

Be a Mary, not a Martha

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Date: 16 June 2024

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[0 : 00] Yeah, as you find that passage, I'll start by saying, as a theological student, and when you maybe do an apprenticeship, or you start going to preaching classes, and you're being trained, and in the early years of church ministry, there's a few big topics, doctrines, and maybe passages that you imagine will probably get you into a bit of trouble when you preach them.

Or at least into a heated conversation over tea, and maybe result in someone leaving your church after they've said horrible things about you on social media.

You know, there's Jesus' clear teaching about God's final judgment. There's the exhortation to give of our wealth and to serve the poor and the marginalized.

There's things like predestination or election and the doctrine of grace. Add to that things like a biblical sexual ethic, and we could go on.

But, I won't be doing any of that this morning. While preparing Luke chapter 10 this week, I realized that this might be that passage. This might be that sermon for me.

[1 : 10] The one that's going to upset some people and perhaps cost me a few friends and maybe a member or two from our church. I hope not. So, let's...

I'm also going on leave this week, so you won't be able to reach me. And Trevor will be here, and you can chat to him about that. So, we're going to read it, and then I'm going to pray that the Lord would speak this morning clearly with conviction, and that He might enable us by His Spirit to respond.

But Luke chapter 10 and verse 38. As Jesus and His disciples were on their way, Jesus came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to Him.

She had a sister called Mary, and Mary sat at the Lord's feet listening to what Jesus said. But Martha was distracted, distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.

And she came to Him. And she asked Jesus, Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work all by myself? Tell Mary to help me.

[2 : 18] And the Lord answered, Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed, or indeed, only one.

Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her. Let's pray. O Lord, we ask now, by Your Spirit and Your Word, that You would address us, that You would convict us, that You would change us, and undergirding all of that, Lord, that You might draw us nearer to Yourself, and cause us to delight evermore in Christ, Your Son, in whose name we pray.

Amen. Now, when the staff asked me for a sermon title on Tuesday this week, I told them that I already had it. It was this, Be a Mary, not a Martha.

You can see by the screen that that's not what I went for. They strongly counseled me against that. I can't figure out why. Only this is, of course, how this passage has often been taught.

And those sorts of sentiments are attached to it by us, whether we recognize it or not. And what happens when we do that, is that this short story, only five verses about these two sisters, has been used as a kind of weapon, or a bat, to beat people into feeling guilty about being too busy.

[3 : 57] And at the same time, heaping guilt on believers for not devoting enough time to prayer and to Bible reading and to delighting in the Lord.

On the other hand, I think a lot of people hear the story, and maybe this is you this morning, and you think, look, Jesus is just being supremely unreasonable and impractical. You know, you read the story, and you think that the meal's not going to prepare itself.

Someone has to. And so coming back to that proposed title, which was a joke, in case you were wondering, you might respond and say, well, you only get Mary's, you can only have Mary's because there are Martha's.

In other words, Mary, we think, she can sit, obviously, and listen to Jesus teach. She can sit at his feet and be devoted to him because her sister was doing all the necessary work of hospitality. And this response, or these gut-level responses to the story of Mary and Martha are really the result of this story being treated since really the early church as a kind of competing opposites, a zero-sum game.

[5 : 09] That is, you're either Mary or you're Martha. And so in the early church, in the ancient church, people would come to this passage and say, look, it's a story about being overly active on the one hand and being contemplative and thoughtful on the other.

Origen, in the early church, took it a bit further, and he said, look, it's really a story about, on the one hand, trying to earn favor with God through doing stuff, and on the other hand, being like Mary, who simply trusts the Lord and listens to him teach.

More recently, the story has enjoyed some attention again and has been set up as a contrast between social action on the one hand and a commitment to theological orthodoxy and truth on the other.

But I think it is a mistake. Actually, in fact, I'm convinced this morning that it is a mistake to treat Mary and Martha as if they are opposites, competing opposites, and that we're being exhorted this morning to choose to be Mary.

And I think that's the case because most of our lives feel a lot more like Martha's. And we sympathize with her in the story less than we do with Mary.

[6 : 30] And so we're going to look at it. We're going to look at, we're through the passage, just those five verses. Then I'm going to try and draw out what I think this passage teaches us about the gospel. And then I'm going to have three, what I hope are very practical applications of the text.

