

Luke 10:38-42

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[0 : 00] Turn back in your Bibles to Luke chapter 10 and we'll read again that short passage about Martha and Mary. Let us hear the word of our Lord.

! But Martha was distracted with much serving.

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. Let us pray.

Father, what we know not, please teach us. And what we have not, please give us. And what we are not, please make us.

[1 : 14] For the sake of your Son, our Saviour, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever praised, world without end.

Amen. Well, I wonder if you've ever been at someone's house as a guest when there was a domestic tiff, an argument. You know, you're there as a guest.

You're having a meal and the husband and the wife start having a wee argument in front of you. Or one of the kids is disobedient and then you need to, the parent needs to take them away and discipline them.

It's awkward, isn't it? I had such an experience a number of years ago in the house of my friends Clark and Lee. They'd just been married and I called in after their honeymoon to see them.

And they invited me to stay for dinner. And there we were having this lovely dinner and enjoying catching up. And the next thing the doorbell goes and it's Clark's business partner.

[2 : 11] And he comes in with his wife and about a five, six-year-old son. And they get invited for dinner. And so there we all are sitting around having this lovely dinner together. And then near the end of the dinner the father decides it would be a good idea to take the boy and introduce him to Clark's dog.

Who's in the back room off the kitchen. Now what was behind the door, boys and girls, was not a pet poodle. It was a big boxer dog.

And when I say big I mean big and excitable. Well there we are talking away at the table. And next thing we hear this scream. And the boy appears in the living room running as fast as he can with this dog slipping all over the kitchen tiles.

Running after him and the dad chasing the dog. And Clark's jumping up from the table. And the boy runs and jumps into his mother's arms crying and screaming. And the dog's jumping up at him. And then she flips out and shouts at her husband. You always take it a step too far. Which all the wives here say amen.

[3 : 21] Right? And next thing they just start this full on argument. Back and forth shouting at each other. It was so awkward. I mean what do you do? Anyone for a pickled onion?

They're really nice. I mean what do you do when you're caught in the middle of a domestic tiff? Well the one thing you don't do is take sides. Can you imagine that day I'd said.

Do you know what mate? I'm with your wife. I think you did. Taking a step too far. Or you imagine I said to the wife. Look. Stop being a stress merchant. Just relax. Just give the boy to the dog and we can all have our dinner.

Just relax. But if you're ever caught in a domestic tiff. What's the one thing you don't do? You do not take sides. Well Luke tells us the story of Jesus.

Caught in a domestic tiff. An awkward moment between two sisters. Mary and Martha. But it's a domestic tiff in which Jesus takes a side.

[4 : 27] And out of which Jesus brings a profound lesson for our Christian lives. The story is quite simple. It's only four verses long. But the point of the story is often missed.

Because we tend to read this story as an either or choice that Mary and Martha faced. On a superficial reading we tend to think of this story as a story about the choice between serving and listening.

Between the busy life and the quiet life. Between the hyperactive life and the contemplative life. But a closer look at the story reveals that that's not the point at all.

In fact we really only get Jesus' point if we first feel the tension of this disagreement. And understand why Martha gets so upset. Because the case that Martha brings to Jesus about her sister's actions is not without good grounds.

Picture the scene. Martha has invited Jesus and his disciples into her home. Verse 38. She's the host. And therefore the pressure rests on her shoulders.

[5 : 33] And what a pressure it is. At the very least there are 13 men staying in her home. All with hungry mouths to feed. Because they're men. And then secondly because they're on a journey with Jesus up to Jerusalem.

The numbers alone would bring some stress into the home. There are rooms to prepare. There's water to fetch. There's food to buy. Prepare. Cook. Serve.

Then clean up. Any person here who regularly practices hospitality or entertains guests knows exactly how Martha would have felt.

Now adds in a mix the issue of Mary. Verse 39. And she had a sister called Mary who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching.

Now we don't really feel the offense of what Mary does here in our 21st century western world. But at best Mary's actions are culturally inappropriate and downright insensitive and thoughtless.

[6 : 35] In this culture women were generally not allowed to be disciples. Yet Mary's posture of sitting at the feet of Jesus was the posture of a disciple.

Do you remember Paul in Acts 22 said that he sat at the feet of Gamaliel, his teacher. This was the position and posture of a disciple.

And in this culture only men were allowed to be disciples of rabbis. Only men should sit at Jesus' feet. Yet here is Mary sitting herself at Jesus' feet and listening to his word.

So it is outside the bounds of cultural etiquette. But that isn't actually Martha's beef. Martha's beef is not that Mary is being so culturally insensitive, Lord.

