



THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

A Tale of Two Sisters

Luke 10:38-42

September 23, 2012

³⁸ Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. ³⁹ And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. ⁴⁰ But 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." ⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, ⁴² but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."

- Last week, Dirk preached on the Parable of the Good Samaritan, and in this account, recorded in Luke 10:25-37, we learn that the context of the parable is an encounter between Jesus and a lawyer.
- Luke writes: "²⁵ And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall ***I do*** to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" ²⁷ And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." ²⁸ And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live." [emphasis added]
- But, then, Luke continues, making perhaps the most significant statement in the entire account, "²⁹ But he [the lawyer], *desiring to justify himself*, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" [emphasis added]
 - In other words, this lawyer was attempting **to justify himself**, that is, make himself right by keeping the law.

- In short, this lawyer had bought into a works-based righteousness. That is, he believed that there was something he could do to earn his righteousness and salvation.
- A works-based view of righteousness is the greatest of sins, because from the outside it is so difficult to recognize.
 - In fact, people who buy into this view of salvation are often some of the kindness, clean-living, hardest working people we know (consider the Mormons, for example).
 - However, a works-based view of righteousness/salvation will only lead to destruction.
- The Bible is full of accounts of individuals who bought into this profound lie.
 - On Wednesday nights, we have been studying from the Book of Genesis, and recently, we examined the story of Jacob and Esau, as recorded in Genesis 25. We read:

“²⁴When her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb. ²⁵The first came out red, all his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau. ²⁶Afterward his brother came out with his hand holding Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. ²⁷When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. ²⁸Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.”

- I have come to believe that there was something interesting, and deeply sad, about what Esau believed. From this text, it is clear that “Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field,” and that “Isaac loved Esau **because he ate of his game.**”
- In other words, I am convinced that Esau learned at an early age that the way to his father’s heart was through his stomach and that as long as he [Esau] killed game and fed it to his father, he would remain his father’s favorite.
- I also believe that over time, Esau likely began to resent and even hate his father, because he understood that his love was based upon what the son did for the father. It was a works-based relationship.
- In turn, the Scriptures state that Esau despised his birthright, thus, Paul states that God declares, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”
- But why? Because Esau lived in a works-based world and man will never be right in God’s eyes by “justifying himself.” If man could justify himself, then we could control and manipulate God by acting in such a way to earn his favor for our own selfish purposes.

- Yet, we are justified by the righteousness of Christ that is received by grace through faith alone.
- And this is the point of the scene we read this morning: man’s works will never make him right in God’s eyes.

We are called to cling to Christ and His righteousness and cease striving to justify ourselves or earn God’s favor through our works.

- I. The Position of Mary**
- II. The Work of Martha**
- III. The Complaint of Martha**
- IV. The Reply of Christ**

I. The Position of Mary

³⁸ *Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house.* ³⁹ *And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching.*

- We first read in this passage that “Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house.”
 - This could possibly be Bethany, but the exact location is not central to the meaning of the text.
 - Luke simply states that Martha welcomed Christ into her house.
 - Interestingly, the name Martha in Aramaic means “hostess.”
- Then, Luke writes that Martha had a sister “called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching.” As Luke introduces Mary in this scene, she is silent, never saying a word.
 - Luke makes her *position* clear: she (a) sat at the Lord’s feet; and (b) listened to the teachings of Jesus.
 - The Mishnah [the body of Jewish oral traditions] states, “Let your house be a meetinghouse for the sages and sit amid the dust of their feet and drink in their words with thirst.” M. ‘Abot 1.4
 - This was the position of a disciple, which would have been surprising for a first century audience.

- In the first century, women were not permitted to receive formal training from a rabbi. The study of theology was restricted to men.
- Jesus was a true liberator of woman, not only allowing them to study theology and God’s Word, but calling them to do so.
- But it is the contrast between Mary and her sister Martha which will be the focus of this passage.

