

ARE YOUR PRIORITIES IN ORDER?

Luke 10:38-42

Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem. Their arrival would begin the final week of the life of Jesus, culminating with his crucifixion and resurrection. On the way, they stopped in the village of Bethany, which was about two miles from Jerusalem. Bethany was a humdrum rural community inhabited by commoners and invalids. Many homes in that village were filled with misery. But Luke focuses on one home that was filled with feverish activity. In this home, two women – Martha and Mary – prepare a meal. But to watch them, you would think they were doing something much more noble. Their eyes are dancing. Their faces are bright. Their feet are barely touching the floor. This was no ordinary meal. It was a meal prepared for Jesus, who graciously accepted this family's invitation to eat, rest, and fellowship in their home on his way to Jerusalem. The house was understandably buzzing with excitement.

Picture the scene.

Martha and Mary go through the house one time to make sure it is clean. Then attention turns to kitchen. They unpack the groceries, get out their cooking utensils, and begin to prepare dinner. Soon the house is filled with a marvelous aroma. As they are put finishing touches on the meal, there's a knock at the door. "Oh, no," Martha whispers, "They're early." Mary replies, "Don't worry. I'll make them comfortable, while you finish up." Mary welcomes Jesus and the disciples, seating them around the table. Martha sticks her head out of the kitchen to say hello, apologize for dinner not being ready, and promise everything will be ready in a few minutes.

Jesus and the disciples engaged in casual conversation, as they waited for dinner to be served. But it did not take long before table talk turned into teaching time. As Jesus begins to teach, Mary argues with herself. Should she sit down or get out? As her mind debated, her heart decided to take a seat at Jesus' feet to listen to him teach. Meanwhile, Martha is in the kitchen, where her preparations are nowhere near finished. The longer she stayed there, the more ideas she came up with to make the meal more special. All of a sudden, the preparations become too much for her. And when she peeked out and saw Mary sitting and Jesus teaching, she snapped. Interrupting the Lord's lesson, she screamed, "Am I the only one that thinks it's strange that I'm working alone. Lord, tell to Mary get off her behind and help me!"

Verses 41-42 report: *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."* The Lord's response to Martha teaches us that devotion to Jesus is to be the ultimate priority of his disciples. OSWALD CHAMBERS wrote: "Christianity is not devotion to a work, or to a cause, or a doctrine, but devotion to a person, the Lord Jesus Christ." I repeat: Devotion to Jesus must always be our ultimate priority. The Lord's encounter with Mary and Martha teach us the ultimate priority of spiritual devotion.

I. DEVOTION TO JESUS IS EXPRESSED THROUGH SUBMISSION TO HIS WORD.

The spiritual lesson found in the biblical references to Mary of Bethany can be summarized in four words: *“at the Lord’s feet.”* That is where we find her every time we meet her in scripture. She is at the feet of Jesus. On the occasion of her brother’s death, Mary fell at Jesus’s feet to find comfort for her grief. **John 11:32** says, *“Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”* Later, at a dinner party apparently held to honor Jesus, Mary bowed at his feet in worship. **John 12:3** says, *“Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made of pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair.”* And in our text, Mary sat at the feet of Jesus to listen to his word. Verses 39-40 read: *“Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching.”*

This story records Mary’s greatest effort to get to the feet of Jesus. At the death of Lazarus, overwhelming grief drove her to his feet. After the death of Lazarus, overwhelming gratitude drove her to his feet, even though it costs her an expensive bottle of pure nard. But here Mary had to make a personal, intentional, and difficult choice to sit at the feet of Jesus. It was a decision she had to make in the face of great resistance. Mary had personal reasons why Mary should not sit at the feet of Jesus. She wanted Mary to help her in the kitchen. Moreover, there were cultural and religious reasons that resisted Mary choice. In the cultural world of the ancient Near East, rabbis did not permit women to be their disciples. But Jesus was different. He welcomed in those whom others casted away. And Mary knew it. So she took a seat with the other disciples to listen to Jesus teach. She did not care what Martha or anyone else had to say. She was not going to miss this opportunity to learn from Jesus.

To sit at the feet of Jesus is adopt the posture of a disciple. It is to submit to the authority of Jesus. Every true disciple should adopt Mary’s posture. You need to sit at the feet of Jesus. But more than that, you should adopt the purpose of Mary’s posture. Verse 39 says that she *“sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching.”* Mary’s devotion was demonstrated by heir submission to the authority of his word. And this should be our spiritual posture. In **Matthew 11:22-29**, Jesus says, *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”* Feel the tension here. To experience true spiritual rest, you must come to Jesus. Without Christ, you are doomed to be exhausted and overburdened. You must come to Jesus. But that is not all. To find rest for your souls, you must get in the yoke with Jesus and learn from him. You must sit at his feet and listen to him teach. You must submit your life to the authority of his word.