No, Martha's beef is that Mary has left her alone to serve. Do you see that in verse 40? Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone?

[7 : 37] Because in this culture women prepared and served food in a home. It was simply the dumb thing. Men sat, women served. That was the culture.

Now this hit home to me a couple of years ago. I was in Malawi. And after church we went to the minister's home. And as we came in he sort of ushered us into the living room. And there we all were.

These men who had come from Australia to teach the Bible for two weeks in Malawi. We were all sitting in the living room. And his daughters and wife sat at the doorway of the living room on the floor in the corridor.

Well, we got up and said, please come and take these seats. And he was like, no. In my culture men sit and women sit in the hallway and they will serve us the food when it is ready.

It was the cultural thing. And we were the ones being culturally offensive to him because of us trying to invite his wife and sister daughters into the room. And it was the same in Jesus' culture.

[8 : 37] Women helped in the kitchen and left the men to talk in the living room. And as a woman, you did not go into the main room and sit yourself down. And yet here's Mary in the main room sitting listening to Jesus.

Leaving Martha all alone in the kitchen. Martha's annoyance is surely understandable then. There are at least 13 hungry men to feed.

And it's not like Mary is an invited guest who might be relieved of helping. No, she's the host's sister of all the people in the house who should see the work that needs to be done.

It's the sister. Not the sister-in-law, but the sister. How can Mary think it's reasonable to leave Martha on her own to prepare everything? Well, given Mary's thoughtlessness, Martha's had enough.

Verse 40. Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me. Her question to Jesus is rhetorical.

[9 : 41] She's expecting the answer yes. Lord, you care, don't you, that my sister has left me? Yes, you do. Well, therefore, tell her to help me. Notice how Martha stopped referring to her sister by her name.

She's just now a her, not a Mary. Mary, the command is terse, it's to the point. It increases the tension. As one commentator puts it, Martha is miffed with Mary.

Theologically profound. But it gets to the point, doesn't it? Martha is miffed with Mary. Now, you can feel the tension, can't you? It's no small matter.

Do you feel for Martha? Do you get her issue? Do you see why she's got a bee in her bonnet? It's a legitimate one, isn't it? Given the cultural etiquette, given there's 1,300 men to feed, provide for, Martha's got a point, doesn't she?

Well, actually, no, she doesn't. And that's what's so shocking about this story. Jesus is not on her side. He's on Mary's side.

[10 : 50] Look at verse 41. 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. We see Jesus' tenderness to Martha in that double pronouncement of her name.

Martha, Martha. He conveys affection and emotion here towards her. He's not on her side. He's about to offer a rebuke. But he couches his words with love and affection.

Martha, Martha. But then comes the stinging rebuke. You are anxious and troubled about many things, but only one thing is necessary.

You see the way Jesus positions the words many and one in contrast to each other? In the original Greek, they are literally side by side. You're troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary.

[11 : 54] And the one thing clearly relates to Mary sitting at Jesus' feet listening to his teaching. Mary has chosen that one thing that is better, the spiritual food of Jesus' word.

And we see that the idea of food is still here because there is this word portion, which conveys the theme of food. Just like in our culture, we'd say to someone, do you want a portion of carrots or a portion of Brussels sprouts?

Well, so too in their culture. A portion was a portion of food. In other words, Mary has chosen to be involved in another kind of meal. A meal with Jesus.

It may be that there's an allusion here to Deuteronomy 8 verse 3. Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

But I think there's a closer allusion, and that is to some of the Psalms. Psalm 73 verse 25 and 26. Whom have I in heaven but you?

[12 : 57] And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Or Psalm 16 verse 5. The Lord is my chosen portion. And here is Jesus referring to what Mary is doing, listening to his word, as her choosing the good portion.

In other words, Mary is feasting on Christ and his word. When this is your food, Martha, it won't be taken away from you.

See, Martha has failed to do the one necessary thing. To listen in humble submission to the word of the Lord. The idea of humble submission comes from Mary's posture, sitting at the Lord's feet.

And this is what Mary has chosen and what Martha has missed. Listening in humble submission to the word of the Lord. But we mustn't misunderstand Jesus' point.

[14 : 03] He isn't presenting Martha with an either-or choice. Serving or listening. Busyness or quietness. Hyperactivity or contemplation.

There are a number of things in the passage that show us that Jesus isn't giving Martha an either-or choice. Look at verse 42 again. But one thing is necessary.

Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her. Jesus is not lambasting Martha for doing the wrong thing. He hasn't said, Martha, Martha.

Mary is doing what is right. You're doing what's wrong. No, he simply says that Mary has chosen what is good. Or, as some translations put it, Mary has chosen what is better.

