

# Luke 10:38-42

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[0:00] Luke 10. So, who doesn't want to be a good listener?! Do you want to be a good listener? Apart from a few narcissistic individuals, it seems to me that everyone appreciates the value of good listening.

! It reflects that.

So, there's articles like the five fundamentals of effective listening, or seven keys to effective listening. And the articles cover something like this.

Keeping an open mind. Responding to non-verbal cues. Maintaining eye contact. Asking good questions. And you read articles like that, it'll reinforce this key question that people are trying to answer when it comes to listening.

What is a good listener? And, of course, that interests us as people of the kingdom of God. And the Bible has got things to say in answer to that. But I wonder if what sets the Bible apart in this topic is that it's less interested in how you listen, but it's more interested in who you listen to.

[1:22] And that is, when it comes to the kingdom and the need to listen, that's our key question. Who do you listen to? And particularly, are you listening to the king of the kingdom?

Are you listening to Jesus? That's our question for this evening. And as we reflect on these short few verses from the end of Luke 10, they capture just one little moment in the life of Mary, Martha, and Jesus.

And I want to look at that tonight just by looking at each character in turn. The sister who does not speak, and the sister who does speak, and then Jesus himself, and what we're left to ponder when he speaks.

So, a moment in the life of Mary and Martha and Jesus. Let's see, firstly, the sister who does not speak. And I trust you noticed that about her as I read it. And no word from Mary is recorded in these five little verses.

Martha speaks, Jesus speaks, but Mary is noticeably silent. And her silence underscores what she's known for, not for talking, but for listening.

[2:37] And when Jesus arrives, she takes, doesn't he, up the position, verse 39, at Jesus' feet. That is the position of learning for disciples in those days.

It's a position of humble listening. And by taking her place at Jesus' feet, she is recognizing Jesus' importance. And she is, in this moment, embodying a principle of discipleship that the Gospel of Luke has already stressed.

I'd not really seen that until I studied this. So come with me on a little tour of the Gospel of Luke. Look at chapter 5 and verse 15. Luke chapter 5 and verse 15.

But now, even more, the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and be healed of their infirmities. Just over the page of chapter 6 and verses 47 and 48.

Everyone who comes to me and hears my word and does them, I will show you what he is like. He is like a man building a house who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock.

[3:43] We'll go to chapter 8 and verse 15. As for that, in the good soil, there are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart and bear fruit with patience.

Chapter 8, verse 20 and 21. And he was told, your mother and your brothers are standing outside desiring to see you. But he answered them, my mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.

Chapter 9, verse 35. Chapter 9, verse 35. And a voice came out of the cloud saying, this is my son, my chosen one, listen to him.

And as we read a couple of weeks ago, chapter 10 and verse 16. The one who hears you, hears me and the one who rejects, you reject me and the one who rejects him, who sent me. Chapter 10,

verse 24.

For I tell you that many prophets and kings decided to see what you see and did not see it and to hear what you hear and did not hear it. You see, it's not an obscure little theme in Luke's gospel. It's central.

[ 4 : 52 ] Perhaps we could even say, actually, it's paramount. And noticing that will help us understand Jesus' reaction to Martha here. But for now, we're noticing Mary.

And she has learned, doesn't she, this lady, she's learned, it seems, just how important it is to listen to Jesus. But what of her sister? What about the sister who does speak?

What about Martha? Well, Luke tells us that Jesus arrived at her home and Martha welcomed him. It's quite likely, I guess, that welcoming Jesus meant welcoming his 12 disciples who were on the road with him too.

She opens up her home. And Martha is almost certainly committed to cooking a meal for 13 hungry travelers. That is hospitable, isn't it? And generous.

But I think we're even more impressed when we remember Jesus' words from earlier in the chapter. Do you remember them? You might recall a few weeks ago in Luke chapter 10, Jesus sent out the 72 followers of his followers on a mission and he told them, in the towns you go to, when you find somebody welcoming you, go on in.

[ 5 : 59 ] Others will reject you. And he told them that you will be able to recognize those who are receptive to my message by the way they show hospitality. And so it's got to be significant, isn't it?