In his book *And the Angels Were Silent*, MAX LUCADO writes of riding bikes with his young daughter. She had just learned to keep her balance on a two-wheeler and was ready to leave the safety of the front street and try the hill behind their house. They sat atop the descent and looked down into it. To her it looked like Everest. “You sure you want to try?” he asked. “I

think so," she gulped. He then reminded her to put on the brakes when she wanted to stop. Lucado rode down midway and waited. Down she came. The bike began to pick up speed. The handlebars began to shake. Her eyes got big. Her pedals moved in a blur. As she raced past she screamed, "I can't remember how to stop pedaling!" She crashed into the curb.

If you don't know how to stop, the result can be painful. True on bikes. True in life. You must learn to put on the brakes from the affairs of life, including the work of the Lord, and sit at the feet of Jesus.

Mary is considered the patron saint of the contemplative life. Monastics point to this text as justification for living in total spiritual concentration outside of the daily affairs of life. But this is not what Jesus asks of his disciples. To the contrary, Jesus commands us to live as his representatives in the world.

II. DEVOTION TO JESUS IS HINDERED BY THE DISTRACTION OF SECONDARY THINGS.

Verse 40a tells us what Martha was doing as Mary sat at the feet of Jesus: "*But Martha was distracted with much serving.*" As Mary sat, Martha served. Luke describes her service two ways. First, it was "*much serving.*" This phrase refers to the immensity of the task and the intensity of her labor. It was a big job. And Martha gave it everything she had.

More importantly, Luke says, "*Martha was distracted with much serving.*" The Greek word translated "*distracted*" is used only here in the New Testament. It means to drag around or to draw in many different directions. Luke uses it here to describe Martha's mental focus, emotional state, and spiritual disposition. She was distracted with much serving. The KING JAMES VERSION says, "*But Martha was cumbered about much serving.*" The word "*cumbered*" is related to our word "*encumbered*," which means to be burdened with obtrusive responsibilities.

Martha's attitude is a stern warning to us today. Your devotion to Jesus can and will be hindered, if you allow yourself to be distracted by secondary things. You cannot be devoted to Jesus and distracted by secondary things at the same time. One will invariably cancel out the other. Every believer is prone to succumb to the power of spiritual distractions. It does not matter who you are. It does not matter how long you have been saved. It does not matter how mature you may be. It does not matter how committed you are. You are prone to distraction. You can become distracted by the sinful pursuit of worldly pleasures. This is what happened to Demas. In **2 Timothy 4:10**, Paul writes, "*For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.*" But you can also become distracted by the diligent stewardship of legitimate responsibilities.

This is what happened to Martha. She was not distracted because she was running the streets trying to have a good time. And she was not distracted because she was in the marketplace trying to build a personal empire. She was distracted while she was serving the Lord. While cooking and cleaning for the Lord, Martha forget the reason

she was doing it all in the first place. Jesus was in the house! She had allowed the work of the Lord to become more important than the Lord of the work.

How can you tell when you have been distracted from the ultimate priority of personal devotion to Jesus? The answer is found in how Martha responded when the work became too much for her. Verse 39 says, *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."* Note the difference between these two sisters related to Jesus. Mary sat at the Lord's feet Martha "went up to him." The language here obscures the forcefulness of Martha's act. She did not approach Jesus humbly and graciously. Martha confronted Jesus. She was not at his feet. She was in front of him. Then she began to put Mary and Jesus in their place.

First, Martha asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone?" This question is rhetorical. Martha had already made up her mind. She concluded that Jesus did not care about her. This is a clear sign that you are distracted by secondary things. You begin to feel that Jesus does not care.

When Jesus traveled across the Sea of Galilee with his disciples, a storm erupted. Jesus slept, as the disciples were not able to row to safety. When it seemed a hope was gone, they asked Jesus a similar question, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" They had witnessed the miracles of Jesus. But they did not ask him to still the storm. It was a foregone conclusion that they were going to die. They only wanted to know if Jesus cared. This is what you ask when you are distracted by a storm, secondary things, or any other circumstances of life. Does Jesus care?