She's chosen the better portion. Which means that what Martha is doing at one level is good and right. It's just not best. Jesus' issue with Martha is that she is worried and upset by many things.

[15:02] Not that the many things in themselves are wrong. Jesus is not saying to Martha, we don't need a meal, Martha. Just come and join the Bible study. Forget the beetroot.

It's all about the Bible. That's not what he's saying. Jesus isn't a Platonist. He didn't have a separation in his theology between the physical and the spiritual.

As if food didn't matter to him. Just the spiritual things mattered. When you read the Gospels, one of the things you see is that Jesus literally eats his way through the Gospels.

Whenever you see Jesus in the Gospels, what's he doing? He's eating. Read the Gospels and what's the main accusation against him? That he was a glutton and a drunkard.

Which means he enjoyed his food enough to be accused of being a glutton. And he enjoyed his wine enough to be accused of being a drunkard. Jesus loved his wine. He loved his lamb steak.

[16:02] He was the man of Ecclesiastes. Par excellence. He knew what it was. To enjoy his wine and his food and his sleep. So he was not opposed to food.

In fact, if you look back at chapter 10 verse 8. He's expecting some food. He says to his disciples, whenever you enter a town and they receive you.

Eat what is set before you. Jesus is speaking to his disciples as they go out on mission. He says, when you go into someone's house, they're going to give you some food and eat it.

And here he is, verse 38, entering Martha's house on a journey. So he's expecting some food. He's not a male chauvinist.

Martha would have had to produce a meal for 13 hungry men. So when he says, Martha, Martha, only one thing is needed. He's not saying, stop fretting about the beetroot and come and feast on the Bible.

[17:05] That's not what he's saying. He's expecting a meal from Martha. Indeed, when we look closer at the text, we see that Mary was most likely initially serving alongside Martha.

Look again at verse 40. But Martha was distracted with much serving and she went to him and said, Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone?

Now, what does that imply? That Mary initially served with her. She left me to serve alone. It's not that she never helped. It's that she's left me in the middle of serving.

That's the nuance here. Jesus isn't presenting Martha with an either or, serving or listening. Busy life or quiet life. No, Mary chose to serve and then listen.

But her listening ordered her serving. Her listening gave perspective and proportion to her serving. Martha's serving consumed her listening.

[18:11] And in the end, she lost all perspective and proportion. And that, in a nutshell, is what this story is all about. It's about perspective. It's about proportion. It's about order.

It's about priorities. It's about this in one sentence. The many important things of life need to be ordered by the one necessary thing in life.

Listening and humble submission to the word of the Lord. Let me say it again. The many important things of life need to be ordered, prioritized by the one necessary thing in life.

Listening and humble submission to the word of the Lord. And when we do that, when we allow the many important things in life to be ordered by, prioritized by, listening and humble submission to the word of the Lord, then life is not so complicated.

And that's the one necessary thing that's needed. Because the ear gives perspective and proportion to the hand. It's ear first, then hand.

[19:20] And when we get the order right, then we have chosen the better thing. Now I think this story is so helpful for us. Because we live in a hyperactive world, don't we?

Where busyness is the new business of life. And I'm sure even as you've sat here this morning, you've thought of things that you need to do tomorrow or this week. Texts and emails that need to be sent.

Food that needs to be bought. Children that need collected from school. Exams that require revision. Arrangements that need to be kept. But the first thing we need to recognize is that the Lord Jesus does not present us with an either or choice.

When we're faced with all of those things. He doesn't say, forget about all those earthly, temporal, fleeting things that you're doing. Just read your Bible. That's not what he's saying to us this morning.

No, he knows about the many important things. He knew Martha had to prepare a meal for him and his disciples. He knows our important things.

[20 : 25] The nappies that need to be changed. The school runs that need to happen. The lunches to make. The meals to cook. The exams to revise for. The emails in the inbox that keep piling up.

The clothes to clean. The grass to cut. The shopping that needs done. The discipline in the home. The family relative to care for. He knows your to-do list.

And he's not anti it. He doesn't ask you to just bin it and read your Bible. He doesn't encourage monasticism. Now, what he says to us this morning is that the many important things of life need to be prioritized by the one necessary thing in life.

Listening and humble submission to the word of the Lord. And when you do that, then those other things start to fall into their proper place.

We see it with Mary. She centers and orders her serving around the one necessary thing. Of listening and humble submission to the word of the Lord.

[21 : 32] It's not that she doesn't serve at all. It's that she served initially. And then realized that Jesus is in the front room. And I'm going to go listen. And I'm going to get my serving in proportion to the listening.

