

Meals with Jesus

A Visit with Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on September 26, 2021

Introduction

- ❖ This morning we're back in the Gospel of Luke, looking at another meal with Jesus. We've mentioned before how Luke centers so much of his narrative around meals with Jesus. You could say these meals function as a plot device, as a means of character development. **Over a meal, we learn a lot about Jesus and about those he's interacting with.**
 - This morning, we're introduced to two new characters – to two sisters, Martha and Mary. They're hosting Jesus. Preparing a feast for him and his disciples. There's a very good intent here to practical hospitality. **But, as we'll see, a beautiful act of service can quickly sour.** What begins as something all about Jesus – all about serving others – can turn directions on a dime and become all about you. That's what happened to Martha, and it could happen to any of us. **We can easily find ourselves busy serving Christ while losing sight of Christ himself.**
- ❖ I know I've been there. I've been serving in ministry for twenty years. Over the course of that time, I've definitely gone through seasons where I'm dutifully serving the Lord – I'm actively engaged and committed to ministry – but I've lost sight of Christ. **I'm more focused on how I'm serving than whom I'm serving. On the quality of my ministry instead of the object of my ministry.** When that happens, my focus shifts to my needs and preferences. Or my disappointments when others don't meet my expectations. So instead of serving out of faith and love, I'm doing it out of resentment and self-pity. That's not a healthy place to be.
- ❖ But, sadly, that's a common place to be for those who are active and involved in Christian service. **You're so busy serving for Jesus that you've been distracted from Jesus.** Maybe you can relate with that, or at least you can see yourself moving towards that unhealthy direction, if you're not careful.
 - Thankfully, our text addresses this problem. But there's a point of clarity that needs to be made upfront. **I think the story of Martha and Mary is often read as a rebuke of those who are always busy serving in ministry.** And the application is that we need to cut back on ministry and serve less – so we can pray more and study more. The devotional life is often presented as superior to the active life.
- ❖ But that's presenting a false dichotomy. **Devotional study and practical service are both important in the Christian life. But one is foundational to the other.** That's the lesson Martha had to learn.
 - Jesus wasn't condemning her hospitality. **But he was greatly concerned that all of her serving – as beautiful as it was in itself – was being done at the expense of sitting under God's Word.** That's the problem. Being with Jesus and listening to his words is foundational to serving him. You can't continue doing one without the other.
- ❖ So as we walk through this meal with Jesus, I want us to examine our hearts. **Our hands are necessary for service but our hearts – our heart attitude – is foundational.** So I want to show you (1) The beauty of a hospitable heart, (2) The souring of a distracted heart, and (3) The priority of a devoted heart.

The Beauty of a Hospitable Heart

- ❖ Let's start by considering the beauty of a hospitable heart. I think too many times this story is taught in such a way that Martha comes across looking really bad. She's treated like the foil in this story making Mary look good. But I don't think that was Luke's intent. **So I want to begin by highlighting the beautiful, hospitable hearts of both Martha and Mary.**
 - Now these are the same two sisters whose brother Lazarus was raised from the dead by Jesus in John 11. There we learn that they live in the village of Bethany, which is located only two miles outside of Jerusalem. Our story begins with Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, stopping by Bethany.

- ❖ Let me read v38 again, *“Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house.”* Now that phrase *“on their way”* hearkens back to chapter 9:51. It's a turning point in Luke's Gospel where Jesus turns his attention from the region of Galilee to the city of Jerusalem. **Luke 9:51** says, *“When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.”*
 - **In other words, Jesus's time on earth is running short.** The days when he will be arrested, tried, and taken up on a cross are drawing near. Commentators suggest that these events are about six months out.
 - **So in light of Jesus's impending death, it makes Martha's willingness to open up her home to welcome him all the more lovely a gesture.** She is showing Jesus extraordinary hospitality.