So let's work through it. Have it open in front of you. We're just going to go verse by verse. In chapter 10 and verse 38, it is worth noting off the bat that Martha opened her home to Jesus, to Jesus and his disciples.

They're traveling through the Galilean countryside. And this abounds to Martha's credit. Perhaps it's even a deliberate contrast because in this travel narrative which starts in Luke 9 and ends with Jesus arriving in Jerusalem, there is lots of talk about hospitality.

And Jesus is often not received well by the people whose towns he visits. And Martha, on the other hand, welcomes Jesus in and wants to make him at home, wants to prepare a meal for him and for his disciples and is very concerned about being hospitable to him.

And so in the next verse, we meet Martha's sister, Mary. And you can have a look at verse 39. We're told that Mary, well, she simply sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he said.

[7 : 54] And so we see Martha welcoming Jesus in and then being very busy, preparing and being hospitable. And Mary, who sits at Jesus' feet.

Mary sitting at Jesus' feet is striking for at least two reasons. The second one, which I'm not going to get into too much now, but the first one is that to sit at someone's feet, a rabbi's feet in the first century, especially in Jewish culture, was really the epitome of discipleship.

It's not a demeaning position. Jesus' disciples would have regularly sat at Jesus' feet. And so to see Mary sitting there is meant to be striking because secondly, a rabbi would almost never permit a woman to sit at his feet and listen.

And it means that quite wonderfully, Mary, on the one hand, she fully embodies a model disciple. She's fitting the mold of someone who is devoted to Jesus and to his teaching and to listening to him preach.

And on the other hand, she breaks the mold completely simply by the fact of her being a woman. And so Jesus too, in this way, breaks the mold of what it means to be a leader and a teacher.

[9 : 09] But after verse 39, we come to the real knot in the story in verse 40. And it's worth pausing before we look at it to note that in Jewish culture specifically and in the ancient Near East at the time, more broadly, hospitality was considered a supreme obligation.

It wasn't to occasionally have someone around for dinner, you know, and to get a nice roast from Willie's. Hospitality was an all-consuming and considerable task that the people took very seriously. And therefore, again, before we get to this conversation between Jesus and Martha, as one commentator notes, Martha's aggravation, in the circumstances, are entirely understandable.

Okay? Martha is not being unreasonable when she comes and asks why Mary is not helping. Okay? In fact, her aggravation, this commentator goes on to say, is evidently forgivable because Jesus makes no mention of it in his response to her.

Okay? Have a look at verse 40 and look at what she says. Lord, she comes to him, Lord, don't you care? Or literally it says, is it no concern to you that my sister has left me all alone?

[10 : 35] There's this emphasis on her being alone, by myself, to do the work. Tell her to help me, she says. Tell her to help me.

Now, any original reader asked to complete the story at this point, without having read the remaining two verses, would have undoubtedly concluded that what happened next was Jesus would say, I didn't realize.

I'm sorry. Mary, you need to go and help Martha. That's what anyone would have expected how this story to play out. Because not only was it culturally expected, of a woman to do this work of hospitality, but as I've already said, Jewish people highly prized hospitality.

But look at how the story plays out in verse 41 and 42. The Lord answers, Martha, he says, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed.

Indeed, only one. Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her. Again, a few things to note in this verse, these verses.

[11 : 58] The repetition of Martha's name is affectionate, it's tender. Throughout Luke's gospel, we see people using this dual use of a name. In effect, Jesus says to Peter, Simon, Simon, when Jesus stands over Jerusalem and weeps for the city, he says, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, not in a scolding way, but full of tender affection.

And so likewise here, when he starts by saying, Martha, Martha, he is being kind towards her. And then, Jesus doesn't say, look, the things that you're worried about, the things that you're anxious about, the things that are consuming, he doesn't say that those are unimportant things, that they are somehow insignificant.

I mean, Martha's only trying to take care of her guests in the way that she knows how. And so Jesus isn't harsh, but understanding and gracious and gentle, which should never come as a shock or a surprise to us.

He's a gracious Lord full of compassion for people living very complex lives. Furthermore, it would be a strange thing for Jesus to disregard something like hospitality and serving others and giving yourself to them, to look after them, something he exhorts in so many other places for us to do.

