

Luke 10:38-42
A Word about Priorities

The ancient Greeks had a saying - "know yourself." It was not a bit of pop psychology about getting in touch with your inner feelings, but rather it meant to know what kind of being you are. Man is not a god. Man is finite. Man is limited. Man cannot have everything he wants. Therefore we must make choices. Choices about what to do with our time, our resources, and our energy. And priorities are the criteria by which we choose.

Everybody has priorities. David wrote,

"One thing I have asked from the Lord, that I shall seek:
That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,
To behold the beauty of the Lord
And to meditate in His temple" (Psalm 27:4).

Paul agreed, "¹³one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:13-14).

In this passage, Jesus was making His way to Jerusalem. His death was only a few months away. He had begun to give extra attention to teaching His disciples and preparing them for the dark days that were to soon come. He was still performing miracles, but His emphasis had shifted from serving the masses and crowds of people who were amazed but not believing, to focusing on those who had chosen to follow. Jesus did this by doing a great deal of teaching. We will see in the passages ahead that He taught His disciples about prayer, persecution, contentment, hypocrisy, unity, stewardship, and humility.

Context

This event is recorded only by Luke. It is not specific as to time and place. In his accounts of Jesus in the closing months of His life, Luke uses phrases like "entered a village (v. 38) or came to "a certain place" (Luke 11:1) or went "through one city and village to another" (Luke 13:22). In John's gospel, however, we are given further information about this event, though the event itself is not specifically recorded in John's narrative. In describing the death of Lazarus, John records that Lazarus lived in Bethany as did his sisters, Mary and Martha. Bethany was located "near Jerusalem, about two miles off" (John 12:18). It was east of Jerusalem at the foot of the Mount of Olives. This was, perhaps, the first time Jesus had passed through this particular village. It certainly would not be the last.

"And He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there"
(Matthew 21:17).

"Now when Jesus was in Bethany, at the home of Simon the leper" (Matthew 26:6).

"Jesus, therefore, six days before the Passover, came to Bethany where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead" (John 12:1).

⁵⁰And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them. ⁵¹While He was blessing them, He parted from them and was carried up into heaven" (Luke 24:50-51).

Luke introduces the story by saying that Jesus and His disciples "were traveling along" (v. 38). They were making their way through Judea (and occasionally Perea on the other side of the Jordan) for a few

months as Jesus prepared His followers for what was to come. Eventually they came to Bethany where “a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home” (v. 38). We do not know how they met. Perhaps through Lazarus. Luke does not say. That she is introduced as “a woman” implies that this was the first meeting between Jesus and Martha. It was not be the last. Scripture reveals that this was a family that Jesus clearly loved, and this particular passage sheds some light on His interaction with it.

We can easily remember that Jesus and His disciples had not always received such a greeting. Only recently the Samaritans had refused Him welcome (Luke 9:51-56), and His followers had received much of the same as they traveled around preaching the kingdom of God (Luke 10:10-12). This time, though, Jesus and His men were welcomed and, we can safely assume, also cared for and fed. Perhaps they had the chance to wash. Perhaps they would stay for a night or two. Scripture does not reveal the details, but what we can infer from the fact that Jesus returned to this home in the future that, at the very least, Martha made them welcome.

Martha was perhaps a widow, since Luke refers to the dwelling as “her home” (v. 38). Also, since Mary is mentioned after Martha when the two are talked about together, we can conclude that Martha was the older sister. She certainly took the lead in this case and in others, “Martha therefore, when she heard that Jesus was coming, went to meet Him, but Mary stayed at the house” (John 11:20). In any event, the dwelling was the home of (maybe even) Lazarus and his two sisters, and they regularly extended a welcome to Jesus when He was in town.

Devotion

When we first meet Mary, we find that she “was seated at the Lord’s feet, listening to His word” (v. 39). Her position suggests intense interest. Though Jewish rabbis did not take on female students, her physical position would be in agreement with the typical teaching format of the day. That is, Jesus would be standing or perhaps seated, and His disciples would be seated around Him at His feet listening.

We know we are commanded to obey. But how can we obey commands of which we are unaware? How can we please God if we do not know what He wants? This is why the Word of God is important. Mary understood this. She knew she could not possibly please Jesus if she didn’t know what He wanted. Obedience and hearing the Word of God were, and are, intimately related.