- ❖ Now just think about how much effort this would involve. **Hosting Jesus was no small matter.** By this point, he was becoming well-known as a great teacher and worker of signs and wonders. Crowds were following him wherever he goes. We just looked at a passage last week where he ministered to a crowd of five thousand men, and that figure didn't even include all the women and children present.
 - So welcoming Jesus into your house is not like having a good friend come over and whipping up a simple dinner or ordering some takeout. This is more like having a special guest of honor into your home – who is also bringing along twelve of his closest friends. **So think back to the last time you had to entertain in your home a special guest.** Maybe you invited your boss to your home for dinner. Or think about the first time your in-laws came over for a meal. You feel this need to go all out. Think about all the cleaning, purchasing, chopping, cooking, baking, entertaining, and washing up when it's all done. It's a lot of work.

- ❖ So what Martha is trying to do for Jesus is good and beautiful. She's stewarding her gifts. She's living out **1 Peter 4:9-10**, *“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.”*
 - So Martha's heart was in the right place. **When it comes to serving Jesus, he deserves wholehearted effort not halfhearted.** Going all out. Holding nothing back. That honors him. Well, that's Martha. Her generous hospitality probably explains why Jesus visited her home more than once, as recorded in the other Gospel accounts.

- ❖ Now let's consider Mary. She has a way of welcoming Jesus that's different than her sister, but it's equally beautiful. **Mary's welcome had less to do with what she could do for Jesus and more about what Jesus could do for her. She welcomed Jesus by welcoming his words – treating them as the words of eternal life** (cf. Jn 6:68). Listen to v39, “*And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching.*”
 - In those days, sitting at a rabbi's feet was the posture of a formal disciple. Paul recounts in Acts 22:3 how he was “*educated at the feet of Gamaliel*”, a famous rabbi of his day. So here is Mary, sitting at Jesus’s feet, listening and learning, taking on the role of a disciple. **That posture of sitting at a teacher’s feet implies not just your full attention but your full submission.** It conveys a willingness to listen and obey.

- ❖ **It’s important to understand how unusual it would have been for a rabbi, in those days, to accept a female disciple.** It was highly unconventional. Had Mary been part of the crowds following Jesus, that wouldn’t have raised an eyebrow. Had she joined the group of women who followed and ministered to Jesus (Mk 15:41), that would’ve been considered acceptable.
 - Choosing the role of host in this situation would’ve been expected. **But for Mary to choose the role of disciple – to sit down and learn alongside men was to break social norms.** Some rabbis would’ve permitted women to study the Torah but not to receive formal instruction as a disciple.
 - And yet here is Jesus encouraging such behavior. **He’s not afraid to confront any cultural norm that conflicts with God’s created order.** In the passage prior to our text, he told the Parable of the Good Samaritan – pushing cultural boundaries, calling Jews and Samaritan to treat each other as neighbors. So is it surprising that Jesus would gladly receive a female disciple?

- ❖ Church, we need to imitate our Lord and push back against any cultural boundaries or stereotypes that conflict with God’s created order. **Sadly, churches can still perpetuate a stereotype that a woman’s role in the church is limited to ministries of helps or hospitality while the men of the church are called to study theology and teach the Word.**
 - But Mary’s decision to sit at Jesus’s feet and his affirmation of the goodness of her choice should be enough to convince anyone to abandon that stereotype and encourage men and women to learn theology, to be students of the Word.

- ❖ That’s what makes me proud of our **Women’s Ministry** and the kind of events they put on and promote. Most are centered on training women to study and teach Scripture and to develop their theology. That’s what happens every summer in the intensive bible study they organize. Or in the conferences they promote. For example, they’re encouraging sisters to attend a local equipping conference next February that features a solid lineup of speakers and workshop teachers. **Like our Lord, we want to encourage and equip the women of our church to be students, teachers, and mentors who are proficient in the Word.**
 - We want the women of our church to emulate both Martha *and* Mary. To have hospitable hearts that welcome Jesus through practical acts of service *and* personal study of Scripture and theology. It’s a beautiful thing.