II. The Work of Martha

⁴⁰ *But Martha was distracted with much serving.*

- Luke clearly places Mary in contrast to her sister, saying, “**But** Martha was distracted with much serving.”
- Remember, it was Martha who Luke states welcomed Christ into her home.
- From this passage, we get a little glimpse into the type of person Martha is.
- Martha, I believe, was a homemaker *par excellence*. She had place cards at every setting, she embroidered Christ’s initials on His napkins, put pomegranate seeds from pomegranates she grew and picked in his salad, served wine from grapes she had picked, and cooked only with extra-extra virgin olive oil from the first press, that she had pressed herself. And not just this, but everyone in the synagogue knew this.
 - **This was Martha’s identity.** She was the best hostess and homemaker in all of Judea, maybe even Israel! To think of all of the work and detail that Martha would have put into serving guests would have been mind-numbing.
 - I believe the women of her local synagogue held her up as the perfect hostess and her home was likely the envy of every woman in Bethany. In other words, people praised her and honored her *for what she did*.
 - And I believe this was the problem.
 - In the context of this chapter, and the lawyer several verses earlier, who **desired “to justify himself,”** Martha was working frantically to, quite possibly, try and earn the favor, praise and approval of Christ.
 - After all, every other person who came into her home praised her for **what she did. Yet, Christ will not.**
- Now, it must be said that, it appears Martha was a sincere and genuine disciple of Christ. Especially in light of her words in John 11:27 (at the tomb of Lazarus) [“Lord; I believe

that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world”] Martha seems to be a true disciple and, therefore, one from whom we can relate and learn.

- It is important to note, though, that Jesus never condemns Martha’s service. Luke just simply states that Martha was **distracted with much serving**.
- Luke’s phrase here is an interesting one. For, he says that Martha was *distracted* by much *servicing*.
 - We know that, biblically, serving is a good thing. In fact, according to 1 Peter 4:9-10, we read, “⁹Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. ¹⁰As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace:”
 - Luke, therefore, is not saying that service – or specifically, Martha’s service – was bad. It was just that she became distracted by it.

I believe one of the Enemy’s greatest tactics against the people of God is to tempt us to fill our schedules with so many “good” things and commitments that we can rarely, if ever, simply “be still and know that He is God.” We become convinced that we must “be at the church every time the door opens,” or go to every Bible study, or be involved in every ministry, or we are in some way “less Christian” than others. I also believe that this is one reason that families fall apart in Churches at such an alarming rate. The problem is not that they do too little in ministry, but perhaps, too much, becoming distracted from what is truly important – quality time with the Lord, often with the family alone.

- So, as we compare Mary and Martha, we see that:
 - Mary is (a) **seated at the feet of Jesus; and (b) listening**.
 - Martha, on the other hand, is (a) **doing much serving; and (b) distracted**.
- The word here in the Greek translated *distracted* appears only here in the New Testament. It describes something “being pulled away.”

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- “In Martha’s defense,” however, she was only doing what she had always done – impressed her guests with her gracious hospitality and attention to every detail. **She did not quite yet understand that Christ was different**.
 - We all do this. We often place our human desires, which are linked to worldly factors, on God. In other words, if we were someone of great influence and authority, we would want (and expect) that when we entered into a home, it would not only be clean, but we would eat on the fine china and enjoy a rather extravagant meal.

- Yet, Christ was not this way. He came to seek and to save the lost. Yes, He needed to eat, as He was human, but He certainly did not desire the “red carpet” treatment. He desired genuine disciples.
- But the point here is clear: as good as Martha’s service was, it was not what Christ sought, and she became **distracted from His teaching because of it.**

III. The Complaint of Martha

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.”