“⁴⁷Everyone who comes to Me and hears My words and acts on them, I will show you whom he is like: ⁴⁸he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid a foundation on the rock; and when a flood occurred, the torrent burst against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. ⁴⁹But the one who has heard and has not acted accordingly, is like a man who built a house on the ground without any foundation; and the torrent burst against it and immediately it collapsed, and the ruin of that house was great” (Luke 6:47-49).

“¹⁹And His mother and brothers came to Him, and they were unable to get to Him because of the crowd. ²⁰And it was reported to Him, ‘Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, wishing to see You.’ ²¹But He answered and said to them, ‘My mother and My brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it’” (Luke 8:19-21).

“But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves” (James 1:22)

In fact, at another time, Jesus defined believers as those who could hear His word.

“⁴³Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear My word. ⁴⁴You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. ⁴⁵But because I speak the truth, you do not believe Me. ⁴⁶Which one of you convicts Me of sin? If I speak truth, why do you not believe Me? ⁴⁷He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God” (John 8:43-47).

Mary was listening to Jesus. She was taking in what He said, so that she could be pleasing to Him in all that she did. She had “chosen what is better” (v. 42).

Distraction

Martha, on the other hand, “was distracted with all her preparations” (v. 40). The word means to be dragged away. She was caught up in preparing the sleeping arrangements, cooking the dinner, and generally making certain that Jesus and His followers were well cared for. This was no small task. Thirteen men had arrived at her home. Including herself and Mary, and perhaps Lazarus as well, that was quite a feast to prepare. Even to a person of some wealth, this would be a challenge. As a result, she had too much to do to be sitting at the feet of Jesus listening to Him talk.

It can be suggested that Jesus was alone, and therefore the fault of Martha was in making such a fuss over only one person. To be sure it does say that as ‘they’ were traveling along ‘He’ entered a village. Perhaps Jesus did leave His disciples at another place. Luke is not, however, too particular in this when he writes, “now it happened that He was passing through some grainfields on a Sabbath; and His disciples were picking the heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands, and eating the grain” (Luke 6:1), for example. In any case, the size of the meal or the amount of preparation required is not the point of the story. Whether it was only Jesus, or Jesus and His disciples is not the main issue here.

First of all, we must understand that what Martha was doing was not wrong. Indeed, believers are commanded to show hospitality to others.

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers” (Hebrews 13:2).

“Contribut[e] to the needs of the saints, practic[e] hospitality” (Romans 12:13).

“Be hospitable to one another without complaint” (1 Peter 4:9).

Indeed, hospitality is such a godly characteristic it is a requirement for leadership in the body of Christ.

“An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach” (1 Timothy 3:2).

An elder must be “hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled” (Titus 1:8).

The issue was not that Martha was busy serving others. That was a godly thing to do. Even to turn down the opportunity to listen to Jesus could be considered a great sacrifice if done with the proper attitude. But that was the point. Martha definitely did not have the proper attitude of a servant. She grew increasingly frustrated. We can imagine her sighing ever more loudly and perhaps banging the pots and

pans as she prepared dinner alone in the kitchen. She was mad that her sister was not helping. Perhaps she had lost the enthusiasm of entertaining the Messiah and His disciples. Maybe she was mad at Lazarus for bringing them over. The bottom line was - she was angry.

Able to take no more, “she came up to Him and said, ‘Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me’” (v. 40). The room must have grown immediately silent. The awkwardness was impossible to ignore. I cannot imagine the look on the Savior’s face.

The accusation was really remarkable. To accuse Jesus of not caring! The Savior Who had healed the lame, cleansed the leper, fed the hungry, taught the ignorant, restored the demon-possessed, and even raised the dead. To speak in such a tone to a man was not acceptable. To speak in such a way to a rabbi even more so. But to speak in such a way to God, Himself, is difficult to conceive.

Martha’s specific grievance was that “my sister has left me to do all the serving alone” (v. 40). She had needed to do all the work herself because her sister had chosen to listen to Jesus. How could Jesus allow such a thing, Martha argued. Surely He should “tell her to help me” (v. 40). Her perspective was that her agenda for preparing the meal and organizing the sleeping arrangements was more important than whatever Jesus was saying. Martha was not wrong for being a servant, she was wrong for making that act of service all about her.

