

Luke 10:38-42
September 1, 2019

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Stephen Covey in his book, *First Things First* [Simon & Schuster, p. 32], asks the following question: “What is the one activity that you **know**, if you did it superbly well and consistently, would have significant positive results in your personal life?” They repeat the question with regard to your professional or work life and then ask, “If you **know** these things would make such a significant difference, why are you not doing them now?” They go on to discuss how we often wrongly let the urgent take priority over that which is truly important.

Transition: We could take Covey’s question and apply it toward our walk with God: “What is the one activity that we **know**, if we did it superbly well and consistently, would have significant positive results in our walk with God?” Or ask yourself, “What is my number one priority for my life as a Christian?” In today’s Scripture text, Jesus points us toward an answer through a very familiar storyline of Martha and Mary. I would love to tell you that the answer is in black and white, but it’s not. Let’s read the text and then let’s discern what Jesus believes is the “one needed thing” in our walk with God. Let’s begin.

BOOK:

At the Home of Martha and Mary

³⁸ As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. ³⁹ She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”

⁴¹ “Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, ⁴² but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

Process Observations/Questions:

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn’t understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

LOOK:

Few things are as damaging to the Christian life as trying to work for Christ without taking time to commune with Christ. what we do *with* Christ is far more important than what we do *for* Christ.

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 213). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

Worshippers: Listening to the Lord (Luke 10:38–42)

Worship is at the heart of all that we are and all that we do in the Christian life. It is important that we be busy ambassadors, taking the message of the Gospel to lost souls. It is also essential to be merciful Samaritans, seeking to help exploited and hurting people who need God's mercy. But before we can represent Christ as we should, or imitate Him in our caring ministry, we must spend time with Him and learn from Him. We must "take time to be holy."

Mary of Bethany is seen three times in the Gospel record, and on each occasion, she is in the same place: at the feet of Jesus. She sat at His feet and listened to His Word (Luke 10:39), fell at His feet and shared her woe (John 11:32), and came to His feet and poured out her worship (John 12:3). It is interesting to note that in each of these instances, there is some kind of fragrance: in Luke 10, it is food; in John 11, it is death (John 11:39); and in John 12, it is perfume.

Mary and Martha are often contrasted as though each believer must make a choice: be a *worker* like Martha or a *worshiper* like Mary. Certainly our personalities and gifts are different, but that does not mean that the Christian life is an either/or situation. Charles Wesley said it perfectly in one of his hymns:

Faithful to my Lord's commands,
I still would choose the better part;
Serve with careful Martha's hands,
And loving Mary's heart.

It seems evident that the Lord wants each of us to imitate Mary in our worship and Martha in our work. Blessed are the balanced!

Consider Martha's situation. She received Jesus into her home *and then neglected Him as she prepared an elaborate meal that He did not need!* Certainly a meal was in order, but what we do *with* Christ is far more important than what we do *for* Christ. Again, it is not an either/or situation; it is a matter of balance. Mary had done her share of the work in the kitchen and then had gone to "feed" on the Lord's teachings. Martha felt neglected after Mary left the kitchen, and she began to complain and to suggest that neither the Lord nor Mary really cared!

Few things are as damaging to the Christian life as trying to work for Christ without taking time to commune with Christ. "For without Me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5). Mary chose the better part, the part that could not be taken from her. She knew that she could not live "by bread alone" (Matt. 4:4).

Whenever we criticize others and pity ourselves because we feel overworked, we had better take time to examine our lives. Perhaps in all of our busyness, we have been ignoring the Lord. Martha's problem was not that she had too much work to do, but that she allowed her work to distract her and pull her apart. She was trying to serve two masters! If serving Christ makes us difficult to live with, then something is terribly wrong with our service!

The key is to have the right priorities: Jesus Christ first, then others, then ourselves. It is vitally important that we spend time "at the feet of Jesus" every single day, letting Him share His Word with us. *The most important part of the Christian life is the part that only God sees.* Unless we

meet Christ personally and privately each day, we will soon end up like Martha: busy but not blessed.

Often in my pastoral ministry, I have asked people with serious problems, “Tell me about your devotional life.” The usual response has been an embarrassed look, a bowed head, and the quiet confession, “I stopped reading my Bible and praying a long time ago.” And they wondered why they had problems!

According to John 12:1–2, Martha must have learned her lesson, for she prepared a feast for Jesus, the Twelve, and her brother and sister—that’s fifteen people—and *did not utter one word of complaint!* She had God’s peace in her heart because she had learned to sit at the feet of Jesus.

We are ambassadors, neighbors, and worshipers, these three; and the greatest of these is worshipers.

Martin, J. A. (1985). Isaiah. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, p. 234)

2. JESUS’S TEACHING THAT ATTENTION TO HIM IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN LIFE (10:38–42).

10:38–42. The focus of this passage is not that people should be unconcerned with household chores, but that the proper attitude toward **Jesus** is to listen to Him and obey His words. The **village** where **Martha opened her home to Him** was Bethany (John 11:1–12:8), a few miles east of Jerusalem. Jesus stayed in Bethany during His final week on earth. A sharp contrast was portrayed between the two sisters. **Mary ... sat** and listened to Jesus, while **Martha made preparations** for a meal. The phrase, **only one thing is needed** (Luke 10:42), refers to listening to His words, which **Mary had chosen** to do. The same theme is seen in 8:1–21.