- Up until this point, everything appeared “innocent enough”: there is Mary, sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening to His teachings; and there is Martha, frantically working to get lunch ready.
- Yet, although there was nothing inherently wrong with Martha’s service, per se, we now get a glimpse into the condition of her attitude.
- In fact, it is mildly shocking how direct Martha is with Christ, **telling Him to tell her sister to help her** (Mary is right there, too!).
- But this is the root problem of a works-based righteousness - we not only become distracted, but **we begin to resent others that we do not believe are working as hard as we are.** Indeed, a system of works always leads to a critical spirit towards others.
 - If we are honest with ourselves, the reason we work hard is not as much that we are working for the Lord and seeking to honor Him, but we are actually seeking the praise of men.
 - But there is another point to be made: not only does a works-based system lead to a critical spirit towards others, but **we ourselves also become bitter towards people who do not recognize the greatness of what we have accomplished. This is precisely what has happened here in the case of Martha and Jesus.** I believe that since Jesus has not affirmed how great a host Martha is, just has become frustrated and annoyed (which eventually leads to bitterness and judgmentalism).
- Retired Pastor and author R. Kent Hughes writes, “There is a tendency for people who are wound tightly like Martha to give everything to their particular area of calling or interest and to allow that interest to so dominate their lives that they have little time to let God’s Word speak to them. Without the benefit of the Words, they adopt a mindset of narrowness, judgmentalism, or fault-finding. And eventually the creativity and vitality they once gave to their area of ministry sours.”

- **There are many Marthas in the world who may never speak up the way she does, yet, their judgmentalism is made known through various other ways, whether it is a look or an indirect passive-aggressive comment. Either way, the result is the same – it creates tension and discord in relationships in the Body.**

IV. The Reply of Christ

⁴¹ *But 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.”*

- The manner in which Jesus responds to Martha is so typical of the way Jesus handles all of us. He does so with tremendous grace and tenderness.
- Luke presents Jesus as using a “double vocative” which connotes emotion.
 - As Darrell Bock writes, “Jesus paints a picture of a woman overwhelmed...”
 - Our Lord says, “Martha, Martha...” Implied here is, “Martha, relax, take a step back and breathe.”
 - He then says, “...you are anxious and troubled about many things...”
 - Rather than condemning her, the way she did her sister Mary, Jesus extends to her mercy and kindness. He basically is saying, **you are overwhelmed and stressed out about so many things...**
 - How often we all need to hear this!
- But, then He says what is central to this passage, “**...but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.**”
 - In other words, what Christ is saying is, “Right now, while I am here, stop running around the way you are, stressing about how clean your house is, our how nice the meal is going to be, sit and listen to what I have to say.”
 - Martha, like so many of us, had priorities that were **self-imposed**. Christ never demanded them. Rather, she imposed them on herself, and when she was not getting the praise she thought she deserved from Christ, she tried to impose them on her sister.
 - **Given her comment to Christ, it is clear that her motive was not simply to serve Christ, but to be praised by Him. Everyone had always praised her for her hospitality, but Christ wasn’t, so this led to her frustration boiling over.**

- Notice, specifically, what Christ says to Martha, ““...but one thing is necessary. **Mary has chosen the good portion...**”

- The phrase “good portion” is a reference to a meal. It could actually be translated, “Mary has chosen the right meal.”
- The words of Christ here echo the words recorded by Moses in

Deuteronomy 8:3: “³ And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”

- Taken in this context, Christ’s words bring up a fascinating contrast. Mary is likely preparing the meal that they are all about to eat, and what Jesus is doing is drawing a contrast **between the meal that Mary, through her works, is providing, and the one that Christ, through His works and words, provides.**
- Put in this context, Christ’s words are a gentle, yet very direct, rebuke of Martha and what she is doing.
- The meal that Martha is preparing will sustain the company of people for a period of hours. The meal Christ provides will for eternity.

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- It is important to note, however, that Jesus is not suggesting choosing only one, for man needs physical food to survive. He is simply saying that there are priorities and Martha has allowed her works-based drive to distract her from what is important at that time (after all, the King of Kings is in her living room!).
 - **Receiving, hearing, and obeying the Word of God is the top priority for all Christians. Other things are important, and even necessary for life, but only the Word of God will sustain us for eternity.**

“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 what he says.”