The Souring of a Distracted Heart

- ❖ So like I said, I wanted to begin by affirming Martha and any one of us – male or female – who more closely identifies with her. Her instinct to welcome Jesus through practical acts of service was not wrong or misguided, but the attitude she developed was problematic. This is an all-too-common problem for those of us who, like Martha, are wired to be hard workers – who are usually serving in the church and actively involved in ministry. **The problem is that our service can be conducted in a way that turns our hospitable hearts sour.** That's our second consideration: The souring of a distracted heart.
 - Let's go back and read 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.'*"

- ❖ Notice it says Martha was distracted. That word conveys the idea of being pulled or drawn away from one thing to another. **So Martha was trying, like her sister, to listen to Jesus's teaching, but she was distracted (drawn away) with much serving.** That word for *servicing* can also be translated as ministry. So she was distracted from Jesus with much ministry. How many of us can relate to that?
 - **Martha allowed serving Christ to distract her from enjoying Christ.** She was doing so much for Jesus that she lost sight of Jesus. She got so distracted that she focused more on the quality of her service than on the one she was meant to serve.

- ❖ That so easily happens to us, doesn't it? **We get involved in ministry with the best of intentions.** We start serving on the worship team or as a small group leader or with the Children's or Youth Ministries. Or we're appointed to serve as a deacon or elder, or we're called to serve in full-time ministry in some way, shape, or form.
 - **And soon enough, serving Christ becomes a distraction from enjoying Christ.** We get so busy with ministry – doing things for Jesus – that we lose sight of Jesus. We no longer prioritize reading his Word or listening to it preached. Being a student of Scripture takes a backseat because we're so busy serving.

- ❖ **The danger of this kind of distraction in ministry is that it often results in a souring of our attitude towards ministry.** When we lose sight of Christ in our serving, our attention turns inward and gives way to self-pity and resentment. Especially when we start feeling overlooked and under-appreciated.
 - You can hear that self-pity and resentment in Martha's words in v40. She was frustrated with her sister for not helping ("*[she] has left me to serve alone*") and frustrated with Jesus for not correcting Mary ("*do you not care*").
 - **When you get distracted from the person you're serving and your focus is fixed on the how and how much you're doing compared to others – then it's easy to feel sorry for yourself.** You're doing so much more than others. They're not carrying their weight. If you keep dwelling on that, you'll completely lose sight of Christ and be fixated on what you're not getting.

- ❖ That's how you grow resentful towards others, especially those in your church or ministry. "Why don't they share the same priorities as me? Why aren't more people volunteering in my area of ministry or supporting these important causes?" **It's easy to get frustrated and resentful that not enough attention or priority is given to the ministries I care about.**
 - Friends, if you can relate to those feelings, it could be that you've been distracted by the busyness of serving. **Could it be that you've begun to neglect God's Word?** I know, at first, it doesn't seem to make much difference if you're spending a little less time reading the Bible, or communing with the Lord in prayer, or regularly sitting under the teaching and preaching of his Word.
 - "What difference does it make if I'm still using that time for serving God? If I'm busy, at least I'm busy doing ministry. At least I'm not wasting my time on worldly pursuits or mindless entertainment."

- ❖ **But the more distracted and disconnected you are from an abiding relationship with Christ – the sooner resentment and self-pity will creep into your heart.** And you'll find it much easier to complain and to find fault in others – for what they're doing and especially for what they're *not* doing (that you think they should be doing).
 - **Friends, in the busyness of ministry, be careful not to crowd out the ministry of the Word.** That's Jesus's kind warning to Martha. She wanted to listen to Jesus like her sister, but she was distracted with much ministry. Again, the problem is not ministry. The solution is *not* to stop serving others and to just focus on private study and devotion. It's not about choosing one over the other.
 - **The devotional life and the active life are both important. But one is foundational to the other.** Serving others in the name of Christ is good and pleasing to the Lord. But listening to Jesus and worshipping him is foundational and must take priority.

- ❖ **Enjoying Christ is foundational to serving Christ. It's like how the roots of a tree are foundational to the branches and all its fruit.** The roots and the fruits are important. A healthy tree needs both. But there is a clear priority. Tending to the fruits of a tree to the neglect of the roots of that tree – is a recipe for disaster. In short order, the roots will grow unhealthy and the fruits will sour.
 - **So enjoying your relationship with Christ – tending to his Word, sitting under it with full attention and full submission – is like tending to the roots of your faith.** Neglect to do so because you're so busy picking the fruits is setting yourself up for failure down the road. Be careful not to get so busy with ministry that you end up crowding out the ministry of God's Word in your life.

