

Mary and Martha – Choosing the Good Thing (Luke 10:38-42)

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Introduction

In Luke 10:38-42 we find our Lord as the guest of Martha, the sister of Mary and her brother, Lazarus. Their home provided a place of comfort, rest and refreshment for Jesus during His earthly ministry. On this occasion their home was also a place where Jesus could speak the Word of God to hungry hearts and eager ears. Mary took advantage of this great opportunity as she sat at the Master's feet and "heard his word." Mary was wise in her choice to sit at the feet of Jesus and partake of the spiritual nourishment of this great spiritual feast.

Martha, on the other hand, was busy serving and laboring to prepare a meal to feed the physical hunger of her guests. This is a mark of a good host. To prepare a meal to feed several guests and especially a guest of the importance of Jesus would require a great deal of work at that point in time. Since most of this labor took place outside of the house away from the presence of Jesus and his teaching, she was not able to hear Him speak as was Mary.

Our text says that she was "cumbered about much serving" which led her to come to Jesus requesting that her sister, Mary, come and help her to prepare and serve the meal. However, Jesus reproofed her choice in what she was doing and her anxiety about the physical food she was preparing in relation to the great spiritual feast that was set before them. Jesus taught a great lesson on priorities in life. He taught Martha, and all of us who study this account, the great truth of the need to seek the spiritual things first in our lives above the physical. He taught the eternally enduring value of the spiritual – the good part – in comparison to the passing value of the material. He taught that even things which are inherently good and necessary to sustain physical life should not be placed above things which are spiritual and eternal in nature.

Sometimes keeping our responsibilities in the proper priority can be difficult and we need the wisdom of Mary to choose the good part over many things which would draw us away from our first priority – Christ and His church (Matthew 6:33). Further, when we become anxious and worry about things of this physical realm, we fail to accomplish the good things which are more important. Let us examine the account of Mary and Martha so we can learn to make the proper choices as did Mary and avoid the anxiety and troubles of Martha in our lives.

The Actions of Mary and Martha

Martha was cumbered, careful, troubled, anxious and in need

Martha was practicing hospitality, which is a worthy thing to do. The Lord did not reprove her for being a good housekeeper or opening her home and practicing hospitality. Our Lord's reproof of Martha was because she, at that time, had put an undue emphasis on the material matters and placed them before the more important spiritual matters at hand.

There was a great spiritual feast taking place right in her presence, and yet her concerns were not with partaking of that feast, but in providing for the physical needs of food. She was not in tune with her needs or the needs of her guest! As a result, she had become cumbered with serving,

worried and anxious about how she would be able to get everything done that was needed and temporarily lost sight of her real needs.

Luke 10:40a says “But Martha was cumbered about much serving,” The word translated “cumbered” is defined by Thayer as, “1) to draw around, to draw away, distract; 2) metaphorically; 2a) to be driven about mentally, to be distracted; 2b) to be over-occupied, too busy, about a thing.” “Much serving” indicates more than just serving, she had given all of her attention to it. Thus, she was distracted with the things of the material, and even though they were not inherently bad or sinful, yet they kept her too busy to be involved with the spiritual matters at that time.

Her undue concern led her to complain to the Lord about the lack of help from her sister Mary in preparing the food. She said to Jesus, “Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me” (Luke 10:40b). There are two complaints and a request in this statement.

The first complaint is addressed at our Lord and is essentially: Lord, don’t you care? Martha is complaining to Jesus and questioning His care for her.

The second complaint is aimed at her sister Mary and is in essence: My sister has abandoned me and is not helping me prepare for this occasion. Martha was feeling sorry for herself.

The request of Martha is one which she thinks will be agreeable to Jesus and set things right again. Her request was to tell Mary to stop listening to Jesus and come help her. Only to a mind that has become so distracted by the material concerns of the moment would this make sense.

Our Lord’s response to Martha in **Verses 41-42** is fitting and true, “And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.”

Jesus gently calls her by her name twice. His evaluation was that she had become careful and troubled about many things. Thayer defines the word translated “careful” as, “1) to be anxious; 1a) to be troubled with cares; 2) to care for, look out for (a thing); 2a) to seek to promote one’s interests; 2b) caring or providing for.” The word translated “troubled” is defined as, “1) disturb, trouble; 2) to be troubled in mind, disquieted.” “Many things” is from a word which means, “many, much, large.” Martha had become anxious, disturbed and troubled about all the many things which needed to be done to provide for the physical needs of her guest. Her concern for this occasion had caused her to cross the line into being anxious, tense and worried.

Mary was attentive, focused, disciplined, listening and chose the good part.

Mary sat at the feet of Jesus and listened to our Lord speak the gracious words of truth. Our text says of Mary, “...which also sat at Jesus’ feet, and heard his word” (Luke 10:39). She was taking full advantage of this great opportunity to listen to the Son of God in person. She was honoring not only Jesus with her attention to His word, but was also showing that her mind was set on the spiritual matters at hand.