Stein, R. H. (1992). Luke (Vol. 24, pp. 320-322). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

Context

It is uncertain how this passage relates to the preceding material. Some have suggested that it is an example of how to seek eternal life (cf. 10:25 and 10:42). Others argue that it is a continuation of contrasts: priest/Levite—Samaritan; Martha—Mary. Others see a literary relationship and the completion of a chiasmus in which in 10:27 we have (A) Love of God—(B) Love of Neighbor followed by—(b) Samaritan’s Love of Neighbor in 10:29–37—(a) Mary’s Love of Jesus in 10:38–42. Thus the love of the injured man (10:29) by his Samaritan “neighbor” (10:36) is now complemented by Mary’s love/reverence for God and his Son. If the tradition found in John 11–12 correctly associated Mary and Martha with Bethany, this last interpretation is quite possible because Luke then intentionally placed this incident after the preceding materials.

Comments

10:38 Were on their way. Compare 9:51–56.

He came to a village. According to John 11–12, Mary and Martha lived in Bethany, which lies on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives. The city is mentioned in Luke 19:29.

A woman named Martha opened her home. The term “opened” or “welcomed” is also found in 19:6 and Acts 17:7 (Jas 2:25). The name “Martha” is the feminine form of the Aramaic term *Mar* and means *mistress*. Martha appears to have been the mistress in charge of the house, but Luke did not expect his Greek readers to see a pun in this and use of the title “Lord” in Luke 10:40. Such a pun is possible in Aramaic, where Lord is translated *Mar*, but not in Greek, where it is translated *Kyrios*.

10:39 She had a sister called Mary. John 11:1 also mentions that she was the sister of Martha.

Who sat at the Lord’s feet. This was a disciple’s proper place (Acts 22:3; *Abot* 1.4; cf. also 8:35).

Lord. Luke again used his favorite designation for Jesus. Compare 7:13.

Listening to what he said. “Listening” is a durative imperfect and emphasizes a continual listening. She was listening to “what he said” (literally *his word*). For the importance of the term *word*, see comments on 1:2.

10:40 But Martha was distracted. Martha also wanted to hear Jesus, but the tyranny of the urgent prevented her from doing this.

By all the preparations that had to be made. The Greek is literally *with much serving*. The same term, “serving,” is used in 8:3; 4:39. Martha’s “service” for Jesus got in the way of her sitting lovingly at his feet.

Lord. This title would have been more pregnant with meaning for Luke and his readers than for Martha.

10:41 Martha, Martha. Compare 22:31; Acts 9:4; 22:7; 26:14; and also Luke 6:46; 8:24; 13:34; 23:21.

You are worried and upset about many things. Martha was too easily distracted by less important things. Compare John 6:25; 1 Cor 7:32–35. Ultimately such worries choke out the word of God (Luke 8:14).

10:42 But only one thing is needed. This is the more probable reading and translation. There is a need to focus on what is most important, for although serving is good, sitting at Jesus’ feet is best.

What is better. “Better” is literally *good*, but in koine Greek the positive adjective (good) could be used for the comparative (better) or even the superlative (best; cf. Matt 5:19; 22:36). Although there is a comparison between two things here, the superlative is to be preferred, for nothing is better than what Mary chose. It is best to sit at Jesus’ feet and hear God’s word. What feeds the soul is more important than what feeds the body. (Sometimes church suppers become an end in themselves, losing sight of the best thing—hearing God’s word.)

It will not be taken away from her. The “it” has been interpreted several ways: she will not be forced to stop listening; the blessings of the kingdom of God or her heavenly reward will not be lost; she will be remembered in history for this. Clearly the first interpretation is true, but it is possible that more may be intended as well.

The Lukan Message

Within this short passage is a clear emphasis on the importance of hearing Jesus’ word (Luke 10:39). The centrality of this theme is evident from the use of the term “word,” in the sense of the divine proclamation, over forty times in Luke-Acts. The one thing needed above all else is the proclamation of how one can inherit eternal life/be saved. For only by hearing the word, retaining it, and persevering can one be fruitful (8:15, 21). To listen to Jesus as Mary did is the best thing one can do, even better than serving. One should not press this account into advocating a life of

contemplation over a life of service, or of celibacy over marriage (à la 1 Cor 7:28–35). Nor should one see here a disparagement of the command to love one’s neighbor relative to the command to love God. One serves a neighbor best when one loves God, and one loves God in part by serving one’s neighbor.

One other issue that should be mentioned involves again the great reversal. In contrast to common rabbinic practice, Jesus encouraged women to listen to his teaching and become part of his ministry (8:3).

The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). (Lk 10:38-42). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

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