- ❖ **This is why the priority of Word ministry – of regularly sitting under the teaching and preaching of Scripture – is so valued in our church.** And why we encourage the young adults in our congregation to occasionally serve in the church nursery, so that parents of little ones can be able to sit under the preaching of God's Word on a more regular basis.

- ❖ **And we especially encourage you to offer this beautiful act of service for Chinese side parents, so that they can regularly attend their worship service while English side volunteers care for their kids by serving in the Nursery, Kid’s Ministry, or Youth Ministry.** Of course, we don’t want you serving families to the neglect of your own experience of corporate worship. So if it completely takes you away from English service, that’s not good. That would be an unhealthy distraction.
 - But what I’m trying to do is to offer you another good reason to serve the families on our Chinese side. **You’re not just loving on their kids and helping them grow in Christ. You’re enabling those parents to prioritize the ministry of the Word.** You’re helping facilitate their growth in Christ. Overall, that will contribute to healthier families. That is the beauty of a multi-cultural, multi-generational church like ours. We have a unique opportunity to serve each other in this way.

The Priority of a Devoted Heart

- ❖ Now this clear priority of Word ministry leads us the third and final consideration: The priority of a devoted heart. In vv40, Martha has a distracted heart. **She’s only giving half-hearted attention to Christ, and Jesus explains that it’s because she’s trying to juggle too many priorities.** Martha is anxious and troubled because she thought all lot of things were necessary, especially her efforts to prepare a feast for Jesus.
 - Listen to vv41-42, *“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.’”*
- ❖ Again, Jesus wasn’t condemning Martha’s efforts to prepare a feast for him. In fact, the way he says her name twice (a double vocative) is no small detail. It conveys a sense of tenderness in his response (cf. Lk 22:31). Jesus recognizes her distress. She’s anxious and troubled and the good intentions of her heart are beginning to sour. **So to turn her distracted heart into a devoted heart, Jesus focuses on the one thing necessary.**
- ❖ Now he doesn’t explicitly name the one thing necessary, but it’s clear based on the context. It’s what Mary chose. **The one thing necessary, in this case, is not to serve Jesus an elaborate meal but to be served by him a spiritual meal – to feast on the Word of God.**
 - When Jesus says that Mary has chosen *“the good portion,”* that word *portion* is often used in association with a meal. **So it’s like he’s saying Mary has chosen the good meal – the better meal.** Jesus is saying, “Martha, Martha, you’re putting a lot of effort into preparing a big meal. I know you think Mary is slacking. You think she doesn’t have her priorities straight. But she’s feasting on a meal at my feet. She’s chosen the good portion, the good meal, which will not be taken away from her.”
- ❖ By that, he means that the food Martha is preparing is temporal. Her meal will satisfy your hunger today, but you’ll still be hungry tomorrow. **But the meal Mary is enjoying – feasting on the Word of God, the Bread of Life – that will satisfy you forever.** That meal will never spoil, never rot, will never fade or be taken away.

