

Sermon 55: Luke 10:38-42: Martha and Mary

OUTLINE

Mary's sitting
Martha's serving

INTRODUCTION

Business is an affliction that our age struggles with. Life has accelerated to dizzying speeds and many cannot keep up. Today you will find life skills books and life coaches who teach you about simplifying your life, about finding the calm in the midst of the storm, about finding the art of living in the battle of business. We live in an age where we have to choose between the urgent and the important. We have to attend to our on-line selves and our real-life selves. Having the right priorities in our business is a timeless problem for Christians as well. The urgent pushes out the important; the good crowds out the best; and the bad replaces the good. The portion that we are examining today is about what is most important when the pressure is on. Luke 10:38-42 is about a family that will become very close to Jesus. Lazarus, Mary and Martha are prominent in the gospels and are close friends of Christ. Our focus today is upon the two sisters, Martha and Mary. Luke's gospel is the only gospel that records this account, but it is a well-known story. We are in that part of the gospel where Jesus is spending more intensive time teaching and preparing His disciples before His departure. V38, 'Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house.' The village we will learn in John's gospel is Bethany, just a few kilometers from Jerusalem showing us Jesus circuitous route at this time. This may be the first time that Jesus met Mary and Martha and we soon get to see the differences between these two women.

As we go through this section we will look at Mary's sitting and Martha's serving.

Mary's devotion

Many have pointed to the two very different types of people these women are from each other. Firstly, we have Martha and we are told in v38 that she welcomes Jesus into her home. It is possible that Martha is a widow as her husband is never mentioned. It is thought that she is the older sister, and based on what we know of her from the gospel what we would call the more responsible one. She lives up to her name. Martha means 'lady of the house', it is the feminine form of Lord in Aramaic. She truly is a hostess par excellence. If we were listening to v38 with our first century Jewish ears on, we would commend Martha for opening her home in hospitality to this travelling teacher. Here is a quote from that time, 'Let your house be a meetinghouse for the sages and sit amid the dust at their feet and drink in their words with thirst.' Martha is portrayed as a good and godly woman who is properly using her home to glorify God. Martha we would classify as trending towards being a workaholic, her strength being her weakness. She is a doer, most likely with gifts of service and hospitality. She seems to be a detail person, a perfectionist; and it seems that her love language is works of service, she likes to give and receive love through service. She is possibly a little house-proud and values the efficiency in a well-run event as a measurement of its success. Then we have Mary.

V39, 'And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching.' This is how J. C. Ryle describes the sisters, 'Martha was active, stirring, and impulsive, feeling strongly, and speaking out all she felt. Mary was quiet, still, and

contemplative, feeling deeply, but saying less than she felt.¹ If Martha was the doer, Mary was the thinker; where Martha was more practical, Mary was more philosophical. Where Martha was more organized and focused, Mary drifted along and was more easily distracted. Where Martha lived her life by her to-do list; Mary did what took her fancy. If we could guess at her love language it was probably quality time. The fact that Mary who is unmarried is living with her sister and not her parents may indicate that her parents are dead, and that Martha is like a mother to Mary.

If we read v39 through our first century Jewish glasses, there is a huge thing that will stand out to us, Mary, as a woman is sitting at Jesus feet as a disciple. The Rabbis around this time felt that teaching a woman was a waste of time, and that it could lead to problems. Jesus had a perspective on woman that treated them as equals, as made in the image of God, as valuable and worthy of service, of capable of learning, serving and being His disciples. Mary was doing something that was not socially acceptable, sitting as a man at Jesus feet to learn. Men were encouraged to humbly sit on the floor at the feet of a teacher and learn but not women. Jesus in His manner and teaching must have made her feel welcome enough that she felt free to do this. I imagine a scene where both women would have been busying themselves with their traditional roles in hospitality rushing around cleaning and serving and preparing as no doubt Jesus would have had many people following Him. As Jesus began to teach Mary would catch snippets and her curiosity would be up, then she would have to go into the kitchen to get something and miss what was said next. So, in frustration she just sat down and decided to listen. This would leave Mary with the lion's share of the work.

The primary reason for sitting at Jesus feet was to sit at His feet and listen to His teaching. Martha we know is in sensed that Mary would abandon her to serve alone and complains to Jesus to rebuke Mary. Jesus responds in v41-42, '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." V42 tells us that only one thing is necessary/essential/most important. This Jesus calls the 'good portion' which is idiomatic for 'the right meal.' There is nothing more important and so it will not taken from her and something put in its place, it must come first. What is it? Listening to Jesus' teaching. Mary is commended for choosing the best thing, sitting at Jesus feet as one of His disciples and learning from Him.

