

# What's your top priority?

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[ 0 : 00 ] The Bible reading is from Luke chapter 10 from verses 25 to 28 and 38 to 42.

On one occasion, an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. Teacher, he asked, what must I do to inherit eternal life? What is written in the law? He replied, how do you read it?

He answered, love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and love your neighbour as yourself.

You have answered correctly, Jesus replied, do this and you will live. Continuing at verse 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. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said.

[ 1 : 02 ] 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, 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 it will not be taken away from her. Amen. I wonder, as we consider these verses from Luke chapter 10, I wonder what your priorities are in life.

I think usually we can judge our priorities first and foremost by looking at how we spend our time.

And for many of us, of course, that means that work is a high priority.

It consumes a significant proportion of our waking hours. And rightly so. Both because it's the means by which we provide for our practical physical needs. It is necessary to our health and that of our family.

[ 2 : 06 ] But also because God's word commends work as a right and proper occupation for human beings, right from the Garden of Eden onwards. Work is rightly a priority in our lives.

Of course, work can take over more than it should. Sometimes we hear of politicians and CEOs resigning to spend more time with their families. And whilst perhaps that is often a euphemism or an excuse, the fact that it's even slightly plausible shows that we do recognize that our families deserve often a higher priority in terms of our time than we often give them.

Perhaps we also want to prioritize some time to ourselves, an opportunity to recharge. And many of us would do well to prioritize sleep rather more highly than we do. But this passage from Luke chapter 10 shows us that there is one fundamental priority that undergirds everything else.

Now, remember the context here. Joe started by reading those opening verses from a couple of weeks ago, Jesus' conversation with the expert in the law. And we looked at the parable of the Good Samaritan that follows immediately on from that introduction.

And in most Bibles, you'll find that the same heading covers the opening conversation and the parable. But you could actually see that opening conversation as providing the context, providing the heading for the parable and also this incident at Martha and Mary's house.

[ 3 : 32 ] And one reason why it seems reasonable to take it that way is that Luke has probably moved this incident with Mary and Martha, moved it out of chronological sequence.

See, we know from John's Gospel, from that other account of Jesus' life, we know from John chapter 11 that Mary and Martha lived at Bethany. And Bethany is only just outside Jerusalem. But there's several chapters of journey still to go. Here's the whole journey Jesus is on, from way up in the north all the way down to Jerusalem at the bottom. And Bethany is down here, just outside Jerusalem.

So Luke's moved this incident out of chronological sequence. And that's because he's not providing a travel diary for the sake of it. But rather, Luke is using this journey as a means to teach us what journeying with Jesus looks like.

Maybe Luke was worried that the parable of the Good Samaritan, if it was taken in isolation, that it might sound like salvation from God would come on the basis of what we do.

[ 4 : 37 ] And Luke wants to correct that. Or more gently, maybe he saw an opportunity just to fill out what the first of those two great commandments looks like.

What does it look like to love your neighbour as yourself? Here's the parable of the Good Samaritan. What does it look like to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind?

We'll take a look at Mary and Martha. So these two illustrations have to go together if we want to have a balanced picture of what God expects and desires from his people.

The Samaritan there in the parable, he's commended for his loving service of his neighbour. And then Martha is critiqued for what might at first look like similar service. Mary is commended for her love of God.

But the Levite and the priest are criticised as representatives of kind of empty religiosity, of false piety, and maybe for prioritising ceremonial purity over practical compassion.

[ 5 : 40 ] So whilst verse 42 says one thing is needed, clearly that one thing is not to the exclusion of all else. So having focused on love of neighbour a fortnight ago, we focused this morning on the wholehearted love of God.

And there's three points I want to draw out for you from verses 38 to 42. Firstly, loving God means listening to Jesus. Secondly, loving God is for everyone.

And third, loving God affects other priorities. Loving God means listening to Jesus. It is for everyone and it affects our other priorities. So first up, loving God means listening to Jesus.

If this incident with Mary and Martha here in verses 38 to 42, if this is an explanation of what loving God looks like from a few verses ago, then that means that what Jesus commends in these verses is what loving God looks like.

