

Luke 10:38-42

MARY AND MARTHA: ONE THING IS NECESSARY

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A. Introduction

Today we continue our series on Luke's story about Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem. That journey is narrated from Luke 9:51—19:44. Along the way, Jesus teaches his followers about the cost and blessings of discipleship.

If we choose, we can make Luke's story about Jesus our own story. We can walk with Jesus, hear his parables, and interact with him. Today, we share Mary and Martha's encounter with Jesus. As I hope to show, Jesus tells Martha that one thing that is necessary: *Loving God by listening to God*, which is exemplified by Mary.

B. Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42)

³⁸ Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. ³⁹ She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet [παρακαθεσθείσα πρὸς τοὺς πόδας τοῦ κυρίου] and listened to what he was saying [ἤκουεν τὸν λόγον αὐτοῦ]. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted [περὶεσπᾶτο] by her many tasks [πολλὴν διακονίαν]; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care [lit. "it is not a care for you"; οὐ μέλει σοι] that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." ⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things [μεριμνᾷς καὶ θορυβάζῃ περὶ πολλά]; ⁴² there is need of only one thing [ἓνός δέ ἐστιν χρεία]. Mary has chosen the better part [ἀγαθὴν μερίδα], which will not be taken away from her."

1. Setting

In Luke's narrative, Jesus and his disciples have been traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem. By the time they come to Martha's home in Bethany, they have journeyed about three days.

The story about Martha and Mary is the third of three episodes that are linked together by the common theme of *loving God* and *loving neighbor*:

- In the first episode, we heard that the greatest commandment is to love God and love one's neighbor (10:25-28)
- In the second episode, saw that love of one's neighbor meant compassion in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (10:29-37)
- The third episode about Mary and Martha, demonstrates how to love or how to be devoted to God (10:38-42)

2. Patriarchal culture

The story of Mary and Martha is set within the ancient patriarchal culture. "Patri" refers to fathers or males; "archy" refers to ruling authority. So a patriarchal culture is where men rule over other men and all women and children.

Jesus lived in was a patriarchal society. This is important to keep this in mind when we read the story of Mary and Martha. Women were subordinate to men:

- Unmarried women were not allowed to leave the home of their father.
- Married women were not allowed to leave the home of the husband.
- Women had restricted roles with little or no authority.
- They could not testify in court trials.
- They could not go out in public or talk to strangers.
- Women were viewed as property.

In that culture, males had certain roles and females had other roles. They tended did not overlap. The separation of male and female roles within the Middle Eastern culture was (and still is) important for them.¹

Women worked to make the household function well. Good wives were the doers, working from morning until night. Men worked outside the home. If there was a problem at home—children, food, guests—the wives (and women) were expected to do something about it, while husbands (and males) sat around and contemplated the problem.

3. Mary

Let's look at Mary.

¹ Bruce J. Malina, *Windows on the World of Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster/John Know, 1993) 76

a. Sitting at the feet of Jesus

The first thing Luke tells us is about Mary is that she "sat at the feet of Jesus" (v. 39). From our 21st century perspective, it sounds like Mary was docile, self-effacing women, something akin to a pet dog.

However, in the ancient Jewish culture, "sitting at the feet" of someone meant something very different. Here are a couple of other examples of people "sitting at the feet" of someone. See if you can tell what is going on.

Acts 22:3. Paul is speaking and says: "I am a Jew, born at Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, educated according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as you all are this day. (NRSV)

Mishnah Abot 1.4. Yose ben Yoezer of Tzeredah and Yose ben Yohanan of Jerusalem received (Torah) from them [the Rabbis]. Yose ben Yoezer said: Let your house be a meeting place for Sages, and sit amid the dust of their feet, and drink in their words with thirst.

When Mary sits at the feet of Jesus, what is going on? Mary is taking the position of a student with a rabbi. Mary is becoming an apprentice of Rabbi Jesus. The problem was that in the Jewish culture of that time, women were not taught the Torah.

Sifrei Devarim 46: "You shall teach your sons and not your daughters."

m. Sotah 3.4. R. Eliezer says: "If any man gives his daughter knowledge of the Law it is as though he taught her lechery."²

y. Sotah 3:4, 19a. R. Eliezer also said, "Women's wisdom is solely in the spindle." He added, "The words of the Torah should be burned rather than entrusted to women."

Other rabbinic opinions at that time allowed women to learn the Torah.³ But generally R. Eliezer's extreme position was accepted.

² The idea was that Torah study for women would increase their deviousness and then they would exploit it to conceal their transgressions from their husbands.

For that reason, Mary's decision to "sit at the feet" of Jesus would have been very disturbing, especially for Martha, who continued her culturally prescribed female duties.

What's more shocking is Jesus defends Mary. At that time "no self-respecting rabbi would teach a woman the law, or even speak publicly with a woman for longer than necessity demanded."⁴

However, Luke makes it very clear that Jesus taught everyone, male and female. The traditional hierarchical separation between men and women no longer existed for disciples of Jesus.

b. Listening to the word

The second thing we are told is that Mary is that she "listened to Jesus' teaching" (v. 39). Literally, "she was listening to his word" (ἤκουεν τὸν λόγον αὐτοῦ). The verb, *ēkouen*, is a durative imperfect, which emphasizes a continual listening.

