

The one necessary thing

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[0 : 00] Our reading is a short one. It's from the Gospel of Luke, 38 through 42. 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 what he said. 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. Martha, Martha, the Lord answered, you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed, or indeed only one.

Mary has chosen what is better and only not taken away from her. May God grant us understanding of his word. Well, this passage that we're looking at in Luke, short passage, and one that I think presents to us something that's readily accessible.

And what I mean by that is that it's a domestic scene, something that we can regularly understand and sort of enter into, get a feel for it.

[1 : 19] Martha has invited Jesus and his followers into their home. She apparently appears to be the mistress of the house, the one who is in charge of what takes place there.

And we know she has a sister named Mary, and later we learn that she also has a brother named Lazarus. And upon Jesus entering the house, two different decisions are made.

Martha starts to get things ready for a meal, and Mary sits down at Jesus' feet. That's the posture of a disciple in Jesus' days. The teacher would sit, and those who were there to listen would sit at his feet.

So what begins to happen? Well, Martha's feeling a lot of pressure, right? We get that. She's made the invitation. She's the one who's asked them to come in, and hospitality in that culture was very, very important.

There was really a sign, really, of honoring those who had come into the house. You might recall the time when Jesus was in Simon the Pharisee's house, and the sinful woman came in and was weeping at his feet and bathing his feet with her tears, and Jesus called out Simon.

[2 : 28] He said, Simon, what is this? Look at this woman. Since I've come in, she has not stopped to weep at my feet and clean my feet, and you have not offered me oil for my head. You have not given me anything to eat or drink.

He called Simon Alphas lack of hospitality. It was an expectation. It wasn't a law, but it was an expectation, and certainly Martha was feeling that kind of pressure.

And then you add to that is Jesus and who? Jesus and the Twelve and any others that might be following. So this isn't just one guy coming in to have a meal. He's got a whole crowd that's come in, and they've all come into the house there to be with Jesus.

And on top of that, of course, she cares about Jesus. She wants to do a good job for him. And I think it's probably not too hard to imagine, as we would, that we'd like to do a good job for us.

She'd like to do a good job for her. That she would get that kind of, well, Martha, thank you. That meal was delicious. Oh, no, no. It was nothing. It was nothing. No, no. Really, it was wonderful. I mean, all those kinds of things could be a play in Martha, certainly the reality of how many people are in there and the need she has to produce a meal, and perhaps even that kind of inner thought life that's going on that I suggested.

[3 : 41] And what happens then is that she becomes more and more consumed by serving. Luke describes the task as something, her state of mind is being distracted with much serving.

Distracted with much serving. Distracted. Distracted from what? Distracted. Well, probably distracted from Jesus' teaching. I mean, she would like to hear what Jesus has to say as well, but

there's a meal to be ready.

And so you can imagine the scene again. She's off there preparing the meal. She's trying to do this. And one time her ear is kind of kicked towards what Jesus is talking to disciples. But, you know, more and more she sees the different things that have to be done in order to get this meal together, and she's getting all worked up.

And she looks over and she sees Mary sitting there. She goes, What is Mary doing sitting over there when we've got all this stuff to get ready? And so finally she just can't take it.

And she goes over and she comes up to Jesus. Now, you have the posture. You have to picture this posture. Jesus is sitting and everybody else is sitting, either on the floor or under the chairs around them, but they're all sitting.

[4 : 46] And she comes up, sweaty, mad, wiping her hands on her apron, and comes up and says, Lord, do you not care that my sister is sitting here while I am preparing this meal?

Tell her to come and help me. Well, doesn't she presume her rightness at that moment?

Right? She's saying, Lord, don't you care that I'm in here working all by myself? Of course you do.

So tell her to come and help me. Here's Mary sitting at the Lord's feet, listening.

