

## **Martha and Mary: Why was Mary Right?**

Luke 10:38–42

Turn to Luke 10 please. We will read the little story of Jesus coming into the home of Martha and Mary, and what happened in that home. I have not spoken on this story before, in part because I did not really like the story. I had sympathy for Martha's complaint. I was not sure I appreciated that Jesus said Mary's way was better.

Sometimes preachers decide to speak on a piece of Scripture because they know they need to study it themselves and make peace with it themselves. This story was like that for me. By the time I was finished preparing, I realized that this was a much more important story than I first thought. Let's read.

*As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to his word. But Martha was distracted by much service. She came to him and said, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me alone to serve? Tell her to help me!" "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken from her."*

### **As Jesus and his disciples were on their way.**

The story begins, "as Jesus and his disciples were on their way." One chapter earlier, end of Luke 9, Jesus set his face like a flint to go to Jerusalem. He was going to Jerusalem to endure mocking and suffering and death. Between Luke 9 when Jesus begins this journey, and Luke 19 when he gets to Jerusalem, Luke the writer reminds us quite a few times that Jesus is on a specific journey. Jesus and the disciples were on their way to Jerusalem.

### **Martha opened her home to him.**

We assume that Martha is the older sister, it is her house, and she welcomes Jesus and his disciples into her home. We can tell from this story, and we know from John's Gospel, that Jesus and these sisters were already close. Jesus had been there before, and they both loved him.

### **Martha had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to his word.**

In a few places I have translated this paragraph more literally than the NIV does. That's why I called this his "word." In the New Testament generally, including in Luke, "his word" means "his message." So we assume Jesus is sitting on a chair, and Mary is listening to him teach the message about God that made him a teacher. We don't hear about the twelve being in the house, but they are probably there.

**Martha was distracted by much service.**

“Serve” is another important word, and it is positive. The most basic sense of “serve” was table service. It meant making sure the people at the table had food and were well cared for. Just before Martha and Mary we have the story of the Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan served the half dead traveler, gave him good care at cost to himself. That’s service at its best. Serving people is a good thing.

Martha has thirteen men in her house for supper. Maybe she knew ahead of time, maybe not. She loves Jesus and wants him there with his followers. But she is distracted by much service. “Much service” means she could have done this more simply. “Distracted” means she’s not having fun. She’s bothered. She’s having trouble getting her whole meal plan going, and it is making her miserable.

**She came to Jesus and said, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me alone to serve? Tell her to help me!”**

The NIV says she “asked” Jesus, but actually she just said it to Jesus. First she corrected Jesus: “Don’t you care, Lord? You can see what is happening. How can you not care? You should care about this!”

Then she tells him what to say. Martha is bold in her irritation. Jesus is speaking the word, the message God sent him to speak. “No,” says Martha, “I will tell you what to say. You tell her to help me.” *She came to Jesus and said, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me alone to serve? Tell her to help me!”*

**“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things.**

“Martha, Martha.” Jesus said that at a different time in a different language and in a different culture, but it meant the same then as it would mean now. There is a gentle correction coming, maybe a little sad: “Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things.” While Jesus was teaching he was also watching Martha out of the corner of his eye. He could see, as he taught, what was going on with Martha. (And what’s going on with you and me.)

Martha said, “Don’t you care what’s happening to me?” Jesus said, “You have many cares and worries.” Listen to this again, listen for the word “care”: Martha said, “Don’t you care what’s happening to me?” Jesus said, “Martha, Martha, you have many cares and worries.” “Martha, the reason you are miserable is not your sister.” “Martha, Martha, you have many cares and worries.” What Jesus cares about is not the problem. What Martha cares about is the problem.

**Only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken from her.**

This is a critical line, people. Only one thing is essential. Mary has chosen that. What is Mary doing? She is listening to Jesus, she's listening to his word, his message. That is the one necessary thing, and Jesus will not take that away from her.

And I want to say, "Yes, Jesus, but you all have to eat! Eventually even Mary will have to eat, or she won't be able to listen any more!" What Jesus says invites that reaction. So then we must step back and try to figure out what's going on here.

Turn to Luke 8. We will read some other words of Jesus to help us understand him.