- ❖ The permanence of that better portion is all the more significant when you consider the circumstances. Remember the context. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem where he was going to be taken up. He was going to die. **So with death impending, Jesus preferred Martha's undivided attention – far more than her busied service.** She was busy preparing an elaborate dinner, but considering the circumstances, it would've been better to prepare a simple meal and spend more time at Jesus's feet and in his presence. Time was running short.
- ❖ Now the story ends in v42 seemingly without conclusion, but the great thing is that we have more than one Gospel account, and this same family shows up again, as we mentioned, in John 11. Martha and Mary's brother Lazarus had already been dead for four days by the time Jesus arrived in Bethany. **Martha was likely busy showing hospitality to the many guests who came from Jerusalem to console them in their grief (Jn 11:19).**
 - But Martha had changed since her last encounter with Christ. Her priorities were different. **Because this time, when she heard Jesus was coming, she immediately left her kitchen, left her guests, and was the first to go out and meet Jesus, even before Mary.** Now her one thing necessary – her top priority – was to be with Jesus. Her distracted heart has transformed into a devoted heart.
- ❖ **Friends, as we consider how to apply this story of Martha and Mary, be clear that this is not about changing personalities but about changing priorities.** I wouldn't want you going away thinking Mary was the better sister or the better Christian. Jesus loved Mary *and* Martha and what each brought to the table. Martha is not being told to be just like Mary or to serve like her. **She doesn't have to imitate Mary's personality – just Mary's priorities.**
 - Martha is always going to be Martha. She'll always be more Type-A. She'll always be wired to serve; to work hard; to get things done. That's good. **The church needs Martha Christians.** Jesus loves Martha Christians.
- ❖ But Martha Christians need to be reminded that when life gets crazy; when you're juggling so many responsibilities; when you're anxious and troubled by many things – **remember the one thing necessary. It's not serving God but enjoying God.**
 - That's what's necessary. That's the priority. Jesus said, *“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”* (Mt 4:4) **That means if you neglect your spiritual meal because you're so busy and distracted trying to serve a literal meal, then you won't have the spiritual vitality to sustain your service.** Your heart will sour, and your strength will fail.
- ❖ **The reality is that you need Jesus far more than he needs you.** We think Jesus needs us to serve him or to serve his church. We think our service is indispensable. **That's why Martha Christians are usually hesitant to take breaks in ministry out of fear that the church will fall apart if we're not serving.** We overestimate the importance of our service. We fool ourselves into thinking we're irreplaceable or that what we do is indispensable

- ❖ But there is only one thing necessary. And it's not anything we do for God. It's what he's done for us. **He sent his Son to minister to our needs as the Suffering Servant.** Jesus is not a harsh Taskmaster who places heavy burdens on us, making us serve him. No, he is a gracious Redeemer who took up our burdens and went to the cross. He didn't come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mk 10:45).
 - **The reality is we need Jesus's ministry far more than he needs ours.** We need his perfect life. We need his sin-atonement death. We need his death-defeating resurrection. We need his daily intercession. We need Christ to return and make all things new. **We need to be served by Jesus vastly more than he needs us to serve him.**

- ❖ I realize some of you are still seeking the faith, so you're not distracted with much Christian serving since you're not a Christian yet. But the story of Martha and Mary is still applicable for you. **If you want your sins forgiven; if you want to be made new; if you want to become a Christian – you don't have to be anxious or troubled about doing many things to earn your salvation or to prove yourself worthy.** The one and only thing necessary is to sit under the good news of the gospel and receive God's promises by faith.

- ❖ And for those of you Christians who are feeling convicted – who are feeling like you need to reprioritize that one thing necessary – I hope to encourage you. **I know you lead busy lives and a lot of that busyness is inevitable and out of your control.** Being a student in that competitive school of yours is busy. Being employed in your line of work is busy. Being a parent and having little kids at home is busy. Life is busy.
 - **You want to spend more time with Jesus – to sit at his feet and listen – but you have no idea how to make room.** Which responsibilities are you going to ignore? Which duties are you going to set aside or abandon?

- ❖ In Martha's case, she was physically unable to listen to Jesus's teaching in the living room, and, at the same time, continually serve in the kitchen. So she was encouraged to choose the better meal like her sister. But do you see? We don't have the same physical limitations. We don't have to drop everything to be in the presence of Christ. **We don't have to escape the busyness of life if we want to listen to his words.**
 - Because Christ has given his Holy Spirit to all believers. The Spirit dwells in us, so we carry the presence of Christ wherever we are and in whatever we're doing. And the teachings of Christ have been infallibly recorded in Holy Scripture – making his words accessible and mobile. Nowadays you can even listen to his words on your phone while you're driving on your commute or busy doing chores in the kitchen.

- ❖ You don't have the same limitations as Martha. **There is a way to carry out of your daily chores and tasks while giving Jesus that necessary attention. It's called practicing the presence of God.** Being mindful of God's presence wherever you are and in whatever you're doing. Even in the busyness of life, you can still choose the good portion.