I mean, this story comes on the back of the Good Samaritan, which concludes with Jesus saying, go and do likewise. Jesus is not saying that these are unimportant things and that we shouldn't be taken up with serving others.

[13 : 30] In fact, the opposite. That being said, he does, in the end, correct Martha. rather than heed her request, which, as we've said, one would expect him to do, he doesn't command Mary to go and help her.

But in verse 42, he says this, have a look at it. Again, Mary, he says, Mary has chosen what is better. The implication, then, is that Martha herself should curtail her domestic cares so that she too would be able to give herself to the one thing that matters.

So that she too might sit at Jesus' feet. That she could be devoted to his teaching, to learning from, to be instructed by, and following after him in obedience and adoration, love, and service.

That's the implication here. That she might find in Jesus an anchor for life and for her busyness and for all the things that she has to do and which are important and that she mustn't just simply disregard.

Jesus is saying that Mary has chosen the one thing that puts all those other things into perspective. You see, amid the busyness of life and the demands of hospitality alongside Martha's efforts to serve others and to give sacrificially within the unrelenting demands of our own lives, perhaps, and work, and families, and responsibilities, we're told this, and I skipped over it when I was reading through it again now, look at verse 40, we're told that Martha, Martha was distracted, Martha was distracted by the preparations that had to be made.

[15 : 38] The late pastor Eugene Peterson writes this about this verse, a great quote, he says, to be distracted, and this is very important for us to get right about this text, to be distracted is not the same thing as being practical, or is working hard, or is taking the tasks of responsibility seriously, of being responsible, that's not what it means to be distracted.

He goes on to say, to be distracted means to not pay attention to something. To be distracted means not paying attention to something.

And the result, Eugene Peterson says, is not having a center or an anchor, and therefore being pulled in every direction as things come about.

To be distracted is to not have a center, something that holds our focus and our attention, so that when those other things come up, we're grounded and rooted.

I hope that you've seen as we work through the story that Martha's problem isn't that she is too practical. The problem isn't that she is too busy with the work of hospitality. Martha's problem isn't that she is trying to care for other people, that she is working hard, that she is busy.

[16:57] This is not the problem in the text. No, Jesus' gentle rebuke is that she paid no attention to him.

In fact, that she was so busy trying to do something for him and for all the other people, all good things, that she had lost sight of him and had grown distracted by those other good things.

By the many things, verse 42, that she was rightly upset and worried about. Those things had led her into overlooking the one thing, the one person.

The one person. that matters. The better Jesus calls himself. The loving, compassionate, and gracious Lord who is attentive to his people and to their needs.

And so instead of being devoted to him, she is distracted by everything else. And friends, that's why I said it's a hard text to preach.

[18:08] I know you feel Martha's struggle. And you sympathize with Martha. I do. Jesus' corrective then still ends up sounding naive, maybe idealistic.

You have so much to do. There are so many demands on your time. Work is hectic. It's competitive.

The cost of living is rising. Maybe you're studying and in order to have any kind of real prospects, do you know that you have to plow now? Maybe you're fetching and ferrying children.

You're changing diapers and feeding babies. Maybe you're doing all of those things while also trying to work and to manage a home. Juggling responsibilities outside of your home and at work.

The expectations of others and social expectations, your parents, your friends, your colleagues, so many things. So many things that demand our time and our attention and that draw us away.

[19:15] Life is fast-paced. It's increasingly complex. I don't know about you, but responsibility seems to exponentially grow with age and doesn't abate.

And very likely to a greater degree this is how you feel as well. And so we are all in some way or other or perhaps in the exact same way as Martha is distracted by the many things and therefore unable to see the one, unable to see the person, the person who was sitting in her lounge teaching, the person, the Lord Jesus, instructing his people.

people. And so what are we meant to do? What is the solution? You wonder. And I want to say to you that it's not in the first place better time management. Jesus is not conducting a seminar here on how to do triage with your responsibilities and tasks.

It's not about working harder and being more efficient. It's not about joining the 5am club. It's not about getting a better productivity tool or prayer app for your phone.

No. The solution is what Jesus says in verse 42. Have a look at it again. Mary has chosen what is better because Mary has chosen the one thing, the one thing that will not be taken away from her.

[20:53] See the corrective here isn't merely a matter of weighing up our choices. But Jesus says it's about giving ourselves to someone who will never be lost.