At the end of the same chapter, Luke is telling us about a woman, Martha, who is extremely hospitable to Jesus and his disciples. So this is not just a woman who's performing a cultural duty. I think we're meant to conclude that she is genuinely interested in Jesus. Like her sister. She sees how important Jesus is. And what's more, we just finished, didn't we, last week, looking at the passage before about what it means to love.

And we learned from the Samaritan in Jesus' story what it looks like to love generously. What it looks like to go out of your way to love and serve. And on that score, Martha scores very highly. Martha exemplifies Jesus' teaching in both these respects. And what comes immediately before this passage predisposes us as we read this to be favourable to Martha and her hospitality.

[ 7 : 12 ] And even here in these verses, the way that Martha is described is very positive, at least in some respects, because she's a servant. Look at verse 40. She's a sister called Mary, you sat at the Lord's feet and listened as a teacher, but Martha was distracted with much serving.

She was distracted by much service. And then later in the same verse, the word translated as work has left me alone to serve alone.

It's the same word. My sister has left me to do all the serving myself. It's the word the rest of the New Testament uses for Christian ministry.

And Luke wants us to know that Martha is not just twiddling her thumbs. She's not just outside playing with the pets while Mary is in there listening. She's not sitting on the sofa reading the paper. Martha is serving.

Martha is ministering to the needs of Jesus and his disciples. And in that sense too, Martha is to be commended. And yet there are, aren't there, some significant differences between Mary and Martha.

[ 8 : 23 ] Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet and Martha is on her feet working and then standing to talk to Jesus. Mary is attentive to Jesus.

Martha is distracted. That's the word verse 40 uses or as Jesus puts it in verse 41. Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things.

And so while Mary is quietly listening, Martha is complaining. No doubt the frustration has been simmering in the kitchen. We know what that's like, don't we?

It's not uncommon in our house for Clara and I to have guests over and for one of us to be working in the kitchen while the other entertains and talks to the friends in the lounge.

and it's not unheard of in our house for the one who is working in the kitchen, whoever that may be, to begin to feel frustrated and feel that they're doing all the work themselves.

[ 9 : 32 ] Well, that's what's going on here, isn't it? Martha's simmering frustration leads to an outburst. And to put it in today's language, she's a bit of a meltdown, doesn't she? Her sacrificial service gives way to self-pity and the emotional damn bursts and she finds fault with both her sister and with Jesus.

She's cranky with Mary for not helping her and she's cranky with Jesus for not doing anything about it. Well, the Lord speaks. How does Jesus respond?

What happens when people get cranky with Jesus? How does he react? There's a lot of tension in the air, isn't it, at this point? And Martha has exploded, there's a meltdown and it falls to Jesus to respond.

And no doubt every ear in the room was trained to hear what he would say. So look at verse 41. But the Lord said, Martha, Martha, you're 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. And Jesus' response is rich in compassion and clarity. His repetition of Martha's name is full of tenderness.

[10:52] He doesn't tell Martha what she's been doing wrong. There is no rebuke for Martha. There is only kind compassion. And yet Jesus' words do bring remarkable clarity.

they clarify things for us too. Jesus clarifies that Martha is worried about many things but Martha is worried about many things but Mary has chosen to focus on the one thing, the one thing that Jesus describes as necessary.

And Jesus clarifies for us that whilst Martha has chosen to do good things, what Mary has chosen is the better thing. And so his compassion is mixed with firmness here, isn't it?

And Jesus is clearly telling Martha he is not going to tell Mary to get up and go and help in the kitchen. In fact, he's suggesting, isn't he, that Martha should leave her pots and pans and her broom and her tea towel and come and sit down too.

Now of course, Jesus is not saying that serving is completely unimportant. No doubt at some point that evening Jesus wanted to eat and he wasn't suggesting that the food didn't need to be prepared but he was saying there is something more important to human survival than food.

[12:07] And that's something that the Bible teaches from beginning to end. Right back at the start of the Old Testament, God had taught the Israelites, man does not live on bread alone but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

And so let me be clear with you, I don't think Jesus is saying that Martha was wrong and Mary was right. He's simply saying that Mary grasped something that Martha had not.

