

To Seek and To Save the Lost

Martha and Mary

Luke 10:38-42

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Scripture

After his ministry in Galilee, which lasted about two years, Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51). On his journey to Jerusalem, Jesus taught his disciples many lessons. We learn about one of those lessons in the account of Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-42.

Let’s read about Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-42:

³⁸Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. ³⁹And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching. ⁴⁰But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.” ⁴¹But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, ⁴²but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:38-42)

Introduction

In an article titled, “Tis the Season to Be ‘Mary,’” author Mayo Mathers writes:

Here’s something about Christmas that brings out the “Martha” in me. I enjoy hosting buffets and entertaining guests. I love shopping for gifts and wrapping packages. And, like Martha, I also get frazzled in the process.

Last year, our holiday plans were in full swing when I attended our church’s annual Christmas pageant. As I sat in the candlelit sanctuary absentmindedly listening to the peaceful strains of “Silent Night,” I wrestled mentally with a list of things

to be done. When the congregation stood to sing carols, my lips moved unconsciously to the words while my brain mulled over various menus for our annual Christmas Eve buffet.

As in every Christmas pageant, the usual parade of bathrobe-draped children marched down the center aisle. A pseudo-weary Mary and Joseph shook their heads in dismay as the innkeeper turned them away. Having watched so many similar renditions of the Christmas story, it had become commonplace to me.

Realizing this, I felt a stab of guilt and bowed my head. *Father, I prayed, let me see the story through your eyes tonight.*

The young girl portraying Mary began to sing a lullaby to the child in her arms. Her voice was so pure, so full of love and awe, that I stared at her, transfixed, my distracted musings forgotten. Suddenly, it was as if the congregation had disappeared, as if I had been transported back in time to the actual stable in Bethlehem.

As I listened to her song, wonder and immense gratitude settled upon me. Into my heart God whispered, *If ever there was a time to worship me, it's now! This season is about me only, but each year you crowd me out with the inconsequential!*

Mathers concludes her article with these insightful words, "Beautiful, delicious dinners are nice. 'Just right' gifts are delightful. But I'm learning that only one thing really matters: while I tend to be more like Martha, at Christmas, 'tis the season to be 'Mary!'"¹

Jesus' interaction with Martha and Mary teaches us the priority of listening to Jesus, not just at Christmas, but always.

Lesson

The analysis of the account of Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-42 teaches us about the priority of the word of God in

¹ Mayo Mathers, "Tis the Season to Be 'Mary'" in <http://www.todayschristianwoman.com/articles/1996/november/6w6136.html>.

the life of every believer.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Setting: Martha and Mary Host Jesus (10:38-40a)
2. Martha's Request: Make Mary Help (10:40b)
3. Jesus' Response: Make the Right Choice (10:41-42)

I. **The Setting: Martha and Mary Host Jesus (10:38-40a)**

First, let's look at the setting: Martha and Mary host Jesus.

Luke said that **as they**, that is, Jesus and his disciples, **went on their way** to Jerusalem, **Jesus entered a village** (10:38a). Though Luke did not name the village Jesus entered, John told us that it was Bethany, where Martha and Mary and their brother Lazarus lived (John 11:1; 12:1-3). According to John 11:18, Bethany "was near Jerusalem, about two miles off."

And a woman named Martha welcomed Jesus into her house (10:38b). Apparently, Martha owned the home, and Jesus seems to have been a frequent visitor.

Luke did not say whether Jesus sent disciples ahead of him (as he often did) to tell **Martha** of his imminent arrival or if he just arrived unannounced. Regardless, **Martha** jumped into action to serve Jesus. She put Paul's later teaching into practice, "Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality" (Romans 12:13). She had the gift of hospitality and used it "to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms" (1 Peter 4:10).

Martha was committed to serving Jesus well. She tidied, cleaned, cooked, hosted, and served him and the others in her home. While she was hustling and bustling, Jesus was teaching a group of attentive listeners.

Martha **had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching** (10:39). Commentator Kent Hughes notes that "Judaism did not forbid women to be in-

structed in the Torah, but it was unheard of for a rabbi to allow a woman to sit at his feet.”² Jesus, as we shall see, not only allowed a woman to sit at his feet but actually encouraged it.

Mary wanted to learn from Jesus. She listened intently to the word of God through the lips of Jesus.

But as Mary was sitting at Jesus’ feet and learning from him, **Martha was distracted with much serving** (10:40a). The Greek word for **distracted** (*perispao*) means to “be pulled away” or “dragged away.”³ The implication is that Martha wanted to hear Jesus as well. As she hustled back and forth, she caught snippets of Jesus’ words here and there, and she wanted to hear more. But her commitment to serve Jesus kept her busy and unable to sit down and listen to him.