And verse 42, Mary's choice is commended. She has chosen the better thing, the good portion. It will not be taken from her. Mary's choice is good.

[ 6 : 52 ] And what's Mary up to? Well, verse 39, she is sat at the Lord's feet. She's listening to what he's saying. Mary's love of God is demonstrated in the fact that she sits and she listens to Jesus.

Now, this is clearly a humble posture, isn't it? She's not relating to Jesus as an equal. She's not standing and debating with him. No, she is sat at his feet, seeing him as teacher, as master, as Lord.

Now, don't misunderstand what's going on here. I guess in our context, talking about sitting at somebody's feet, it would be a pretty odd thing to do. It would be a pretty strange experience for me to have you sat at my feet as I stand here.

I mean, it would be nice to see you, but for you to be sat on the floor at my feet would be somewhat odd. We kind of associate being sat at somebody's feet almost with degradation or maybe a kind of over-the-top lovesick adoration, an unhealthy obsession.

It's not a very positive idea for us today, is it? But that isn't really what we're talking about when Mary does it. Firstly, despite what some illustrations of the scene would have you believe, this is not a private audience.

[ 8 : 06 ] This is not kind of individual teaching for Mary as he gazes down at her, but rather Jesus is presumably teaching a whole group of people. I couldn't even find an illustration with a whole group in, but that seems to be the context.

A group made up of disciples who are travelling along with him and whoever's gathered from the rest of the village. This isn't a private thing just for Mary. And secondly, to sit at somebody's feet, this isn't about hero worship.

That's just how you sit to learn. I suspect even it's become idiomatic there rather than literal in at least some cases. To say you sit at somebody's feet means you are learning from them.

And we can compare to other biblical references. For instance, Tom Wright says, When Saul of Tarsus sat at the feet of Gamaliel, which is Acts 22 verse 3, Saul wasn't gazing up adoringly and thinking how wonderful the great rabbi was.

Saul was listening and learning and focusing on the teaching of his master and putting it together in his mind. To sit at someone's feet meant quite simply to be their student.

[ 9 : 17 ] So if you want the modern equivalent of this scene, you're probably better off picturing a lecture theatre that's full of students with varying levels of interest. Many have just kind of popped in

to see the latest curiosity and some of them are falling asleep in the back row.

But there's Mary right in the front seat, eager to learn, poised with her pen and paper, taking her notes, keen to hear and put into practice everything that Jesus has to say.

That is the posture that is commended for Mary. That is the posture that is commended for you and for me. To sit, eager to learn and keen to put into practice what Jesus says.

Why? Because that's what loving God looks like. Loving God means listening to Jesus. Secondly, loving God is for everyone.

Now there are, of course, numerous places in the Bible that we could go to make that point. We could go to God's promise to Abraham. God's promise to Abraham that he will be a blessing to many nations.

[10:26] We could go through Paul's emphasis on the fact that the great dividing wall between the Jews and everyone else, that that wall has been torn down. Or we could go right the way to the other end of the Bible, to Revelation, to see a people gathered from every tribe and tongue and people and language.

The dividing walls are broken down. Loving God is for everyone. But there's a particular inclusivity that comes through on this occasion.

And that many would say is particularly noted by Luke throughout his Gospel. That he emphasises incidents that make this point. Did you notice? Did you notice the key characters in this story are women?

Oh, I've missed a slide. How sad. How sad. Shocking, isn't it? That the key characters are women. Now maybe it's not particularly shocking to you or me, but it is worth pausing to reflect on how shocking it was back then.

Now of course Martha's role, this is not particularly shocking. It's not unusual to be taken up with the preparations to be focused on being a good hostess. That's what everybody expects.

[11:34] But what's surprising is Mary's role. Or perhaps more so, Jesus' acceptance of Mary's role. Jewish teachers of the day, they were generally quite strongly opposed to permitting women to take on this role of student.

They saw it as improper, as a waste of everybody's time. Not so, Jesus. Jesus says Mary has chosen wisely.