After all, Martha welcomed Jesus and served Jesus but Mary could see that welcoming Jesus and serving Jesus find their proper orientation, their proper fulfillment when you listen to Jesus.

Mary had realized that you need to understand that all the other important things in life need to be understood in the context of the one essential thing of paying attention to the word that comes from the mouth of God, from the mouth of his son Jesus.

So this is not a contrast between somebody who knows how to be a good host and someone knows how to be a good listener. It's not that these two sisters have got different skill sets or different spiritual gifts, it's just that one of them understood the moment they were in better than the other.

[13:29] Mary's choice was wiser. And what made Martha's the poorer choice was everything to do, has everything to do with who it was that had walked through the door.

This is not about how to listen. This is all about who to listen to. And Mary recognizes who Jesus is and of all the things she could have done to demonstrate she knew how important he is, this is the one thing she chose to listen.

And Jesus says, doesn't he, at the end of verse 42, it will not be taken away from her. The last line of the chapter is beautiful, isn't it?

It's Jesus' word of promise for Mary. If you seek me, you will find me. If it's me you want, it's me you'll have.

And many other things will be taken from you in life. But if you choose to listen to the word that comes from the mouth of God, it will be never taken from you. I went to see Dick Lucas this week.

[14:44] He's now 96, still living on his own. He's slowed down considerably. He doesn't get out very much. He's rarely in church. He's the greatest preacher I've ever heard.

He's the finest man I've ever known. And he's not able to preach now. His voice is not strong enough. But he still has Jesus. He still has Jesus.

What a stunning word of assurance this is, isn't it? What he has, what you have, will not be taken away from you. And with that word, Luke 10 comes to an end.

Now, who am I? That's my last point. Where do we find ourselves in these verses? What do they say to us? And once again, I want to return to the same application that we've come for the last two

Sunday nights as well.

Who does Jesus say that I am? What does this passage say to us about who we are? And once more, I think this passage yields two answers to that question.

[ 15 : 49 ] on the one hand, we find ourselves in Martha, and on the other hand, we find ourselves in Mary. Let me explain. So in the first place, like Martha, I'm a servant.

And this is important to say, because it may seem less obvious than what we'll go on to say, but it's vital here we see how Jesus responds to Martha's service. She's hospitable to Jesus and his disciples.

it's a sign that she is welcoming God himself into her life. She goes out of her way to love like all good disciples should. She's serving, she's doing ministry here.

And Jesus does not tell her you're doing the wrong thing. And I think that's significant for us to notice. There is a place and there is a time for being a servant. Ministry does matter.

And Jesus affirmed that in the first two sections of Luke 10. Do you remember, to belong to the kingdom is to be a worker. To belong to the kingdom is to be a lover.

[ 16 : 57 ] To belong to the kingdom is to be a server. There is ministry to be undertaken. Disciples serve, and so if you're a disciple, you're a servant. And yet what Jesus is pointing out here, isn't it, which is so helpful, is that even ministry, serving, can be a distraction from listening.

that being a servant, as good as that is, can actually distract you from the one thing that's more necessary than anything else. And I think that can come to us as quite a surprise.

In fact, it's quite common to read this passage and feel like Martha gets a bit of a raw deal here from Jesus. It's often the case that when we read these verses, our sympathies lie really with Martha.

but it might not be that the reason why we really need to understand these verses, why we really need to understand what Jesus is saying here, is because the point that I'm trying to make to you is that Christianity, many people think that it's all about serving.

Many people think the heart of Christianity is how we live our lives for the sake of others. they think it's about doing to others as you will have them do to you.

[ 18 : 20 ] And there are so many people that think that the good Samaritan captures the whole of what it means to be a Christian. But we saw last week the real point of that section in Luke 10 is that being neighbourly is not the way to eternal life.

That people cannot justify themselves. They need God to justify themselves. People cannot get right with God on their own. They need God to do that for them. And so you cannot love your way into heaven.

The only way to get into heaven is by being loved. By Jesus himself. And yet so many people still think that being like the good Samaritan or being like Martha, well that's the way to God's heart.

Which is why most unbelievers when they come to this passage will naturally side with Martha. other. But the surprising thing that the Bible says to us again and again and again is that loving or serving your neighbour is not at the centre of the Christian faith.