Mary had at least two options when Jesus came to their house: She could be involved in preparing for the dinner, or she could pay attention to her guest and learn great spiritual truths from Him. Mary made the best choice in this situation. She chose the good part, the part which could not be taken away from her since it involved eternal spiritual matters.

The posture of sitting at the feet of a teacher was one which indicated that she was a disciple (Acts 22:3). She was a disciple of Jesus in the sense that she wanted to learn of Him and follow His direction. She was attentive. Her ears were open, her heart was disciplined and thus she was not distracted by the hustle and bustle of the moment. Mary was focused on the things above, rather than the things of this earth. She was more interested in being a good disciple than a good host.

In our Lord's answer to Martha, he compared Mary's worthy choice to that of Martha when He said to her, "But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:42). Thayer defines the word translated "needful" as, "1) necessity, need; 2) duty, business." Mary was not in need as was Martha. Her choice had fulfilled her necessity or need for the spiritual things. Martha needed to make that choice, but had failed to do so. This shows that choosing the spiritual things over the material is an absolute necessity or need for all.

Strong defines the word translated "chosen" as, "to select: - make choice, choose (out), chosen." Thayer defines it, "1) to pick out, choose, to pick or choose out for one's self; 1a) choosing one out of many, i.e. Jesus choosing his disciples." This indicates that a selection had to be made. Mary chose one thing of the spiritual realm, while Martha chose many things of the material realm.

Thayer defines the word translated "good" as, "1) of good constitution or nature; 2) useful, salutary; 3) good, pleasant, agreeable, joyful, happy; 4) excellent, distinguished; 5) upright, honourable." He defines the word translated "part" is defined as, "1) a part as distinct from the whole; 2) an assigned part, a portion, share." Thus, Mary selected out of many things, that portion or share that was excellent, upright, and honorable.

Mary made the best choice possible, because in the end, there is only one thing that is really needful for all of us—our spiritual welfare. Jesus commended Mary because she had "chosen the good part," and He adds that it, "shall not be taken away from her." Mary made the choice of putting first things first. She was seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matthew 6:33). She chose that which had eternal blessings.

Applications from Mary and Martha

There are several lessons and applications which we can learn from the actions of Mary and Martha and which will help us make the best choices in our lives so we will be pleasing to God and set a good example for others.

Proper Priorities

Making the best choices in life in how we use our time, energy and means is a matter of making sure that our priorities are correct. It is easy to become distracted by the immediate cares of this

life and thus put off doing those things which we should place first – the spiritual activities of the Lord and His church.

1. Health And Wealth – In **3 John 2** John prayed that Gaius might: (1) **Prosper** (financially, in the physical realm) and (2) **Be in health** to the same extent that his soul prospered. From this, we infer that God expects and intends for a Christian to prosper and to have good health.

Notice the standard by which to determine how rich we may safely become – as long as one enjoys soul or spiritual prosperity, our physical riches bless and benefit many others. When riches began to impair spiritual health, and one starts to trust in them instead of God, or they get in the way of our serving God faithfully, then it is time to perform surgery and sever them from us, lest our spirit be destroyed!

The rich young ruler stands as such a case (Mark 10:17-31). It wasn't his riches per se that caused him to fail, but putting his trust in riches, rather than the Lord. A person, who has ten dollars or ten million dollars can do that!

John's petition for Gaius was written in the spirit of our Lord's statement in Matthew 6:31-33 concerning seeking the kingdom of God and His righteousness first. Having put first things first, in the case of Gaius, it was entirely proper and right that Gaius should have good health and financial prosperity. It is a lesson that is needed among us today. In the words of the late brother Guy N. Woods, "We should ever remember to subordinate the material to the spiritual and never allow the world to gain precedence in our thoughts and lives." (Commentary on Peter, John, Jude, p. 358).

This passage shows that man is made up of both body and soul and that both should work together for the good of doing God's will here upon earth. This body is merely our temporary earthly tabernacle in which our eternal spirit dwells while here upon earth (2 Corinthians 5:1). At times, some seem to be more concerned with their bodies, than their most precious possession, their soul. Some are concerned about the temporal dwelling place, but neglect the one who lives there. They repair the building and starve the occupant – feed the flesh, but starve the soul (Matthew 4:4).

Jesus emphasized the value of the soul in Matthew 16:26. He also taught in the Sermon on the Mount that we should remove those things in the flesh that would hinder us from living a faithful life (Matthew 5:28-30).

The petition of John was for the health and prosperity of Gaius. If John had stopped here in the passage, there might be some excuse for using all our time and energy to be healthy and wealthy, but he spoiled the matter for some who would be minded to be rich in this world and neglect spiritual things, by including the phrase, "even as thy soul prospereth." Thus, being spiritually prosperous is to be the standard of our prosperity and health.

2. Family Responsibilities – Those who are married realize that we have responsibilities and duties in our homes. The Bible clearly sets forth our responsibilities in the relationships we have as husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, and children in several passages (Ephesians 5:22-32, 6:1-

4; Colossians 3:18-21). Certainly the Bible teaches that we are to work to provide not only for our own needs, but the needs of others (Ephesians 4:28; 1 Timothy 5:8).