Martha, distracted with much serving. Finally, Martha can't deal with the situation anymore. She goes up to Jesus. She makes her demand. And how does he respond? With gentleness, but firmly. Now, again, imagine the scene. Jesus is teaching, which means he's sitting down. And that's the posture of the teacher at that time. Martha comes up, sweaty, agitated. And Jesus describes her as being upset.

[5 : 53] And the term, the Greek term underneath that, really is kind of akin to being turbulent. Like being very noisy, even. Something's noising. It's in the same category as this.

So one can imagine that not only is Martha in the other room getting internally upset. You can think of it. Going around, banging some pots. You know, taking a knife, smacking on the counter.

Take that, and smack that over there. So she's just creating that kind of passive-aggressive stuff going on. And here's Jesus trying to teach. And all the time he hears this banging and her muttering to herself over in the corner.

And finally she comes over and says to him, Lord, you need to have her come and help me. And he says, Martha, Martha, Martha.

You are worried and upset about many things. But few things are needed, or indeed, only one.

Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.

[6 : 55] It's not so much a rebuke as a gentle corrective. It's a teaching moment. It's like he's saying, you know, I appreciate, Martha, that you're putting all of this together for us.

And there are many things to do, many things that are important towards that end. But they are not so important, so necessary, so needed, that it should distract you from me.

There'll be time for food. Come and sit next to Mary and listen to what I have to say. Now let's look at that defining statement of this for just a minute.

Few things are needed, or indeed, only one. Another translation is necessarily. Only one thing is necessary. One thing is needed.

And when we pause over that, I mean, what comes to mind? If something is necessary, it's absolutely the one thing that is needed, that means that the, whatever it is involved with, you can't do without.

[8 : 00] You can't make tomato sauce without tomatoes. And you can't analyze a financial portfolio without data.

And a car engine, it needs petrol to run. It's necessary. It cannot be a car without that petrol. You can't do the analysis without the data. You can't make tomato sauce without tomatoes.

It's absolutely necessary. It's needed. And a human being, you know, we can survive for a while without water, without food, but you cut out air, and we're done.

Air is absolutely necessary. These things are necessary, or things cannot exist the way they are supposed to exist, to be what they're supposed to be, and in some cases, even continue.

So in the midst of a very ordinary domestic scene, one in which we can all, I think, readily agree, or understand, identify, one that portrays a woman as being distracted by the obligations of it, so much so that she makes demands upon Jesus, which you would probably be embarrassed about later, when she stops to think about it.

[9 : 16] And what does Jesus say? One thing is needed. And what is that one needed thing? It is the portion. It is the choice that Mary has made to sit and to listen to Jesus.

That is the one necessary thing. Now, you probably know who C.S. Lewis is, and you might know his book about mere Christianity, and he makes an argument about Jesus.

He says in there, you know, when people say he wants to be a, we respect him as a good moral teacher. We expect him as a life guide, but we can't consider him to be God. Lewis says that you don't have that option.

You don't have that option when you consider Jesus. He says this, I'm trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about him, that is Jesus. I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God.

That's the one thing Lewis says we must not say. A man who said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic on a level with a man who says he's a poached egg, or else he would be the devil of hell.

[10 : 26] You must make your choice. Either this man was and is the son of God, or else a madman or something worse. I think this statement of Jesus, one thing is necessary and Mary is chosen, and one thing is for you to sit down and listen to what I have to say, falls into that category.

It's an outrageous claim of Jesus. Really? The one necessary thing is to sit and listen to your words? How could he make such a claim? Why?

What would he say to Martha that she would need to stop everything she is doing, things that are important, and sit down and listen to what he has to say? Everything else can wait, Martha.

Don't ask me to send Mary away to you. You come down and sit with Mary. How could he make such a claim? Well, if we go back to Luke's gospel at the very beginning, what happens when the angel comes?

What does he say to Mary? What does he talk about, about the nature of this one who would come? He will be great. He will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. He will reign over Jacob's descendants forever.