Mary is welcome to sit at his feet. She's welcome to come and to learn from him, to count him as her rabbi. Now that is not to say that there are no differences between men and women.

There are other passages of God's word to consider. We could talk about those and we shouldn't interpret one passage in contradiction to another part. But what this here does say is that men and women alike are called by Jesus to love God.

And called to express that by listening to his words and obeying his teaching. By digging deep into what God has actually said. Not being content with a surface level understanding.

[12:43] But rather eager to learn from everything Jesus has to say. Folks, it is profoundly un-Christian. And profoundly un-biblical. When people are made to feel second-rate or unwelcome in the church.

Excluded on whatever basis. With sex, ethnicity, class or anything else. So if you have ever been told or if somebody's actions have implied.

That you are somehow a lesser member of the kingdom of God. Then that was wrong. If it's been suggested to you that studying theology isn't for women.

Well I suggest that whoever said that had not thought through the implications of this passage. And of course it's not always about what we explicitly say.

Or even about what we see in ourselves. But rather there are often ways where we implicitly and unconsciously imply. That this group or that is less valuable to God.

[13:42] And personally I'm sorry for anything that I have done that's ever given you that impression. Because this shows that loving God is for everyone. We're all of us called without exception to love God.

With all of our heart, soul, strength and mind. Thirdly then, loving God affects other priorities.

See, in and of itself being hospitable is a good thing, isn't it? To care about making your guests welcome. This is positive. To want to provide a delicious meal.

Oh great. Verse 41. Jesus replied to Martha. It comes in sympathetic terms, doesn't it? Martha. Martha. He recognises her concern.

This isn't a stinging rebuke. This isn't, Martha! Martha! Surely not. No, this is an invitation to her. To reconsider her priorities.

[14:44] Why? Well, because what she's doing is, in the abstract, good. Holding this occasion, together with that parable of the Good Samaritan, it shows us that.

It is good to be concerned for the needs of others. To want to provide for other people. But there's an important clue here in the fact that in verse 40, Martha is described as distracted.

Her commitment to the household tasks, it is a distraction. And that's made more explicit in verses 41 and 42. That few things, or indeed only one thing, are needed.

And Mary's choice is better. Mary has chosen wisely. Mary, Martha has chosen poorly. It's not that she shouldn't do those things, but that she shouldn't do them then.

I wonder, have you ever been to somebody's house for a meal? And you come away from having visited their house feeling like you've never actually spoken to them at all. Maybe you were ushered into the formal sitting room on your arrival, whilst your hosts busied themselves off in the kitchen.

[15:52] And the meal itself, well, that was punctuated by hopping up to check on the next course, just every time as you were starting to get an actual conversation going. And after the meal, whether there's the clearing up to do, and before you know it, it's time to head home.

Now, of course, with forward planning and a timer on the oven, we can mitigate most of that. But before we go to that, isn't it worth asking there what your objective is as the host?

Are you inviting these people because you want to spend time with them or in order to show off? Maybe a simpler meal would be better. Maybe something you can enjoy cooking together.

It's worth thinking about hospitality that actually engages people and welcomes them into family life instead of holding them at a distance. But that's not really the point here.

More important than that delicate balance when it comes to hosting one another, more important than that is the question, how are you going to treat Jesus? Because Jesus makes it clear here that for a disciple, an attitude of learning and obedience must take priority.

[16:57] That our first priority must be to love God, and that we express that by heeding the words of Jesus. How foolish of Martha to squander this golden opportunity.

Folks, wouldn't you give up almost anything to sit and listen to Jesus for a couple of hours? Now, I suspect that for you and for me, it will not often be quite so clear cut.

Because we're not going to have in this life an opportunity to go and sit at Jesus' feet. But we still have to recognize this first priority, don't we?

And Bishop Ryle says that this should be a perpetual warning to Christians to watch out for the cares of this world. He says, It is far more frequently an excessive attention to things in themselves lawful, and the being distracted with much serving.

It seems so right to provide for our own. It seems so proper to attend to the duties of our station. And it is just here that our danger lies.

