

“It Will Not Be Taken Away”

Mary and Martha. The good sister and the bad sister, right? Isn't that the way we often think of them? Mary, the good sister, sat at Jesus' feet and listened. Martha, the bad sister, did other things. She even got upset with Mary for doing what she was supposed to do. We should be like Mary and not like Martha, right?

Well, not exactly. Sometimes, we oversimplify a bit. Sometimes we take the lesson of the story that we learned in Sunday School and don't think about it more deeply or with a more nuanced approach than that. The reality is that, like much of Scripture, we can and do learn many lessons and find many applications to our life from what is recorded in our sermon text today: an actual, historical account from the life of Jesus.

To help us see that Martha is not the villain that she is sometimes made out to be, just consider this: what would you do if Jesus was a guest in your house? Wouldn't you want to make sure that the house was clean? Wouldn't you want to give him a nice meal and make his stay as comfortable as possible? Wouldn't you want to do many of the same things that Martha did? Martha was a well-meaning host to a special guest, and she wanted to do it right. Let's not fault her for that. But let's consider the actions of these two sisters in the light of what Jesus says about them. And let's rejoice in the blessing that Mary enjoyed, which is ours, too, and which will not be taken away.

Jesus was very likely on his way to Jerusalem for the Feast of Dedication when he made a stop with his friends in Bethany. Bethany was a little town about two miles east of Jerusalem, on the southeast slope of the Mount of Olives. Martha and her sister Mary lived there, and as we know from other places in Scripture, their brother Lazarus did, too.

The account that we have of Jesus and his visit there is really very simple and straightforward. Martha stayed busy taking care of Jesus. We're not told what all of the preparations were that kept Martha busy, but we might surmise that she prepared a meal, perhaps made a bed, maybe cleaned up a bit. As I mentioned already, these seem to be the same sorts of things that you and I might do for a houseguest, especially a very important one.

Mary, on the other hand, took a different approach. She sat down at the feet of the Lord to listen to what he had to say. We can only guess at the specifics of what Jesus taught her that day, though we know a good deal about what Jesus usually taught. He likely spoke to her about various aspects of his kingdom, and about how his people respond in faith to the opportunities before them.

His teaching was interrupted by the voice from the kitchen. Martha had had enough. She didn't want to put up with this anymore. As she saw it, she was the only one working, even though she had a sister who could be helping. “Jesus,” she whined, “tell my sister to help. It isn't fair that I'm the only one working!”

But she didn't get the answer she was looking for. Jesus responded, “Martha, you're busy with many things. Only one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen what is better, and it won't be taken from her.” Jesus wouldn't stop Mary from doing the most important thing that she could do: listening to him.

But notice that this doesn't mean that what Martha was working on was wrong. What she was doing wasn't bad in and of itself. After all, she was serving Jesus. She was trying to meet his physical needs and to make him comfortable. She was offering hospitality to a dear friend. Jesus didn't rebuke her for what she was doing. He didn't tell her to stop. But he did have a correction to offer. The problem wasn't with what she was doing. There was a problem with her spirit and her reaction to her sister. What do you suppose she thought of Mary at the time? Maybe she thought Mary was lazy. Certainly she found her unhelpful in a situation where she would have appreciated some help.

But Jesus didn't see Mary that way. Mary had chosen a better option. Mary saw Jesus not only as a houseguest, but even more importantly as her Savior and her Lord. Jesus was someone who had so much to give to Mary, much more than she could ever give to him. As Jesus himself explained on another occasion, **"the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"** (Matthew 20:28).

Again, there is a certain nuance that is worth acknowledging. The people of God do serve Jesus with their good works. He is pleased with the things that they do out of faith. 1 Corinthians 10:31 tells us, **"So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."** The issue in our text wasn't that one sister was doing good and the other doing bad. The issue was one of balance and understanding priorities. The first priority, what is better, is to hear God's Word.

And this is a lesson worth considering, for we often fall into the same trap that Martha did. How often do we find other good things to do and allow them to crowd out what is even better? How often do we fail to give God's Word the time and the attention that it deserves in our lives? There are, to be sure, many good things that capture our attention: our family, our friends, our work, even serving in various ways in the church. These are good things, and in giving them our effort and attention, we are serving God.

But they become an issue when they crowd what is better out of our lives. Our salvation, thankfully, is not based on what we do or what we have done. It is based on what Jesus Christ has done for us. We learn about Jesus and are strengthened in our faith through his Word. Like Mary and Martha both, we have so much less to offer to Jesus than what he has given to us and continues to give us in his Word.

And that is something that we need to be reminded of frequently. It comes naturally to us and to all sinful human beings to focus on ourselves and our own efforts. It comes naturally also to focus on others and to make comparisons. But God's Word redirects our attention away from ourselves and to the one who really matters, Jesus Christ.

So we need to make sure to take time away from all of the other important things in our lives to sit at Jesus' feet, not literally as Mary did, but by being attentive to his Word. And this, right here, is a good start. But there's more. This one hour is less than one percent of your week. Don't stop with worship. Join in a Bible study. Read your Bible at home. Use the meditations devotion booklet and the Forward in Christ magazine. Check a People's Bible volume out of the church library. Find a friend to talk to about your devotions. Set a schedule and stick to it.

Because here's what Jesus says about his Word: **"only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."** You have that one thing readily available to you right now from day to day and from week to week. As you by God's grace make the choice to focus on that one thing, it will not be taken from you. It will strengthen you to face the temptations of this life and will keep you until eternal life. One commentator on these verses says it this way: "When this one thing needful is truly treasured in the believer's life, everything else falls into place and it will not be taken from us, even into eternity."

And what is scary to think about, the opposite is true as well. When we neglect and ignore God's Word, there is no guarantee that we will have future opportunities. Martin Luther warned his fellow Germans that God's Word was like a passing rain shower that could move away and not return. His warning has proven prophetic, as the vibrant churches that sprang out of the Reformation are for the most part empty or gone today. Seeing that course of history ought to make us appreciate and cherish even more the blessings we enjoy today.

Mary realized what she had. She had Jesus himself speaking to her, and she was determined to listen. We have Jesus' own Word in the Bible. Let us with the same urgency and intensity hear and learn it.

The Text: Luke 10:38–42 (NIV84)

³⁸ As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. ³⁹ She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

⁴¹ "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, ⁴² but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."