What does it mean to "listen to his word"? There are four contrasts between Martha and Mary that might help us understand what "listening" means:

- 1) Martha is distracted; Mary is absorbed in Jesus' word.
- 2) Martha is concerned about "many things"; Mary chooses "one thing."
- 3) Martha is anxious and troubled; Mary is still before the Lord.
- 4) Martha complains; Mary says nothing.

What then is "listening to Jesus"? I think we can see that *listening to Jesus is a single-hearted, quiet absorption in the word and love of God.*

- Literally, this translates into reading and reflecting on the Word, the Bible.
- Figuratively, this translates into an ever present awareness of Christ or contemplative prayer.

³ For example, R. Eleazar ben Azariah said: "'Gather the men, women and children'—since the men come to learn Torah and the women come to hear, why do the children come?" (y. *Sotah* 3:4, 19a). Women were part of the community on that occasion—the occasion of mass Torah study, as listeners. The Talmud also tells of the generation of King Hezekiah (b. *Sanhedrin* 94b): "They did not find a single girl or boy, man or woman, who was not expert in the laws of ritual impurity and purity."

⁴ Allen Verhey, *The Great Reversal: Ethics and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 95.

Notice we are not told "what" Jesus taught. That was not the point. The point was that Mary "listened" to the Lord. Between *serving God*, on the one hand, and *listening to God*, on the other, Jesus says that listening is the "better part" (v. 42).

Jesus does not say that serving is bad, only that listening is better. Why is "listening to the Lord" better (higher priority) than "serving the Lord"?

Without hearing, we will not know who to serve, how to serve, or when to serve. Without communing with God, we are clueless about God's will. "It is a great temptation to serve at the expense of being fed spiritually."⁵

4. Martha

Now, let's look at Martha.

a. Received

The first thing we hear about Martha is that she "received Jesus" (ὑπεδέξατο αὐτόν) (v. 38). The Greek word, *hypodechomai*, means "to welcome a guest." It is the word for "hospitality".

The preceding episodes taught that *the one who loves God, loves the neighbor and the stranger* (10:25-37). Martha demonstrates that love.

In this way, Martha is characterized positively at the outset. Martha is not totally contrasted with Mary. She is receptive to Jesus and his mission.

b. Distracted

The second thing I see about Martha is she "was being distracted" (durative imperfect) with "many tasks" (NRSV) or "much serving" (RSV).

The English word, "distracted," is the translation for the Greek word (περισπάω), which means:

- 1) To draw away or distract

⁵ Darrell Bock, *Luke*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 306.

- 2) To be driven about mentally
- 3) To be over-occupied or too busy

You get the picture. This is someone who is juggling too many balls and is in frenzied or agitated state.

This is just the opposite of "listening". When you are in this kind of state, you cannot sit still and listen to God

c. Resentful

The third thing I notice about Martha is she is resentful. Martha complains to Jesus that Mary abandoned her to do all the work.

Now remember, in this culture, women were expected to do all of the domestic labor, not men. Mary seems to have abandoned that role. She has decided to sit around and contemplate with the men. That may have really irritated Martha.

However, I think Martha's resentment went deeper. I sometimes find that when I am "serving God" I can become resentful. I want to help others, but when I do, I can say some twisted things to myself that make me very disturbed.

For example, I hear myself say things like:

- "I'm making all the sacrifices" (overgeneralization)
- "No one is helping meeeeeee" (narcissistic whining)
- "They think I'm stupid, so they're using me" (mind reading; jumping to conclusions)
- "You should help me" (infantile demand)
- "The world isn't fair" (magnification)
- "These people are slobs and jerks" (labeling)

Of course, the *antidote* for listen to this kind of stinkin' thinkin' is "listening to God"!

If you do not listen to God, you're probably listening to your own self-defeating, misery-making, self-talk. That results in mental anxiety and trouble.

d. Anxiety & trouble

The fourth thing I see about Martha is she is full of mental anxiety and trouble. Martha's resentment led to mental disturbance. There are two Greek words.

- 1) *Merimnaō* (μεριμνάω), which is translated, "anxiety."
- 2) *Thoor-bad'-zō* (θορυβάζω), which is translated "troubled".

The word, *thoor-bad'-zō* is used for crowds "making an uproar". So Jesus is saying that Martha has put herself "in an uproar," like a crowd of people inside her head yelling and screaming.

C. Reflections

1. Discipleship of equals

Jesus and his earliest followers created a community of equals. Men and women were on the same footing. In contrast to common rabbinic practice, Jesus encouraged women to listen to the divine word and become part of his ministry.

2. Service and Reflection

Discipleship is a balanced combination of two things: service and reflection, or duty and devotion. Action and contemplation go together.

But Jesus says that ***one thing that is necessary***: *Loving God by listening to God*, which was exemplified by Mary.

So Jesus warned Martha, and all other would-be disciples. Martha was commendable in her service, but she was missing the blessing of her service, because her mind was so distracted by external demands, she took no time for God.

Still, service is important. Mary and Martha present us with the dual calling of loving God and loving neighbor. The story of Mary and Martha remind us of the importance of balancing duty and devotion, action with absorption, care with contemplation.