I am not sure how you have heard this section of scripture being preached on in the past, but I have sermons like this: spending time with Jesus is more important than serving Jesus, so make sure you have your quiet time every day. Now let me say that that is a good message, though not the primary meaning of the text. There are two main ways in which I think these verses apply.

Firstly, if this is Mary and Martha's first meeting with Jesus, it is possible that they are not yet believers and followers of Christ. They may have opened their homes because of His reputation and are not yet formally disciples. If that is the case then Mary choosing to put everything else aside to sit at Jesus feet as His disciple would be the equivalent of conversion, her getting saved. She is answering the call of discipleship which calls us to put Christ before everything else. If this is the case then the contrast is between Martha a typical religious Jew who is trying to please and earn righteousness through her doing; and Mary who stops doing to become Jesus disciple. There may be someone here today who is

1 <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/ryle/Expository%20Thoughts%20on%20the%20Gosp%20-%20J.%20C.%20Ryle.pdf>

like Mary. They have come to church to please God to show how good they are trying to be, but they have not stopped everything and sat at Jesus feet to become His disciple. If that is you here today then hear what Jesus says, 'one thing is necessary,' that one thing is to come to Christ who accepts all, the one who calls the weary and heavy laden to Himself, become His disciple. Turn aside from the wearying work of your works righteousness or your enslavement to sin and submit yourself to Him. He alone can grant you rest for your soul.

But if these sisters are already believers then the lesson is about the priority of sitting under Jesus teaching and being served by Him. Here is the paradox of the gospel, it is more important and necessary that God serve us than we serve Him. Self-righteousness and self-reliance, which deny what we are in sin, defiled and having no resources of our own, thinks that serving God is the number one priority. It is not! Because of our sinfulness and our neediness salvation begins not with us serving God but with God serving us. The Christian life proceeds upon the same basis, once you are saved you have to constantly be served by Christ before you are able to serve others or Him. Many learn this lesson in salvation for justification but then forget it for sanctification.

Many today create an antithesis between word and Spirit, between gathering as a church and daily Christian living, between hearing and doing. Many will talk about going to church not for what you get out but what you put in. Jesus prioritizing sitting at His feet under His teaching as the one essential thing puts all of those ideas to bed. 'Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.' The sword of the Spirit is the Word of God. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God, we are sanctified by truth His word is truth. God serves His people through the means of grace, through the preaching of His word. It is good to serve the Lord, we are saved for good deeds after all. But we cannot serve others unless we have first been served by God through His word. We need to have the Bible as a constant in our lives so that God by His Spirit can renew and transform us through it, purify and direct us by it, educate and encourage with it. Many today will talk about doctrine dividing, of how we need to get over teaching and get on with doing, that it is time for orthopraxy not orthodoxy, that we should just unite in action. Mary probably as baggage from her works oriented past continued to put a priority on her doing that she missed the riches that Christ has for His people as His serves us first through His word, and this is what enables us to then go a serve more effectively. Going to church on the Lord's Day, on the day of rest, this is the day when God through His word serves us as we sit at His feet. This is necessary if we are to go into the world and be effective in our love of neighbor. In a world that is so busy many have decided that church, fellowship, those things where God meets us to serve us, that these are the things we must do away with. No, we need them now more than ever.

If you are worried that we have stressed listening to God's word but have not stressed prayer, do not fear, 11:1-13 will deal with that.

Mary's serving

V40, '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." So picture the scene, Mary is sitting at Jesus feet, Martha is now having to pull double duties as she tried to watch the food, serve the drinks, play the part of a hostess, and making sure that everything is going well. The anger and resentment of having to do it alone builds up within her until she is so angry she opens her mouth. Martha is like many of us, she reveals

to us our sins in our serving. Being busy does not equal being good; nor does serving mean that we are saintly.

We are told that Martha was distracted with much serving, the word distraction literally means, 'being pulled away.' No doubt she too would love nothing more than to sit and listen but she is pulled away by the tasks she insists must be done. One would not think that Christian service could be a bad thing. After all how many of us ever do enough for God, if anything we would say that we should do more. Here we are reminded that there is a way of serving that is bad. Service itself is not being condemned but service at the cost of not sitting under God's word. When teaching takes a low priority, when you think that church is not as important as being busy for God, then this is the sort of business that is wrong. Martha is doing the good deed of hospitality, Jesus is not condemning hospitality. But if you think that those things where God serves us, like in going to church and sitting under His word are just dead religion and you would rather be out building relationship and blessing others, your priorities are out of line. We should do good works, but we need to be served by God first.