That's not the one thing that's essential to being a follower of Jesus. The one thing that is essential is to what? It is to listen to Jesus.

[ 19 : 30 ] listen to Jesus. That's the difference between giving and receiving. And that's the same distinction we hear Jesus making in chapter 10 and verse 21.

In the same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said to I thank you Father Lord of heaven and earth that you've hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children. Yes Father for such is your gracious will.

I hope you understand this. That when we take when we serve and when we take pride in our service in what we give to Jesus we can seek to justify ourselves.

But when we listen we acknowledge that we need to receive from Jesus. He alone has what we need. But of course it's not just in the world is it that this misunderstanding is prevalent it's also in the church.

It's not just unbelievers who find their sympathies here with Martha it's many believers too. So we need to hear Jesus reminding us whilst we are servants there's something more essential to who we are.

[ 20 : 56 ] Listening. I'm a servant. And the tragedy of the church in the UK today is they want to say we're serving Jesus but actually we won't listen to him.

Last point is this I'm a listener. I'm a servant and I'm a listener. Listening to Jesus is how the Christian life begins. You cannot enter the kingdom of God by working or by loving or by serving. You enter by listening to Jesus and receiving what he reveals to you. But listening is also how life in the kingdom continues.

Listening is at the heart of what it means to be a disciple from the beginning to the end. But what do we actually mean when I talk about listening to Jesus today? After all, for Martha it wasn't very complicated, was it?

Jesus was in a lounge room in the flesh and he's talking. But Jesus isn't in your lounge room, he's not in mine, not in the flesh anyway. So how do you listen to him? In some ways that's a whole other sermon.

[ 22 : 12 ] But at the very least today I need to point out to you that is why as Christians we take the Bible so seriously. Because in the Bible we read the words that Jesus actually said when he was in the flesh in people's lounge rooms like we are here this evening.

In the Bible we read page after page after page of words that come from the mouth of the Lord. And that's why we read our Bibles in our homes and on our iPhones and on the way to school and on the way to work and when we meet together on Sundays and during the week.

And that's why we pray that the spirit of the risen Jesus who still speaks through his ancient words will give us ears to hear his voice. And this is also why we don't just read because true listening is not just about words going in our ears.

It's about the truth of those words penetrating our hearts. So we meditate on God's words turning them over and we pray about them. And we meet with others to talk about them.

And we read what other people have said about what they mean. And we hear those words proclaimed and expounded. So like Mary we're attentive to Jesus and we attend to the Lord and his word.

[ 23 : 31 ] And we let it shape us and we respond when it corrects and rebukes us. We're provoked by it into work for Jesus. Into the love of our neighbours. Into ministry.

And we relish the way that it grows in us the character of Jesus and it teaches us repentance and obedience because we know that there's a real danger of listening but not putting it into practice don't we? There's a danger of hearing but not also doing.

And we know that there's another danger, one that Jesus warns us about here and that is the danger of being distracted from hearing by doing. It's the danger of being like Martha.

Of being so busy trying to be a servant that we fail to be a listener. And so we must hear Jesus point this evening at the end of Luke 10 that even ministry, even serving can deflect us from listening.

And that applies to the person writing and giving this sermon on a Sunday as much to the mum and dad of a busy household. Jesus says to us through these words it's better to be a listening disciple than being a busy servant.

[ 24 : 45 ] It's better to be a listening disciple than a busy servant. time. And so let me ask you is there a time each day when you slow down and listen to God's word?

Or are you too busy, too distracted to make time? Or do you find that your Christian identity in your service of others is in what you do for the Lord is in your ministry or in you as a little child sitting before him, hanging on every word the Father speaks?

Are you comfortable being alone with Jesus or is there just an awkward silence? Is your mind full of worries and things you're upset about? Lord? Or are you gladly focusing on the words of Jesus your Lord?

Of course there's many things, many many things that are important for life in this world. And Jesus isn't saying that you should give up eating and drinking, that you should give up your jobs or your education, you should give up social education, retreat to a cave somewhere with a torch and a Bible.

He's not saying that. Because we're servants, there's work to do for Jesus. There are people to love for Jesus. But Jesus does say to you there's something more necessary than all those things.