Let me pause to answer that question. Yes, Jesus cares. **1 Peter 5:7** says that you should always be *"casting your anxieties upon him, because he cares for you."*

**DOES JESUS CARE WHEN MY HEART IS PAINED
TO DEEP FOR MIRTH AND SONG
AS THE BURDENS PRESS, AND THE CARES DISTRESS
AND THE WAY GROWS WEARY AND LONG?**

**O YES, HE CARES — I KNOW HE CARES!
HIS HEART IS TOUCHED BY MY GRIEF;
WHEN DAYS ARE WEARY, THE LONG NIGHTS DREARY;
I KNOW MY SAVIOR CARES**

Martha questioned the Lord's concern. Then she gave the Lord instructions: *"Tell her then to help me."*

III. DEVOTION TO JESUS IS AFFIRMED FOR ITS COMMITMENT TO EXCELLENCE.

Luke gives Jesus the last word. Verses 41-42 close this narrative with the Lord's response to Mary's devotion and Martha's distraction: *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."* Consider what the Lord says here about Martha and Mary.

A. WHAT JESUS SAID ABOUT MARTHA

Jesus said, *"Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary."* When the Lord addresses a person by calling their name twice, as he does here with Martha, it is a word of warning given in a tone of love. Here we see the compassion of Jesus. He was not angry with Martha. He was concerned about her. I can imagine that he put his arm around her shoulder. And with a meek and lowly spirit, he warned Martha that she was "anxious and trouble about many things."

It is bad enough to be anxious or troubled. It is worse to be both. Her mind was anxious with care. Her heart was troubled with pressure. She was anxious and troubled by many things. But the "many things" were not the problem. Martha was. She had allowed her priorities to get out of order and she lost sight of what mattered the most. Jesus said, *"You are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary."* What does this statement mean? Some conclude that Jesus is saying that the meal she cooked for him should have been simple, not elaborate. Just a casserole, not a banquet. But this is not the point. The one necessary thing is that which Mary chose. To be fair to both sisters, commentators argue that we should strive to be like Mary and Martha. We should imitate Mary's devotion and Martha's diligence. That's probably true. But it is not what Jesus says here. Do not complicate the simple words of Jesus. He told Martha that she was so consumed with many things that she missed the most important thing.

That is the message of the story. Devotion to Jesus is the ultimate priority. Always put carpet time ahead of kitchen work. Don't let the distraction of secondary things keep you from sitting at the feet of Jesus to hear what he wants to teach you. Be a one-thing person. In **Psalm 27:4**, David testifies, *"One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple."* When Jesus healed the blind man, the religious leaders tried to distract him from glorifying God by calling Jesus a sinner. In **John 9:25**, the blind man answered, *"Whether he is a sinner I do not know, One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."* In **Philippians 3:13-14**, Paul confesses, *"Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."*

B. WHAT JESUS SAID ABOUT MARY

In verse 42, Jesus says, *“Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.”* This word translated “good” here can be rendered “good,” “better,” or best.” Either way, the point is the same. Jesus draws a clear distinction between what Mary did and what Martha did. Martha was out of order. But Mary chose the good portion. How did Mary get it when Martha missed it? She chose it. This is the key to getting and keeping your spiritual priorities in order. The flesh, the world, and the devil constantly work to distract you. But you must choose the good portion. It does not happen accidentally. It will not happen automatically. You must choose to be devoted to Jesus.

On December 19, 1972, an Eastern Airlines jumbo jet crashed into the Florida Everglades. Filled with holiday travelers, Flight 401 was bound for Miami from New York City. But as the plane approached the Miami airport for its landing, the light that indicates proper deployment of the landing gear failed to light. The plane flew in large, looping circles over the swamps below while the cockpit crew checked to see if the gear had not deployed or if the bulb was defective. When the flight engineer tried to remove the bulb, it wouldn't budge. The other crewmembers tried to help. As they struggled with the bulb, no one noticed the aircraft was losing altitude. And the plane simply flew into the swamp. Dozens of people were killed in the crash. While an experienced crew of pilots fiddled with a seventy-five cent light bulb, the plane with its passengers flew right into the group.

R. KENT HUGHES commented: “How self-deceived we tend to be. A fly on the wall of the church might as well imagine that everything going on below him is dependent upon his presence and would cease if he flew away!”

At the Milan Cathedral there are three inscriptions over the respective doorways. Over the right-hand door are the words: “All that pleases is but for a moment.” Over the left-hand door the words are: “All that troubles is but for a moment.” But over the central door there is a simple sentence: “Nothing is important save that which is eternal.”