David Gooding

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- Now it must be said that Luke, here, is not encouraging us to abandoned work or the cleaning of our homes! Rather, He is calling us to a life of purpose and order.

- John Calvin, writing in the sixteenth century, states:

“When some men were driven by ambition to withdraw from the ordinary intercourse of life, or when peevish men gave themselves up to solitude and indolence, the resolution to adopt that course was followed by such pride, that they imagined themselves to be like the angels, because they did nothing; for they entertained as great a contempt for active life, as if it had kept them back from heaven. On the contrary, we know that men were created for the express purpose of being employed in labor of various kinds, and that no sacrifice is more pleasing to God, than when every man applies diligently to his own calling, and endeavors to live in such a manner as to contribute to the general advantage.

On the contrary, the Lord enjoins his followers to make such a distribution of their time, that he who desires to make proficiency in the school of Christ shall not always be an idle hearer but shall put in practice what he has learned; for there is a time to hear, and a time to act.

There was this additional evil, that Martha was so delighted with her own bustling operations, as to despise her sister’s pious eagerness to receive instruction. This example warns us, that, in doing what is right, we must take care not to think more highly of ourselves than of others.

In a word, we do but wander to no purpose, if we do not direct all our actions to a fixed object. The hospitality of Martha was faulty in this respect, that she neglected the main business, and devoted herself entirely to household affairs. And yet Christ does not mean that everything else, with the exception of this *one thing*, is of no importance, but that we must pay a proper attention to order,”

- We should work as unto the Lord, regardless of what occupation we have. However, our lives must be ordered and prioritized so that we **seek first the Kingdom of God.**
- I personally must admit that one of the most difficult things for me to do is to sit and feast on the Word of God, outside of the context of preparing for a sermon or Bible study.
 - I imagine a similar struggle exist in the lives of many here.
 - We are, indeed, just like Martha.
 - So many of us run around from ministry to ministry, Bible study to Bible study (all of which are good things), but these good things **distract us from that which is primary and top priority – sitting at the feet of Christ.**
 - I recently read a quote that, according to the Mayo Clinic, 80-85% of its total caseload was the result of anxiety, stress and worry. I also read that 112 million Americans take medicine for stress related symptoms.
- So, why do we act like Marthas? I believe there is at least two reasons:
 - We feel productive [when we act like Martha], like we are accomplishing something. There is a contentment that comes from a job well-done (and there is certainly nothing wrong with this). However, it is a real problem when we place our doing above simply seeking to know Christ.

- We receive the praise of men.
- **As a result of seeking this praise from men, we become imprisoned and we never get to the point where it is enough – we are never satisfied.** It is truly an **exhausting** pursuit.
 - Just as Christ said to Martha, His Word declares today: Cease striving! Stop trying to earn approval or righteousness and know He is God.
 - Again, this is not an “either-or.” Christ is not condemning Martha and saying that we should all be like Mary all the time. Rather, He is commending Mary, at that time and in that place for placing the priority on sitting and the feet of Christ and listening.
 - I ask one more question: Is the way we parent also leading to a works-based righteousness in our children. Have we convinced our children that all they have to do is make us happy by what they do? Do we reward behavior that, on the outside, looks good and makes us look good, when in reality, their hearts are far from us?
 - May we all examine our hearts and sit at the feet of Jesus.

In his book *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, Don Whitney writes, “No Spiritual Discipline is more important than the intake of God's Word. Nothing can substitute for it. There simply is no healthy Christian life apart from a diet of the milk and meat of Scripture. The reasons for this are obvious. In the Bible God tells us about Himself, and especially about Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God. The Bible unfolds the Law of God to us and shows us how we've all broken it. There we learn how Christ died as a sinless, willing Substitute for breakers of God's Law and how we must repent and believe in Him to be right with God. In the Bible we learn the ways and will of the Lord. ...None of this eternally essential information can be found anywhere else except the Bible. Therefore if we would know God and be Godly, we must know that Word of God – intimately.

Philippians 4:6-7: “⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”