To someone who holds us far more tightly than we hold him because he has made us his. That's why Jesus can say that he is the one person, the one thing that truly matters because Mary will never lose that.

It means we don't get to check out to drop everything. You know, life is, we'll continue to be busy and sometimes overwhelmingly busy. And the warning then for us in Luke 10 is not to be so distracted, not to be so worried and upset about all the things to the extent that we give our lives away or spend our time and our energy and our efforts and ourselves for something that despite how hard we hold on to them, we will inevitably lose.

That's what Jesus is saying to Martha and to you this morning. To give our lives to something that you will never be able to hold on to at the end because it doesn't hold you back.

It doesn't embrace you. Mary gave herself to the one she would never lose and Jesus says that that is better, that is wise.

[22 : 26] I haven't read a long quote from someone you've never heard of so I thought we'd do that for get that out of the way, you know, I'd like to do that in a sermon. Although maybe thanks to the recent efforts of popular rises, stoicism, you may have noticed, is back.

Stoicism is excited about stoicism again, at least garden variety forms and domesticated ways of doing it. Thanks to the, oh sorry, I was struck this week as I prepared and I was going through just on my notes, notes I've taken down over the years about busyness and priorities and devotion and demands and I came across one that I had written down after reading the meditations by Marcus Aurelius.

You all know Marcus Aurelius, right? Maybe you know Ryan Holiday, okay? He's given his life to making us all know who Marcus Aurelius is. But Marcus Aurelius writes this in his meditations. He says, if thou wouldst no contentment, let thy deeds be few. He's quoting from someone else that explains why the language is a bit weird. But then he says this, better still, limit your actions strictly to such things that are essential or along with what society reasonably demands.

And now here comes the line that you're most likely to encounter on social media or in a popular book. This, he says, strictly limiting what we do to the essential, this brings the contentment that comes of doing a few things and doing them well.

[24 : 06] most of what we say and do is not necessary and their omission will save us both time and trouble. And then he goes on to say that we should ask about everything that we do.

Is this significant or is this superfluous? Is this essential or is this an extra? And friends, I want to say to you that in theory that sounds great.

Sounds great. only in reality, how do you determine those things? How do you distinguish between something that is superfluous and something that really matters?

I mean, would Martha have been better off if she had just done some ruthless triage in her life? You know, like, I'll just do two dishes instead of three. That's not what Jesus or this passage teaches. In fact, in this passage, Jesus distinguishes between everything else and himself. Between everything else that we might give ourselves to and him.

[25 : 21] And he says that I am the one thing. that you will not lose, that cannot be taken away. And he says this because in drawing near to him and in devoting ourselves to him, and spending time in prayer and meditation, we gain something that we will never lose, God himself, in the person and the work of his son.

I think that's the point. And like I said in closing, three quick applications for us this morning. The first one, and that comes straight out of our passage, is this.

We have to create time to sit ourselves at Jesus' feet. This doesn't mean getting up two hours earlier so that you can spend an hour in the third heaven praying and an hour in intense Bible study. you don't have to join a monastery, however much you might want to. You don't have to read through your Bible three times in a year, twice in a year. You don't have to read through your Bible once in a year.

However, and these are the words from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, if you know anything about history, was an incredibly, incredibly busy man. He wrote this. He says, He goes on to say this.

[26 : 58] God's word claims my time because God himself has entered time and now wills that I give him mine. And even as I make this point, I realize I have to quickly beware of turning devotion, as it's so often done, to some kind of duty for devolving into something that we either judge other people by or measure our own spirituality and faith by.

That's not the point. And that's not the point of the story where Jesus says, draw near to me because I can anchor you for all of life and I'm the one thing that you will not lose.

It's not simply to put something else in the calendar, although I think practically we probably do need to do that. It's about knowing him. That's why we carve out the time in our busy schedules to sit at his feet or why we should.

I haven't heard it put any better than this by a book I know a lot of you treasured, a book called Gentle and Lowly by Dane Autland. He asks this, he says, why not build into your life unhurried quiet, where among other disciplines you simply consider the radiance of who Jesus is, what animates him, what he delights in.

Why not give your soul, a wonderful expression, why not give your soul room, he says, to be enchanted again and again with Christ.