[18:16] Our families, our businesses, our daily callings, our household affairs, our interactions with society. All, all may become snares to our own hearts and may draw us away from God.

We may go down to the pit of hell from the very midst of lawful things. Isn't that a profoundly worrying thought?

We need to beware, don't we, of allowing things which are undoubtedly good to crowd out that which is best. Folks, if we are those who love God, then that will necessarily be expressed in making it a priority to listen to him.

And that might mean that other good things will be left undone. It may not always be easy to see where the time will come from to prioritise listening to him.

Ryle, again, he's very blunt. He says, Let us mentally write poison on all temporal good things. Used in moderation they are blessings for which we ought to be thankful, but permitted to fill our minds and trample upon holy things.

[19:35] They become an inevitable curse. Now, some applications of this principle are straightforward. Folks, if you're so taken up with having agreed to host the visiting preacher for lunch, that you decide you'd better not come to church this morning so you can get everything ready, well, you need to reassess your priorities.

And on the other end, well, the A&E department at the hospital really does need people working there on a Sunday morning. Do not for a moment feel bad about working in a job that is so obviously in line with the parable of the Good Samaritan, and for doing so on a Sunday morning.

Do not for a moment feel bad about doing what is necessary to care for others on a Sunday morning. But you might ask yourself in that situation, how are you going to prioritise feeding on God's word at other times, catching up on recordings or whatever else?

The extremes are easy, aren't they? But there's a whole lot of in-betweens. There's lots of things that need working out, and I can't tell you this is how many hours you should spend on this, and this is how many hours you spend on that.

Not least because it's different at different stages of life, if different depending on the conflicting demands and priorities that we have. I can't tell you what you should do, but what I can do is I can ask you.

[ 20 : 57 ] I can ask you whether when you honestly look at your life, whether it demonstrates this number one priority. I can ask you whether you are availing yourself of the opportunities that are there to sit at Jesus' feet and to listen what he says.

I can ask you whether a log of how you spend your days would show that Jesus is lovely to you, or whether it would demonstrate that Netflix is a rather higher priority.

Well, Jesus says listening to him is an even higher priority than the undoubted good of showing hospitality, an even higher priority than the high priority of commitment to family.

And surely that is even more true when it's compared to the neutral at best nature of how most of us spend much of our time. And surely yet more so when we compare the priority of knowing and loving Jesus to the sin that we struggle to let go of.

Friends, if Jesus is better than good things, then surely he is infinitely better than that sin that you are clinging on to. The relationship you don't want to let go of, though you know it's wrong.

[ 22 : 17 ] Your constant focus upon your own needs to the exclusion of others. Your anger, your greed, your selfishness, your pride. The things that feel good in the moment.

And so you don't want to let go of them. Folks, Jesus is a higher priority. Jesus is more precious. And as I draw to a close, let me point out, let me reassure you that you are not going to lose out by prioritising Jesus.

In a couple of chapters time, he'll say to his disciples, 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. As Billy so helpfully prayed on Wednesday night, may it be true of us all that we look upon Jesus' wonderful face, and therein we find that the things of this earth grow strangely dim.

Or we can go earlier to the words of the psalmist. Psalm 27 is an even clearer statement of what we were singing from Psalm 84 earlier. One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple.

[ 23 : 47 ] Friends, may that be the one thing that we ask. Let's pray. Lord God, as we desire to love you with all that we are, Lord, help us to see what that looks like in practice in our lives.

Help us to align our priorities with yours. Help us to delight to listen to Jesus, to hear what he has said, to reflect upon what he has done, and to put into practice in our lives the way that you would have us live.

We are sorry when we have forgotten that priority in our own lives, and we are sorry when we have implied that it cannot be a priority for others for whatever reason.

Lord Jesus, align our other priorities in light of this great consuming priority. Take away the supposed loveliness of sin.

Magnify in our eyes the glories of our Lord. Show us your loveliness that we may be consumed with you moment by moment and day by day in all that we do.

[ 25 : 10 ] Amen.