[11 : 36] His kingdom will never end. The Holy Spirit will come upon you, Mary, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you so that the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God.

That's the backstory to this encounter with Martha and Mary and Jesus. Jesus. Emmanuel. God with us.

God in the flesh. So this is no mere mortal. He's fully human like you and me, but this is not just like any other human, even a more exalted or enlightened human.

No, this is God in the flesh, and he's come to save his people from their sins, and he has come to reveal to them the Father. He says in Luke chapter 10, all things have been committed to me by my Father.

No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son, and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal them. He has come to fulfill covenant promises made in eternity to redeem a people for God.

[12 : 42] He brings with him the kingdom of God. He is the face of God manifested in time and space. Remember what he says to his disciples.

I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except to me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him. Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.

Don't you believe that I am in the Father and that the Father is in me? The words that I say to you, I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father living in me who is doing his work.

Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or at least believe in the evidence of the works themselves. When he says, one thing is needed, Martha, and Mary has made the good choice, that's such an outrageous claim unless who he is and the reason for his coming to earth is as the scriptures say.

Right? Think about this now. If you were to go to somebody and say, listen, you need to listen to me. Well, no, I've got lots of other stuff to do today. No, no, no. You need to sit down and listen to me. Well, you might say that as a parent to a child.

[13 : 54] Right? You need to sit down here, Jim. We've got something to talk about. I've got my football practice. No, no. You need to sit down and listen to me. We understand that kind of authority.

Jesus is exercising this authority completely and fully. He is speaking with divine authority. You need to sit and listen to me.

So, Martha was doing what she was expected to do. And I don't think Jesus is faulting her for wanting to do a good job. What he is faulting her for is that the need to do a good job has overcome the need for sitting and listening to Jesus.

What he is correcting her is he's not faulting Martha for having made the choice that she's made in so much as he is uplifting Mary for the choice that she has made.

Now, I speculate as to what might have motivated Martha. But it's clear that she desired that this be done and done well. So much so that she was willing to draw her sister away from sitting at the feet of Jesus.

[15:03] So, Jesus speaks to her as he does. I'm not sending her to you. She's made the good choice and I'm not going to take it away from her to help you in the kitchen.

Listen. You need to sit down with her. You need to sit and listen to me. Now, I think that statement is also fueled by the urgency of the moment.

You know, not unlike that parent with the child or some scene in an action movie, right? When the enemy is closing in and there's the hero stands there and the guy's getting all freaked out who's next to him and he takes and grabs him and he smacks him across the face a couple of times. He says, stop it! Listen to me! You listen to me, you stay with me. We're going to get out of here. There's an urgency to the moment here with Jesus as well. Just prior to this, we learned that as the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. See, Jesus understood this about himself, about his mission. This is why he was here to go to Jerusalem, to accomplish what would be transpired, to go through his passion week, to be unjustly tried, to be flogged, to be crucified, and finally to die.

[16:13] To experience the betrayal, to experience the turning of their backs upon him. He understood that this is what was about to happen. His death, his burial, indeed his resurrection, and ultimately his ascension were waiting, but there were not many days left for him on earth.

The time with him will seem even more precious when they're gone. So Martha, one thing is necessary. Come and sit and listen to my words.

What I am revealing when I speak is as necessary for the welfare of your soul as the food that you are preparing is for your body. And the welfare of your soul is more important than the welfare of your body.

So come, sit, listen. As Lewis suggests, Jesus claims primacy of importance in our world.

He's not to be considered just another teacher, enlightened master, a prophet of God. He is the one needed thing. And Mary, by the grace of God, knew to choose the good portion.

[17:23] You know, there are some who consider the placement of this story right after the parable of the Good Samaritan is intentional on the part of Luke.

And I think it's something worth considering. Do you remember the parable of the Good Samaritan? That's when the fellow comes and says, you know, what must I do to inherit eternal life? And Jesus says, well, what's written? He says, well, to love God with all of your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself.