[28 : 36] Ponder him and allow yourself to be alert and won over. We have to make time to do that. It's not going to keep you from feeling too busy or even overwhelmed.

It's not going to reduce the amount of things that you worry about and that you have to do. It's not going to magically reduce the to-do list and take away some of your responsibilities. Martha was still going to have to go back and do the work of hospitality at some point and yet Jesus could say to her that Mary has done something that is better.

She has devoted herself to me. By carving out time we can battle against becoming distracted. We can battle against not giving our attention to our Lord and as we do that find that our lives slowly in small ways are reoriented and framed in a way that we can perhaps better navigate the demands and the responsibilities and the burdens and the struggles with him through him and by drawing near to him.

That's the first thing. Secondly and linked with this need to carve out time and you can thank my wife for this point. I've always known she wants to preach and so she's doing it vicariously through me this morning.

[30 : 03] You know so as I speak you can hear her. Don't tell Stephen. Many of the things that we run to and from in our week in our lives many of the things that keep us busy will always be there and I think this is a point that we easily forget.

We imagine that oh at some point I will take that last thing off the list and then I will go and pray or I will finally get to the end of the to-do list and the kids will be in bed you know and the kitchen will be cleaned and I would have scheduled all my emails for the next morning and I would have done all the things and okay now I can spend some time reading my Bible and praying.

Now I can do the thing that I know I ought to be doing and yet you know that that never happens. You never get to the bottom of that list and at the same time you also know that if you put those things off for a time guess what when you finish and go back it's still there.

They don't go anywhere. We can put these things down in fact I think that this passage is an exhortation for us to rest a little bit more in the Lord and entrust ourselves and our lives and all the things that we have to do to Him and that is a difficult exercise of faith but it is believing that I can give something up for a time and that God is big enough to hold it while I do that.

You know in Isaiah we're doing Isaiah in the evenings we're told that the Lord holds the earth in the breadth of His hand you can give something up for a few minutes and trust Him that He's got it and I think that the passage this morning is exhorting us to do that as we carve our time and try to do that do so knowing that we can give those things up for a moment and that they will still be there and if we wait to get to the end of the to-do list of all the important things again not unimportant things then we never will you can trust Him you can put the things down you can pause and you can go and devote some time to being with Him to hearing from Him to drawing near to your Lord it'll all be there later it'll all be there afterwards put those things aside even just for a few minutes again like I said it's not an hour it's not half an hour but it is time spent devoting ourselves to Him because we trust Him and we want to be allured by Him thirdly and finally and a point for me as much as it is

[33 : 14] I'm sure for some of you we do probably give up more of our time than we should to things that distract us from Him as one famous writer put it so well he said we speak about saving time we speak about buying time and making it up and so on but that's an illusion time is always passing and because you can't get any of it back surely we should spend it more wisely than we do this writer goes on to say that if people threw away their money as recklessly as we throw away our time we would think them crazy but he says time is infinitely more precious than money because money can't buy time nothing can get the time that we waste back and yet all of us give our time and attention to if we come back to him to Marcus

Aurelius because maybe we're a bit harsh with him to what he calls superfluous and insignificant things and I think you know what those things are the things that clutter the things that distract the things that fill up and leave no margin if we want to do the first thing which I said is to practically start to carve out time it's probably here that we start and ask well what are those things what are those things that really I would lose nothing by giving up and this is where we ought to start as we draft habits spiritual disciplines devotional practices to keep us from being distracted I'm going to finish a quote a great quote a book it was actually featured on our social media I think this week by Kevin DeYoung it's a book called Crazy Busy and he writes this which personally

I think I've used it in lots of scenarios my students as well he says it's not wrong to be tired it's not wrong to feel overwhelmed it's not wrong to go through seasons in your life that are completely

chaotic but he says what is wrong and what is so wonderfully avoidable is to live a life with more craziness than we want because we have less Jesus than we need let's pray oh lord we thank you this morning for your son we thank you that as we eat and drink now at your table it is that beautiful reminder that you are attentive to us that you love us that you draw near to and ultimately gave your son up so that we might know love be devoted to and delight in you to to hear that you are gracious that you are kind and that you are compassionate and lord that you meet us in in the chaos and in the complexities and in you we meet a gracious
God help us we pray this week as we go forward from here to hear to rejoice and to do all in faith and entrusting your son we pray this in his name amen