Martha sinned in several ways which reveal the way our own sinful hearts work when we are under pressure. Her sins are revealed in her loaded question, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." Firstly, Martha interrupts Jesus ministry to get Him to attend to her perceived needs. Jesus is obviously teaching, Mary is sitting there listening. Instead of respecting the moment that Jesus is ministering to others, she needs Jesus to act to alleviate her immediate need. She needs Jesus to act immediately to rebuke Mary and get her to alleviate her burdens. Martha in her anger, in her intense focus on how her sister has wronged her has made her insensitive to the moment and she bulldozes Christ's ministry.

Secondly, we see that she accuses Jesus, 'Lord, do you not care?' I am intrigued by the way Jesus answers questions. Questions are never innocent; they can be filled with malice, accusation, ignorance. They are always coming from somewhere. This is a rhetorical and a loaded question. The question is set up in such a way that the only way Jesus can agree that He cares is if He does what Martha demands, gets her sister to help her. This false dilemma betrays the fact the Martha cannot see how Mary is doing anything good, that she is wrong in this situation not herself. Our pain, perceived or otherwise, real or drummed up, blinds us and we no longer objectively assess the situation. This leads us to even insinuate that God, who cannot sin, has somehow sinned because I am in pain. If He does not stop my pain, He must not care. Jesus answer refuses to be caught in the false dilemma, He steps back and helps Martha to see that she has the wrong priorities. His care becomes evident in His loving rebuke.

Thirdly, as she fixates on the fact that she alone is working, she is not rejoicing in the fact that Mary is being benefitted, but in the fact that she is losing out both in the teaching and having to work. She is not rejoicing with those who are rejoicing but building up resentment over the fact that all the work has been left to her. She is counting her losses not others gains, this is a typical perspective we have when we are thinking selfishly.

She is full of self-pity. She accuses Christ of not caring, so she has to have concern for herself. Note the emotive language as she bursts out that she has been neglected in some way. That her suffering of having to work alone has been ignored as everyone else has been enjoying themselves. In her self-pity she has to amplify her pain which has been overlooked by all the insensitive people around her. She is the only one who is suffering while everyone else is happy. Her pain is the only real pain. Our pain makes us solipsistic,

my pain is the only real thing going on. Everything disappears as I attend to my pain. My complaints demand that you arrange your world around me just as I have done.

Her anger has turned a happy home environment where there was a warm welcome into an awkward squabble. All the bystanders including Jesus have been dragged into this family squabble. Everyone in the room has to stand as an embarrassed witness to an older sister humiliating her younger sister.

She is single minded in her grievance and seeks to coopt Jesus and what He is doing to make it all about her and the lesson that her younger, less mature sister needs to learn. She cannot see her own cruelty, self-righteousness, self-pity or misdirected anger. These are the sins our own hearts commit when we think we have not been appreciated, when others do not suffer as much as we do when serving, when we are left to carry the heavy end, when others are not as attentive to our needs as we are. We are shown here that service without love can become horrible display of self and everyone around you will be affected.

V41, 'But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things.' Jesus is not coopted into her world of self-service. Instead He gives the bruise of a friend as He compassionately rebukes her. He begins with the double mention of her name. This means that it is emotionally charged, He is speaking with compassion, with personal attention. It would halt her in her tirade and communicate His personal knowledge of her. He then puts His finger on the problem. The problem is not a thoughtless sister. The problem is not that there are too many guests to attend to herself. The problem is not that she has thoughtless guests who don't care and she is the only good person in the room. The primary problem is her own heart and the idols in it.

Anxiety and trouble over many things, these are the symptoms of a heart problem in Martha. She is a details person, a task oriented person, she loves order and to have everything in its place. She prides herself on her hospitality and now as her sisters drops the ball she looks bad as her carefully laid plans fall apart. Success, looking good, being in control, smooth operations, these please her and are her priorities. Anxiety is found in the heart for many different reasons, in her case it was because of the idols of her heart. You know you have an idol if when it is not served it makes you mad, bad, sad or glad. Martha is mad at the sinless Savior, is being bad in her treatment of her sister and her accusations, sad in the self-pity on display, and glad when things go according to plan not when they are going according to God's will. She is most happy when her priorities are served not Christ's. she is troubled over many things instead of focusing on the one thing that is necessary. Being in relationship with Christ, learning from Christ, being served by Christ is of the utmost importance.

Now let us not be too hard on Martha, what we want is to serve like Martha with the heart of Mary. Mary's sitting is way we should start but Martha's service is how we should end. We must rest in the gospel, rest in Christ, allow Him to serve us through His word as we drink in doctrine and teaching and the word. But then this should lead us to grateful and happy service of others. If we go to serve others without feeding deeply upon Christ and His grace then we will be grudging givers and selfish servers. So strive then to serve like Martha with the heart of Mary.