

Pulled Away From the One Thing Necessary

Luke 10:38-42

By Billy Dempsey

Turn with my in your copy of God's Word to Luke chapter 10 verses 38 to 42 - Jesus in the home of Mary and Martha. It's a passage we know well. It's a passage in which we identify quite easily with one of these sisters and perhaps not quite so easily with the other. It's a passage that we've looked at both in Bible studies and worship services and prayer meetings in our own homes time and again. Yet there's much to teach us here, much to teach us here. Even if we feel like we know it all, there's much to teach us here as we look at it together and think about some of the issues that we see active both with Mary and with Martha and with Jesus. But before we go further, before we read, let's pray together.

Father, now open our minds and hearts to see Your Word and see the truth here, be it old or new. Teach us, feed us, nourish us, direct our hearts toward the one thing necessary. Feed our souls now, in Jesus' name, amen.

Let me read beginning with verse 38 in Luke chapter 10:

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

A Problem, Not of Serving

Let's think about some truths that we can pull from this passage as we think about this topic of the way Jesus relates to sinners, especially in the context of a meal. And one thing to say real quickly is that serving is not the problem. Alright? Serving is not the problem here. This is not the only time we see Martha and Mary in the Scriptures. As we see them in John chapter 11, as we see them in John chapter 12, we see two very different women, though they're sisters, two very different women relating to Jesus in very different ways. I think that's important to note. Martha's the one that takes the lead. Martha's the one who's

out front. Martha's the one you've got to get up early, early in the morning to get ahead of. Martha's the one in John chapter 11 when Jesus has come after Lazarus' death, Martha's the one who goes out to meet Him. They both hear, both sisters hear that Jesus has come; Martha is the one who goes out to meet Him. She's identified in John chapter 12 in the dinner given for Jesus, she's the one identified as the one who's busy with the serving. Mary's quite different - maybe because she's younger; Mary's quieter. Mary's more reflective and tends to, compared with the two, tends to hang back a bit more. When Jesus comes after Lazarus' death, Mary stays in the house and does not go to meet Jesus until Martha comes to say, "He's asking for you." She hangs back; she stays quiet; she stays alone.

In John 12, it's not that she's shy because in John 12 she demonstrates an extravagant display of love and affection and devotion to Jesus with the anointing of His feet referenced in John. Mark says she anointed His head and His feet with that pound of pure nard and then dried His feet with her hair. That's an amazing display. So it's not as though she's a mousy little person; she's not mousy at all. She's so different and her display of love and affection for Christ is different from that of Martha's. Both women love Him; both women trust Him. Again I'll reference their conversation with Jesus after the death of Lazarus in John chapter 11. You see both women making strong professions of faith. But we see that they demonstrate their love and devotion to Him differently. Again, Martha by serving, by doing for Him; Mary by, in this case, in this passage, literally sitting at His feet and listening to everything He had to say.

A Problem of Distraction

So what's the problem? There really is a problem, isn't there? There's a problem in what happens in this household at this time. What is the problem? If it's not the serving, look again at verse 40. "Martha was distracted with much serving." Distracted - the Greek word means "to pull apart." You've felt that way before. We feel as though we want to give our attention to one thing and there are four other things that are pulling on us and we do feel literally pulled apart. Martha couldn't listen to Jesus because circumstances around her appeal to her default mode of operation which could be described in two words - do something! "We've got all these people in the house, all these people that require to be fed!" It wasn't a surprise; Jesus had already, in the first part of Luke chapter 10, Jesus had sent out the seventy-two. Among other things they were to tell people that Jesus is coming. So Martha knew Jesus was coming. It wasn't as though Jesus and the disciples just walked in the door and said, "Hey, what's for supper?" She knew they were coming and she had made some preparation obviously, but when it's time for the meal to be delivered, you've got people coming in the door who are thirsty and maybe looking for some kind of appetizer before the meal, some place to rest, I mean that requires some activity and that requires some activity on the moment.

Martha is distracted. Jesus is teaching. Martha's distracted. She's pulled apart by the things going on around her and her normal operating mode, "Do something," at that moment, with that number of people to be taken care of, is quite overwhelming. Her standard mode of operation overcame, I think, overcame her to the point that she loses patience with Jesus and certainly with Mary. She says, "Lord, do You not care?" Now are you hearing how she's addressed Him? She's frustrated with Mary but do you hear who she's talking to? "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me!" She's frustrated with Mary, she's frustrated with Jesus, and there's a clash here. She's lost patience. To use our title here, she's scandalized. She's scandalized that Mary is here sitting at Jesus' feet, oblivious to all that has to be done for these people. She's scandalized. Again, serving is not the problem; what the serving has brought into play becomes the problem. She's distracted; she's pulled in many directions.

J. C. Ryle in his comments on this passage warns us that the cares of this world are a snare to our souls if we allow them to take up too much of our attention. Let me say that again; that's a real important point. The cares of this world are a snare to our souls if we allow them to take up too much of our attention. Let me read you this quote. "The fault of Martha should be a warning to all Christians. If we desire to grow in grace and enjoy soul prosperity, we must beware of the cares of this world. Except we watch and pray they will insensibly" - that's exactly what's happening with Martha right here - "they will insensibly eat up our spirituality and bring leanness to our souls. It's not open sin or flagrant breaches of God's commandments alone that lead man to ruin. It is far more frequently an excessive attention to things in themselves lawful and the being distracted with much serving. It seems so right, it is so right, to provide for our own. It is so proper to attend to the duties that accompany our stage in life. It's just here that our danger lies. Our families, our business, our daily callings, our household affairs, our daily coming and going and society at large, all may become snares to our hearts and may draw us away from God." The problem isn't serving but Martha has allowed the cares of the moment to pull her apart, to pull her away from what Jesus is doing, so that suddenly her slow-burn erupts into an open harshness with Jesus whom she loves and Mary whom she loves.