So how can we make the best choices when it comes to matters concerning our responsibilities to the church and our family responsibilities? Jesus said in **Matthew 10:37**, “He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” This does not teach the concept that we must abandon our family responsibilities, but that they must be put in the proper priority. We cannot allow family and work to come before the kingdom of God and offer God the leftovers of our lives (Luke 14:16-24). We must learn the lesson that even things which are inherently right must be put in their proper priority. God must come first in our lives, before families, work, school and civic activities, recreation, entertainment, and sports activities.

The cares of this world can choke the word of God in our hearts and cause us to be unfruitful (Matthew 13:7-8; 22). The cares of this life can leave us unprepared to meet the Lord in judgment (Luke 21:34).

Anxiety

If we allow the cares of this life to take precedence over Christ and His church, and allow these things to consume our time, energy and means, we will become distracted like Martha and end up like she did: anxious, worried, troubled, and cumbered about many things.

Anxiety is a major problem in this nation. Worry or anxiety indicates that a person has little faith. This is one of the predominant lessons of Jesus in Matthew 6:24-34. The concept of taking or not taking “thought” is found 6 times in these verses. The expression “take no thought” however, does not mean that we should be unthoughtful, unmindful, unthinking, unconcerned or oblivious to everything in this world! It comes from a word that means, “to be over anxious, very careful” (Young, p. 981). The ASV translates it “be not therefore anxious” in Matthew 6:31. It is a compound word from two Greek words that together mean, “dividing the mind” (Bagster, p. 263). So, the concept is to be constantly preoccupied with the cares of this world: constantly anxious — fretting and worrying over the things of this world to the point where one cannot think clearly or completely about other things.

Most all of us have met those who are so “wrapped up” in their problems and worries that it seems to be impossible to get them to focus on something outside of themselves. Why? Their mind is divided. They are too busy “taking thought” — worrying and anxious about something else in their life to focus on anything else for long. What is the problem? Jesus summed it up in that one word translated “O ye of little faith.” Little faith is the seed bed of worry for many people. Instead of turning to the Lord and trusting in Him to provide and care for them on a daily basis, they have turned inward and become anxious — worrying and stewing about every detail and concern of life. Jesus said that the Gentiles (heathen unbelievers) worry or are anxious about the material things of life, but that we should not be this way or go about asking, “What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?” We are not to be worried, even about the necessities of life: food and clothing. Why? Verse 32 — Our Heavenly Father knows we need these things and cares for us more than the lilies of the field or the birds of the air, for which He amply provides.

Freedom from worry and anxiety does not merely mean that we have an optimistic attitude in life. There are problems which we must face in this life which cannot be solved by human power or wisdom. Only the light of God's Word can help us in those times and situations. It is then that we must have faith in God (which comes through His Word) and turn to Him for our guidance to direct us through the storms of life.

Of course, there are some things we should be most thoughtful about, and those are the things which concern our spiritual welfare. Thus, Jesus makes the contrast in Matthew 6:33 instructing us on the proper priority of seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. Half-hearted, lukewarm, hit and miss attendance produces unfaithful and unfruitful members of the church who need to be concerned – not about material things, but about repenting of their sin of apathy and being restored to their first love, by putting God and His kingdom first in their lives as Jesus taught. How can we eliminate the worry and anxiety which besets far too many in this world?

First we can learn, as the apostle Paul learned, to be content and depend upon the Lord for our strength and needs (Philippians 4:11-13; 1 Timothy 6:7-8). One of the problems with worry is that some have taken their eye off of the goal of Heaven and have become near-sighted Christians as they focus on the things of this life (Colossians 3:1-2; 2 Peter 1:5-10).

Second we must realize that it is the Lord who sustains us and cares for us, as Peter wrote in 1 Peter 5:6-7, "6 Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: 7 Casting all your care (anxiety - ASV) upon him; for he careth for you." This means that we are to leave our cares, worries and anxiety with the Lord.

Third we must recognize that we belong to the Lord, as His purchased possession (Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 6:20). Therefore, our Heavenly Father is concerned for the welfare of His children and our burdens become His burdens. Knowing that we do not have to bear our burdens alone helps to lighten the load and gives us encouragement to keep trying. That is why it is so important for us to have a deep abiding faith in the Lord to sustain and keep us at all times. We can be content and free from the anxieties which plague those of the world, if we continue to look to Christ and abide in His Word.

Conclusion

All of us from time to time may be temporarily distracted by the cares of this life. We know this was a temporary situation with Martha, because later we find that she confessed her great faith in the Lord as the Christ, the Son of God (John 11:27) and served the Lord without distraction when He visited their home again (John 12:1-2). The lessons of Mary and Martha help to remind us that we should keep our attention focused on the things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God and continue to put first things first in our lives, as we seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

When we have our priorities right, then we will serve the Lord first and in the process become better hosts, spouses, parents, children and employees. When we chose the one thing best for our souls – the good part – over the many things – the cares of this life – then we make the

best choice for our souls and the souls of others. Let us all resolve to choose the good part and enjoy the great spiritual blessings in Christ and His church.

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