Preaching professor Haddon Robinson, in a sermon titled, “Don’t Just Do Something, Sit There,” said that when he was in seminary, a pastor from a Christian Reformed church in Chicago came to the campus. One evening he told the students a story of a couple in his church, a mother and her son. The father had died when the boy was young. The mother and son had a very unique relationship. This was back before television, and folks would spend evenings listening to the radio or reading to one another. They both enjoyed listening to good music. Theirs was a special relationship.

In his early twenties, he met a young woman at the church, fell in love with her, and they decided to be married. Back then, during World War II, housing in our large cities was very difficult to get.

The mother, knowing they wanted to be married, said, “We have a two-story house. I can make an apartment for myself in the second story. You and your bride can live in the first

² R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 396.

³ *The Lexham Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* (Logos Bible Software, 2011).

story. The only thing I ask is that we get a chance to spend some time together because I'm going to miss the reading and the music."

Her son said, "Mother, you can be sure of that. It's too important to me."

The couple married. For a while, life continued with the son stopping by a couple of times a week to spend some time. He was busy, and eventually days and actually weeks went by with only a call from downstairs or a brief glimpse. The relationship was not what it had been.

On the mother's birthday, the young man bought his mother a lovely dress, brought it to her, and said, "Happy birthday, Mother."

She opened the package and looked at the dress. "Oh, Son, thank you. I appreciate so much what you've done."

He said, "Mother, you don't like it."

She said, "Oh, yes, I do. It's my color. Thank you."

He said, "Mother, I have the sales slip. They tell me I can take it back."

She said, "No, it is a lovely dress."

He said, "Mother, you don't fool me. We've been together too long. What's wrong?"

The woman turned and opened her closet. She said, "Son, I have enough dresses there to last me for the rest of my life. I guess all I want to say is that I don't want your dress. I want you."

Dr. Robinson then concluded as follows: "Out of this quaint story of long ago, I hear God saying that to me. With all of our busyness, we better simplify our lives because, ultimately, God doesn't want your life as much as he wants you."⁴

It is so easy to get **distracted with much serving**.

⁴ Haddon Robinson, "Don't Just Do Something, Sit There," *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 138.

II. Martha's Request: Make Mary Help (10:40b)

Second, look at Martha's request: make Mary help.

Martha then **went up to Jesus and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me"** (10:40b).

There was nothing wrong with Martha's service to Jesus. What was wrong was that she wanted Mary to serve Jesus her way. Martha believed that what Jesus needed most at the time was her service to him, and she wanted her sister to serve Jesus in the same way.

We make a mistake when we think that others must serve in the same way we serve him. Dr. Philip Ryken says, "This is where the unattractive attitudes in our own service to Christ will lead. . . . We are increasingly critical, finding fault with others for what they are doing or not doing for us. Before long we will be trying to tell God his business. This will all happen when in our service *for* Jesus we get distracted *from* Jesus."⁵

IV. Jesus' Response: Make the Right Choice (10:41-42)

And finally, notice Jesus' response: make the right choice.

But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her" (10:41-42).

Notice that Jesus did not take sides. Jesus did not send Mary back to the kitchen to help Martha. Nor did Jesus tell Martha to stop her work, sit down and listen to his teaching. This is a very important point because, as commentator Norval Geldenhuys said, Jesus did not "disapprove of Martha's activities as such, for they were also the outcome of love for Him and

⁵ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Vol. 1: Chapters 1-12, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 558-559.

were meant to serve Him. It is her wrong attitude as revealed in her condemnation of Mary and her dissatisfaction with Himself that had to be set right and rebuked.”⁶ The issue was not who was doing what, but what kind of relationship Martha had with Jesus.

Jesus loved Martha as much as he loved Mary. He loved Mary by protecting her time with him and praising her choice to sit at his feet and listen to his teaching. But he also loved Martha because he said to her, “**Martha, Martha.**” Saying a person’s name twice indicated intensity of emotion. Jesus gently rebuked Martha and exposed her sin of being distracted by her service. She did not know how to let some things go and pay attention to the important things. As Kent Hughes says, “Martha’s self-appointed responsibilities distracted her from what mattered most. So it is with us. The self-imposed necessities of ministry smother us, and serving becomes drudgery.”⁷

After gently rebuking Martha, Jesus said, “**One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her**” (10:42). Martha had a list of things that she thought was necessary in her service to Jesus. But Jesus said that only **one thing is necessary**. What is that **one thing**?