**The Seed is Choked by the Cares of Life – Luke 8:14**

Jesus told the parable of the farmer and the seed. A man plants seed on 4 different kinds of soil. Then Jesus explained the parable: *"This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God... The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear the word, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature."*

The seed is the word of God. The word of God and the word of Jesus are the same thing here. Remember that Mary was listening to his word. The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, those who paid attention to the message. The word came into their lives and it brought the real life that the word brings when it enters us.

*But as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.*" Martha, to our knowledge, is not bothered by the riches and pleasures of life. But at this moment in her home, distracted with much service and upset with her sister Mary, she's being choked by the cares of life, the worries of life.

Jesus did not correct Martha because she was preparing food. He corrected her because she had many cares and worries. They were choking the life that the word of God had planted in her.

**Do Not Worry, Seek God's Kingdom – Luke 12:22–31**

*Jesus said to his disciples: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest? "Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry*

*about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.*

Let's read the end again: think about Martha. *“Do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.”*

Jesus said, “Martha, Martha, you have many cares and worries. Mary has chosen the one necessary thing.” In that hour, in that house, Martha was worried about what they would eat and drink, and Mary was seeking the Father's kingdom. It is that simple.

Martha said to Jesus, “don't you care that my sister left me alone?” Jesus did care about Martha, but not that she's left alone. Jesus cares that she has so many cares and worries.

This story gives us a jolt because Jesus completely bypasses the practical question of food. People need to eat, and regularly, and in that home it was time to eat. In this story Jesus ignores that. In the face of practical reality, he tells us that hearing the word of God is more important, more necessary.

Martha was hosting Jesus and the twelve. In that sense she was giving real service to the kingdom of God. Hosting that group for supper was offering holy service to the kingdom of God. Even there this danger remains, people. She's such a good person, doing such good things. Even there, the cares and worries of life can turn us away from the kingdom.

We are all as vulnerable to this as Martha was. When Jesus said, “Martha, Martha, you have many cares and worries,” that was not a compliment. He said it because he cared about her. The problem was not her circumstances, it was how much of herself she gave to her circumstances, and how little of herself she gave to the word of God.

God has spoken so that we would listen to him and build our lives around his message. The world always tries to capture us. When we are stressed and pulled into many directions, that's the world. That's the cares of life choking the plant.

God has spoken so that we would listen to him and build our lives around his message. There is nothing more important than that. That is the one necessary thing. Our lives need an organizing center. We need to have a single vision. Martha was distracted by much service. She had many cares and worries.

There is a Martha in us all. God words to us, if we will hear them and take them to heart, lead us away from the Martha that is in us all. That is the only way out.

This church uses Scripture in all kinds of ways, and that is so good. Understand that this is not just a good church habit. God's message is the only way not to be Martha.

So, look at all your stress and cares, your worries and concerns, and hear this from Jesus. One thing is necessary, take hold of what God has said. We have all these worries and concerns, but one thing is necessary. Mary was listening to Jesus, and that was the one essential.

How exactly shall we hear the word? There are many ways. Private Scripture reading works for some, but for many it does not work. Some people post important Scriptures on their mirror, so they see them first thing in the morning. Roseau River Bible Camp had Scriptures posted all over the place on the walls of the men's bathroom. I know people's lives who have been changed by listening to Scripture read online. Best ever use of technology.

This from Moses: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.* Deuteronomy 6:5–9.

Find a way to hear the word of God. At the very least, take Miranda's advice: memorize Psalm 23, and the Lord's Prayer, and use them both regularly. That's a good start.

But hearing is only the first half. Then take those words to heart. Moses said these words "are to be on your hearts." Let's shape our minds and our lives by these words. Let's build our lives and our thinking around these words. That, or be Martha. The word of God is incredibly useful when we are bombarded with cares and worries. The world never stops pulling us in. So we will never stop hearing word and taking it to heart. Amen.

PRAYER: Father, thank you for this story. There is a Martha in us all. We are easily distracted by our many cares and worries. Turn us toward your words, your message. Your words have such a different picture of what is real and what is important. Help us listen to your word, help us take it to heart. We don't want your life in us to be choked. We want it to thrive. Thank you for this little story, and thank you for what your word can do. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give us a spirit of unity among ourselves as we follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth we may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.