Mary, if you like, made Christ her portion. And therefore she kept everything else in proportion. She made Christ her portion. And therefore kept everything else in proportion.

And unless we do the one necessary thing of listening and humble submission to the word of the Lord. Then our lives start to spin out of control. We start to lose perspective and proportion on those many important things.

Now in case you think this is a sermon about the quiet time. Notice where Mary is. She's not having a wee one-on-one Bible study here in the conservatory.

She's in a room full of men sitting at Jesus' feet. She's listening in humble submission to the word of the Lord in community. Mary's at church.

[22 : 39] Think about it. She's sitting at the feet of Jesus. The head of the church. With the apostles. Either side. Mary's at church. Quiet times are great.

I think we live in an age when our personal walk with the Lord is often downplayed. It's good to have a time in the day when we read and pray. But the priority in the Bible is not quiet times but church times.

That's where we hear the word of the Lord and should sit in humble submission. Getting together as believers and listening to Jesus speak through his word. That's why there's something healthy about the rhythm of the Lord's day every week.

It's a time for us to get our perspective right again. To order the many important things that we need to do in our lives. But I want to close by asking a question.

And that is, how did Martha lose perspective while Mary kept perspective? How did Martha lose perspective while Mary kept perspective?

[23 : 46] Remember many years ago, John MacArthur, the American pastor in California, telling the story of the time he was at a pastor's fraternal and he got talking to a charismatic pastor who told him that every morning when he woke up and was in the bathroom shaving, Jesus would come into the bathroom and they would talk together.

Well, if you know who John MacArthur is, that's the wrong person to tell that story to. John MacArthur wrote a book called Charismatic Chaos. And it wasn't positive towards the charismatic movement.

So here's this pastor telling him that every morning Jesus comes in and they talk together in the bathroom. And John MacArthur looks at him and says, Can I just ask you, do you mean Jesus Christ of Nazareth, who died and rose again, comes into your bathroom and talks with you when you're shaving in the morning?

He said, yes. He said, let me just get this right. You're telling me that Jesus Christ of Nazareth, born of a virgin, lived in Palestine, comes into your bathroom, who was crucified, risen, exalted to the Father's right hand, comes into your bathroom and speaks to you?

He said, yes. He said, let me just get this right. You're saying that Jesus Christ, born of a virgin, lived in Nazareth, crucified, died, risen, exalted, before whom angels worship and demons tremble, comes into your bathroom and talks to you while you're shaving?

[25 : 15] And the charismatic pastor said, Yes, it sounds like you don't believe me. To which John MacArthur said, I've only got one question for you. Do you keep shaving?

And then MacArthur says to him, If Jesus Christ of Nazareth, who was crucified, risen, and is exalted to the Father's right hand, came into my bathroom while I was shaving, I would fall on my knees and worship him.

Because when you realize who Jesus Christ is, when he's in your home, then you act differently. And that's why Martha lost perspective.

And Mary kept her perspective. Because Martha didn't realize who was in her home. But Mary did. In fact, it's interesting that three times in these four verses, the title Lord is used.

But in verse 40, when Martha speaks in one verse, three times she speaks about herself. She's lost all perspective of who's in the house.

[26 : 25] And it's all about me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me. Martha, Martha, he whom angels worship, and before whom demons tremble, is in your home.

And you're worried about the potatoes. How does Jesus like his potatoes? Does he like them baked or fried? Should we boil them? Should we grill them? How should we do the potatoes?

Martha, Martha, prophets and kings wanted to see what you see and to hear what you have the chance to hear. Prophets and kings, Martha.

But you're worried about the cauliflower. Should we do it with cream or just plain? How should we serve the cauliflower? Martha, Martha, the queen of Sheba came from the ends of the earth to listen, to listen to Solomon.

And one greater than Solomon is in your front living room. And you're worried about the banana fritters. Martha, Martha, in light of my identity, a simple meal would have done.

[27 : 35] And then you could have come and had another meal that will never be taken away from you. Because, Martha, when you realize who I am, then I am your portion.

See, Martha lost all perspective because she lost the identity of Jesus. The Lord, the one upon whom the end of the ages had dawned.

The savior of the world was in her home. But she was more worried about whether it was cream or ice cream would the apple crumble. Mary, on the other hand, she knew who he was.

And so she sat and listened. Well, brothers and sisters, as we gather Sunday by Sunday during the week in our home groups to sit in humble submission to the word of the Lord, let us never forget who it is who speaks to us through his word.

It is our Lord Jesus Christ, the King of glory before whom angels worship and demons tremble. And when we remember that and listen in humble submission, then it helps us keep the many important things in life in right perspective.

[28 : 50] Let us pray. Let us pray. Thank you.