He says, you've answered rightly. Go and do likewise. And what does the man say? Well, who's my neighbor? And Jesus goes on to tell that famous parable about how it is that the one who is in need of help is your neighbor.

This is how you are a neighbor. And so, there's the second half, as it were, of the law, right? Remember the summation of the law, to love God with all of your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself.

That Jesus says, all the law and the prophets hang on that. So he answers the second part of it, but he kind of neglected the first part. And so, when Luke puts this picture right up after that one in his account of Jesus, he's saying, okay, love your neighbor, but you also have to love God with all of your heart, soul, strength, and mind.

[18:36] And in many respects, that's just what Mary is doing at this time. He is, she is loving God more than loving the food.

She is loving Jesus more than she is the necessity for the approbation that would come from doing a good job by helping Martha. No, she wants, and she does, express her love for God with all of her heart, soul, strength, and mind.

She sits down. You see, good works, good works cannot take the place or overwhelm our relationship with Christ. They are good, but one thing is needed. One thing is necessary. Now, I say we can readily identify with Martha because we've all been there probably in some way, shape, or form. Something in your life has put a lot of pressure on you and you feel like you've got to concentrate, you've got to get this done. It could be a meal that you're preparing for people, it could be a project that you have at work, it could be a paper you've got to write for school, it could be lots of different things that put pressure on us, that focus, it feels like you've got to get this thing done.

[19 : 42] And so we can identify when we're in such circumstances that cause that kind of pressure to be put upon us and the way it distracts us from other things. One of my sons can get so focused on some of the projects that he does he forgets to eat, I'm serious.

He'll sit and work at his desk for hours and hours and we finally have to go and say, Sam, you've got to eat something. But he's focused on it and he forgets, he's distracted by the needs that his body has, distracted by everything else that's going on, he is focused on what he's doing. And it's not to say it's unimportant, but we can see how it distracts us from other things. And in this case, with Martha and Mary, with his pressure on her and the things that is demanded of her, has distracted her from the one necessary, the one needed thing.

Life can be distracting. You know, we can look around and I don't know about you, but I hear it on lips of a lot of Christians here and back in the States, a lot of Christians that we look at the state of the world and we go, boy, things are going to hell in a handbasket.

What's the expression? That it's just going, it's just going down. Things are just getting worse and worse and worse. We need, we need revival. Well, we do need revival. But the pressures of an economy that's a little wonky, a war in the Eastern Europe, troubles with viruses floating around in the air, all these things can become very, very distracting.

[21 : 09] They're real, they're important, but they can make us lose focus on Jesus. Because what Jesus does for us is anchor us, gets us right back in the center of who God is and what he has done in sending his son to this earth.

You know, there are times, for instance, that we can also be distracted even in ministry things. I don't know what your church is thinking about these days, but I know plenty of churches that start thinking about, you know, we start this program of discipleship over here, we want to do this outreach program over here, I think we need a new building over there, so we start a building project.

Different kinds of things that go on that can also become very, very distracting. We forget that really the one necessary thing is Christ.

And we think the most necessary thing is to get that building built so that people will come. You build it, they will come. Not necessarily. How many empty churches are there in Scotland? How many empty churches are there in the States?

They're all over the place. You can build it, but they might not come. In fact, quite often, they don't come. And so it isn't a building project that's going to draw them.

[22 : 19] It's Jesus that's going to draw them. And that's why He is the one necessary thing. In fact, if we don't keep Jesus at the center of all of our plans that we have in ministry, then all we are really doing is offering to people yet another social organization that's around them that says, hey, we can do some fun things with you.

We can do some nice things for you. But we forget that really our goal is to reveal to them Jesus. It doesn't mean we can't do fun things and know Jesus. It doesn't mean we ought not to do good things.

Parable of the Good Samaritan is there. But if it's not Jesus that is the source, the outflow of our love, our generosity, our enjoyment, then we're really just trying to, you know, get their attention like everybody else is.