Oblivious to a Gospel Priority

So what Martha lacks - and again we've all been here, we've all been exactly where Martha is - what she lacks is an understanding of the Gospel priority at this moment. There is a Gospel priority at this moment and Martha's oblivious to it. She needs a category. She needs a way to think about what's happening all around her. She needs a way to judge the moment. She needs a way to recognize values apart from her default operating procedure. And as He responds to her, I think that's exactly what Jesus provides. He provides the

corrective that she so desperately needs, that you and I so desperately need as we find ourselves traveling down Martha's road.

Listen to what He says. First of all He does something very sweet. We miss it perhaps but Martha got it. "Martha, Martha" - that's not exasperation, that's not impatience, that's not, "Here we go again;" that's love. And Martha caught it. Martha knows that what she's about to hear she's about to hear from one who loves her intensely and jealously and zealously. "Martha, Martha." He says, "You're anxious and troubled about many things but one thing is necessary." Anxious - the Greek word is, "divided of mind." We know; we've been there. We know that feeling. What a great definition. My mind is divided, I'm anxious, troubled, tossed about; nothing's right, nothing will go right, nothing's working, too much to do - tossed here and tossed there. We know. It's as though Jesus is saying, "Martha, there are so many plates you've got spinning there right now and there's so much for you to manage but you're missing the one thing necessary."

A Caution against Distraction by the Things of this World

What's she missing? She's missing what her Messiah is teaching. She wants so badly to do for Him that she's missing what He's there to do for her. She wants so badly to serve Him and to make sure that all is ready and right for Him that she's missing the fact that He came not to be served but to serve and to give His life for her at the proper time. She's allowing her anxieties - we all do this - she's allowing her anxieties about the bread she'll feed Him to overwhelm the clear truth that she already knows, that "Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." She knows that - that's Scripture, that's Deuteronomy, she's heard that. But the cares of the moment obliterate that from her mind and her heart. We know exactly where she is. Ryle makes the point, another point, that we all enjoy good things and we all work for good things that are not necessary. He says, "Health and money and lands and rank and honors and prosperity are all well in their way but they cannot be called necessary. Without them, thousands are happy in this world and reach glory in the world to come. But many things which men and women struggle for are not really necessary. The grace of God that brings salvation is the one thing necessary."

What Jesus is doing right here is giving Martha and us a tool for managing ourselves. One thing is necessary. One thing is necessary. Let's use that phrase, let's use that concept, let's use that idea to caution ourselves with it. Let's tell ourselves, "There's one thing necessary." Caution ourselves when we allow ourselves to become distracted and anxious about the many things before us to do every day in this world. Let it quicken us when we're tempted to look longingly at the stuff that won't last. And that's exactly where Jesus takes Martha next.

Absorbed by the Good Portion

Listen to the next thing He says. "Mary has chosen the good portion which will not be taken away from her." Alfred Edersheim says this about scene in the home of Mary and Martha that "Mary forgot everything else but Jesus. Mary forgot everything else but Jesus who spoke as no one else had ever done. She was absorbed with Him." Wow. The good portion. She was absorbed with Him. It's as though Jesus is saying to Martha, "Right now is the moment for the good portion. Right now. There will come a time to eat and to drink and then that time will come around again and it will come around yet again, but the good portion, whose time is right now, will never be taken away. It's good will last through eternity." What a way to think about what's in front of us. What a way to manage ourselves as we all have those "Martha moments," those "Martha hours," those "Martha weeks," to ask ourselves, "Where is the good portion? What is the one thing necessary? In all the things I'm distracted and troubled about, where is the one thing necessary?"

As we read this narrative and we know it and we love it, as we read this narrative and look at who we are and how we live, are we willing to apply Jesus' standard to ourselves and to choose the good portion which won't be taken away from us? Are we willing to mark out those times when everything else stops and we listen to Jesus as He teaches us through His Word? Are we willing in those times to run the risk that good things might go undone, that important work might be put off, that something might be a tad late so that we can give ourselves for a time to the good portion, the one thing necessary that won't be taken away?

Let's pray.

We are scandalized, Father. We think of all there is to do and we're bothered about taking time to read, to stop and read and think and pray. We valiantly struggle to make that time happen and as soon as we begin, this thought, that thought, this errand, this task, they all come crowding in upon us. Help us to manage ourselves the way You teach Martha to manage herself. Thank You for Your love for Martha. Thank You that this is not a narrative of a good girl and a bad girl because we find ourselves more like Martha than like Mary. That You that You love Martha and Your intent is to teach her and to train her and to help her not miss the good portion, the one thing necessary. Help us be thoughtful. Help us be hungry. And help us be willing to let things stop so that we can sit at Your feet too and hear what You would teach our hearts. Thank You. We make our prayer, Father, in Jesus' name and for His sake. Amen.

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to

produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.

Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the [First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement](#).

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to RPM

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [RPM](#), please select this [link](#).