Some commentators suggest that Martha was preparing an elaborate meal, and Jesus was saying that only one simple dish was necessary. However, by pointing to the example of Mary, Jesus was indicating what is the **one thing**. As Philip Ryken says, “What is necessary is to sit at Jesus’ feet, the way that Mary did, and listen to what he says, and in this way come to know Jesus for sure. This picture shows us Mary’s devotion to Christ, specifically her commitment to his teaching. Mary

⁶ Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, The New International Commentary on the Old and New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952), 316.

⁷ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke*, 398.

loved Jesus and his word.”⁸

My New Testament professor, Don Carson, said, “The story is not meant to teach the value of a contemplative life compared with a life of action, but to show that service to Jesus must not fill people’s lives to such an extent that they have no time to learn from him. One honors him more by listening to him than by providing excessively for his needs (*cf.* Jn. 6:27).”⁹

There is only one thing necessary for every believer and that is the priority of the word of God. It is not what we do for God. That was Martha’s mistake. She thought that what was really important was her service to Jesus. Yet our service for God is never necessary in the absolute sense, because God does not need any one of us. As the apostle Paul said, God is not “served by human hands, as though he needed anything” (Acts 17:25). God does not need our service. But we desperately need him. What is necessary for every Martha or Mary is not to serve Jesus, but to be served by him.

The **one thing** that **is necessary** is the priority of the word of God in the life of every believer. It is by this word that God gives us the saving knowledge of Jesus, and it is by this word that God directs our service to him. Listen to how David Gooding puts it:

Amid all life’s duties and necessities there is one supreme necessity which must always be given priority, and which, if circumstances compel us to choose, must be chosen to the exclusion of all others. That supreme necessity is to sit at the Lord’s feet and listen to his word. It must be so. If there is a Creator at all, and that Creator is prepared to visit us and speak to us as in his incarnation he visited and spoke to Martha and Mary, then obviously it is our first duty as his creatures, as it ought to be our highest pleasure, to sit at his feet and listen to

⁸ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, 5.

⁹ D. A. Carson et al., eds., *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 999.

what he says.¹⁰

I also want you to notice that Jesus did not say that Mary made a “better choice.” Instead, he said, “**Mary has chosen the good portion.**” Nevertheless, Jesus did seem to make a comparison. It is good to love Jesus by serving him, as Martha did, but it is better to love Jesus by listening to him. Service is essential in every believer’s life. But more important is our spending time with Jesus. And we do so by spending time in the word of God. And it is by spending time in the word of God that we learn how Jesus wants us to serve him.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the account of Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-42, we should prioritize God’s word in our lives.

Martha heeded the gentle rebuke of Jesus. She prioritized the word of God in her life. A few months later Martha and Mary’s brother Lazarus died. Martha heard that Jesus was coming to her home, so leaving Mary, she went out to meet him. She was her usual blunt self, as we read in John 11:21-27:

²¹ Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.” ²³ Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴ Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” ²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” ²⁷ She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.”

¹⁰ David Gooding, *According to Luke: A New Exposition of the Third Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 212.

Martha made one of the two great confessions of faith in the New Testament. The other is by Peter in Matthew 16:16.

How did Martha get to this point? She did so by choosing the “one thing.” She joined Mary and sat at Jesus’ feet. She made the word of God a priority in her life. And because she did so, she made one of the two great confessions of faith in the New Testament.

Mary, of course, also kept choosing the “one thing” too. Some time later, “six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table” (John 12:1-2). I doubt that Martha was doing all the work by herself. Surely Mary was helping but, nevertheless, without warning she approached Jesus with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume. She poured a generous portion on Jesus’ head, anointing him and then poured the rest of the contents on his feet – humbly and worshipfully wiping them with her hair.

This was an expression of intense devotion to Jesus. And it was extremely costly, perhaps as much as a year’s salary.

Why this act of devotion? Jesus gave the answer to her critics, “Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial” (John 12:7). You see, by sitting at his feet and listening to his teaching Mary picked up on teaching that even Jesus’ disciples missed. Jesus repeatedly spoke about his death, but the disciples did not understand what that meant. But Mary understood that Jesus was the Messiah sent by God to seek and to save the lost by dying for their sins. So, she anointed him in anticipation for his burial.

Martha and Mary may well have been the first to believe the gospel. They came to believe because they prioritized God’s word in their lives. May God help us to do so too. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons
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PRAYER:

Father, thank you for Martha and Mary. And thank you for their devotion to you, which was shown in different ways. And thank you for Jesus teaching them – and us – to prioritize the word of God in our lives.

Help each one of us to prioritize the word of God in our daily lives.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!