No, Jesus is the one necessary thing. A Christian life, a Christian church, a Christian ministry must be anchored in Jesus. And there are many things, many things that can make us anxious, make us troubled, like it was for Martha.

But knowing that God has sent his son and that he will supply all things that we need can take away that trouble, that anxiety.

[23 : 37] We focus on him. He who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things, the apostle writes in Romans 8.

And you know what's wonderful is that we don't need to speculate about what Jesus wanted to teach Martha if she would just sit down and listen. We don't need to speculate. We have it. We have what Jesus teaching is. We have it. We have both the description of who he was, how he was, and what he taught, and then we have this devil to help us. It's from John chapter 12. And it's again, it involves Martha and Mary. And let me just set it up for you, right, in just a chapter just before, we learn that Lazarus, their brother, is ill and that he dies. And Jesus shows up at the tomb and he raises him from the dead. He brings him back to life. And the next scene we have is Mary and Martha again and with Jesus.

[24 : 44] And listen to what it says. Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor.

Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a half a liter of pure nard and expensive perfume. She poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair.

And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected. Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages.

He did not say this because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief. As keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. Leave her alone, Jesus replied.

It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have with me. It's a similar scene, isn't it?

[25 : 43] You've got Martha serving. You've got Mary worshiping. An extraordinary act of worship. I mean, this, can you imagine? I mean, here she is in this public setting and she takes this perfume and breaks open the vial and pours it on Jesus' feet and the perfume fills the house.

Everybody goes, wow, that's nard. That's nard. And she poured it out. Expensive perfume. What we don't have is Martha objecting.

Martha's not saying, Mary, Mary, how dare you do that? Why did you say, that's expensive. Why did you do that for Jesus? That's crazy. No, the one who says that is the one who's going to later betray Jesus.

But Martha was serving. Mary was worshiping. This time, Martha didn't object. What happened at the end of that other scene? I think it's very possible Martha did leave off her serving and come and sit down at the feet of Jesus.

And she understood something that she hadn't understood before. You know, that's a tough scene for her, isn't it? I mean, there she is doing all this stuff for everybody.

[27 : 01] And Jesus kind of calls her out. Gently, nicely, but still calls her out. And, you know, she could get defensive. She could splutter.

She could make all kinds of excuses. Well, we don't know exactly what happened, but we have a clue at least somewhere along the line she got it. It was more important to offer the honor and respect and worship that Jesus deserved.

That's the one necessary thing. So she could create that meal. She could serve. She could do everything she has to do to make that happen and do it with joy because, you know, Jesus was being honored and worshiped by her sister.

Amazing, isn't it? How we can be transformed by the Spirit of God, how we can learn from Jesus, how we can actually have our understanding of things completely made new. It is an amazing thing. And we have it here right on the pages of Scripture that indeed, here is a woman that we can all readily identify with and frankly feel pretty sympathetic with to see that indeed she chose the one needed thing and we can too.

[28 : 08] Let's pray. Father God, thank you for this story and as just this so human, it's just such a human story in that we get caught up like Martha in all that is needed to be done, all the important things that need to be done, that we lose sight of you, we lose sight of the one necessary thing, the one thing that is needed and we ask your forgiveness.

Help us, Lord, to reorient ourselves back to Christ and when we feel that kind of anxiety, remind us of this story, remind us of what Jesus said, no, no, no, one thing is needed, that's Jesus.

and that all the things that might have drawn her away, her desire for praise, her need for doing a job, all of those things which are not in and of themselves necessarily bad, but they can crowd out Christ and that's what happened and we don't want that to happen to us.

So we pray you help us, Lord. Help us to keep our focus on Christ. help us to be as Martha, I believe she was, teachable, able to actually sit and listen to Jesus but also to be taught by Jesus. So to that end we pray, looking for your grace and help in our lives. In Jesus' name, Amen.