Jesus responded with grace. Of course He did. He said to her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things” (v. 41). Repeating her name was a sign of emphasis and emotion.

“Why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” (Luke 6:46).

“They came to Jesus and woke Him up, saying, ‘Master, Master, we are perishing!’”

(Luke 8:24)

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not have it!” (Luke 13:34).

His rebuke was that Martha was worried about “about so many things” (v. 41) when in fact “only one thing is necessary” (v.42). Mary had “chosen the good part” (v. 42). Literally speaking, she had chosen what was best. “Leave the food and the beds to themselves and come and take a seat and listen to what I have to say,” we can hear Jesus saying. The things of this world will take care of themselves.

The Lesson

First, let us take from this that true, believing Christians can be very different. Both Martha and Mary were followers of Christ. Both of them loved Jesus and served Him. Both of them were among the few who chose to be more than amazed. Yet they were very different in their personalities. Martha was active and energetic, taking charge and unafraid to speak out. Mary was quieter, more contemplative. Both rejoiced to see Jesus; one because it gave her an opportunity to serve, the other because it gave her an opportunity to learn.

We must remember that not all sheep in the flock are the same. We must be careful not to judge others who respond to Jesus differently than we do. As long as the action or attitude is biblical, we must not impose our understanding of the details of the faith on our brothers and sisters.

Second, couldn't we argue that Jesus was a bit hard with Martha? Shouldn't He have encouraged Mary to help, so then both sisters could listen to Him together? To answer this, first I would suggest that in accordance with customs of the time and place, it would have been inappropriate for both sisters to have left Jesus to prepare the meal. Assuming Lazarus is not there (and there is no mention of him), to whom was Jesus to talk while the sisters were away. Who was to entertain Him? That is, Mary was being as dutiful as Martha in meeting the needs of Jesus.

Also, Martha accepted the rebuke. She did not argue, and later passages show she felt no hard feelings. ²¹Martha then said to Jesus, 'Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²Even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You'" (John 11:21-22). Her love for Jesus was not diminished by the rebuke He gave. She responded well. She grew in her faith and obedience.

Third, today we cannot literally sit at the feet of Jesus. But we do have the words of Jesus recorded in Scripture. And these words are the very words of God. This was something Jesus emphasized to His disciples throughout His ministry to them.

"Jesus answered them and said, 'My teaching is not Mine, but His who sent Me'" (John 7:16).

"I have many things to speak and to judge concerning you, but He who sent Me is true; and the things which I heard from Him, these I speak to the world" (John 8:26)

"I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me" (John 8:28).

"I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15)

"⁶I have manifested Your name to the men whom You gave Me out of the world; they were Yours and You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word. ⁷Now they have come to know that everything You have given Me is from You; ⁸for the words which You gave Me I have given to them; and they received them and truly understood that I came forth from You, and they believed that You sent Me" (John 17:6-8).

The words of Jesus are the words of God, and they are kept for us securely in Holy Scripture. We must be drawn to them. They must be a priority. They must inform us and compel us to obedience. The Bible, and the Bible alone, contain the information vital to eternity. It is the only place where we can learn who we are, why we were made, and what we are expected to do. It is the Bible which teaches us about our sin. It is there that we understand our inability to save ourselves. From nowhere else can we learn about the atoning death of Jesus. It is only there that we understand how to truly please God.

Finally, we must be careful of letting the cares of the world interfere with our preparation for eternity. The excessive zeal with which Martha focused on entertaining Jesus was what got her into trouble. It was not the act itself, but the fact that it became more important than it should have been. We all have things we must do. We have jobs, school, families, even the need for recreation and leisure to keep mentally and

physically sound. We are not called to asceticism and disengagement. But we cannot let this world take priority above the next.

Let us be passionate about the “one thing” (v.42). As Jesus promised, it “shall not be taken away” (v. 42). Our relationship with Jesus is unlike anything in this world. It is eternal. All of the things of this world will end. It will all pass away. But our relationship with Christ is eternally permanent.

“²⁷My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; ²⁸and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand” (John 10:27-28).

“³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

Take Aways

By God’s grace, any we choose to pursue passionately our relationship with Jesus, and overcome the distractions of this world.