[ 26 : 16 ] There's something more essential to who we are, humbly listening to Jesus. And the word humble is important, isn't it? Because this final passage of Luke 10 lands us where the previous two passages have as well.

The heart of being a disciple of Jesus is humility. It's the humility of being a child rather than a wise and learned one. It's the humility of knowing that you need to be loved.

And you need to be justified by God rather than trying to justify yourself. And it's the humility of being a listening learner at the feet of Jesus. And humility is at the heart of discipleship precisely because of who it is that we follow.

Ultimately, Mary's response was not better than Martha's because listening is better than serving, but because Jesus is better than serving. Martha was in the kitchen.

Mary was with Jesus. Jesus who deals compassionately with suffering. Jesus who sees through hypocrisy like a laser. Jesus who has no intolerance for just injustice.

[ 27 : 29 ] Jesus who absorbed the terrible way he was treated with seemingly limitless patience. Jesus who heals people, who forgives people, who tenderly restores the broken. Jesus whose life was taken from him on a lonely cross outside Jerusalem as he suffered and bled for the sake of people everywhere who have spent so much of their lives failing to listen to him.

I don't know if you noticed, but in the very first verse, verse 38, Luke tells us, just interestingly, that Jesus and his disciples were on their way.

They were on their way. Let me take you back to where they were on their way to. Look at chapter 9 and verse 51. And when the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, that is to be crucified, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.

And so Jesus stops on this journey to share with you this valuable lesson with his two friends, Mary and Martha. But this was really a detour.

He was headed for his destiny in Jerusalem. That's why he'd come. He came because he knew that the only thing more essential to our lives than us listening to him was him enduring death in place for us.

[ 28 : 58 ] And that's by far the most astonishing thing that Jesus ever did. And it's the most powerful word that Jesus ever spoke. And I want to ask you tonight what Luke asks each one of us in the gospel.

Is there anyone who deserves your attention more than Jesus? Than the man who came from God, the Lord of heaven, who surrendered himself to death that you might have life? So can you see why I want to say to you, it's not so much an issue of how you listen, but who you listen to.

Because there is no one more essential to listen to than him. There is no one worth listening to more than him.

And Mary had understood that. Martha had yet to grasp it. You see, at the end of the day, that's why these five verses are here. They're not here to tell you that Mary was better than Martha.

They're not even here primarily to tell you that Mary's response to Jesus was better than Martha's. They're here to tell us that Jesus is better than every alternative. They're here to tell us that the man who sat in Mary and Martha's lounge that day is the one every faithful Jew longed to see and hear.

[ 30 : 17 ] He's the one who every spiritually hungry person in their day longed to spend time with and listen to. And he's the one who every wise person since the days of Mary and Martha has paid careful attention to. Because all the ministry in the world and all the voices in the world and all the distractions in the world only ever last a lifetime.

But you can have Jesus forever. one of the privileges of my job is that I'm with people sometimes at the end of their lives.

I'm with people when they pass from this life into eternal life. And very often with people at the end of their life there's very little you can say.

You read them the Bible and you pray with them. And then you read them more of the Bible and you pray with them. And you keep reading the Bible with them because there's very little to say. Comes a time when they're not able to talk and eat. When they're largely non-responsive. But what you often notice is that they'll nod their head when you pray.

[ 31 : 30 ] Or they'll nod their head when you read the scriptures. Well that's what I want isn't it? That's what I want for you. I want you to listen to Jesus in your very last breath.

To recognize his voice with joy. To die with his words ringing in your ears. To nod your head. That's what I want for my children. That's what I want for those I love.

That's what I want for you. I want you and I want myself to be a listener. And if you're a disciple of Jesus, you are too.

You can listen to other people for as long as life lasts. And you can be distracted by a great, great many things. Maybe you are. Many of them are good. And you can have years and years and years of ministry that will bear great fruit.

But one day they will all come to an end. time for you. And you will come to time for you when you'll stop nodding your head.

[ 32 : 38 ] And you'll stop breathing. But if you trusted and listened to the Lord Jesus, the next thing you will hear is the voice of Jesus. And you'll still be listening to him.

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's pray. Mary has Mary has