

The One Thing

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[0:00] I chose a passage that deals with women, a fairly well familiar passage, and we think we know what it means. So I thought what I would do is to look at this passage with new eyes and ask ourselves, what is this passage saying?

And so if you turn to the back of the bulletin, I suggested four different ways of looking at this passage, and let me assure you they're not exclusive.

It's not that if you hold to second view, then you can't hold to the third view or something like that. It is an extremely rich passage, and it is dedicated to all the women in this congregation, and the men too.

It is the passage about Mary and Martha in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 10, verses 38 through 42. So let me read this passage, and we'll ask God to help us see what it means.

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.

[1:17] But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be done. 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 only one thing is needed.

Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her. So to think about this passage, there are several things to notice.

First of all, there is something very, very interesting at the very beginning. As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home. I find that rather amazing. The reason for that is that we know from other passages that Mary and Martha also had a brother by the name of Lazarus.

[2:22] Lazarus was the one who died, whom Jesus raised. And then in John chapter 12, after the resurrection, after bringing Lazarus back from the dead, they threw a banquet in honor of Jesus.

And as you read the passage there, which is not this event, but it's after the resurrection of Lazarus, it's interesting enough that Martha is serving and Mary is at Jesus' feet.

And we see that happening here again. Martha is serving and Mary is at Jesus' feet. The question that I wonder is, why is it said, a woman named Martha who opened her home to him?

I find that rather strange. Because if there is a son, if there is a boy, it is the boy who would inherit the house. That house should be for Lazarus.

So to say that it is Martha's house means either that she worked hard in some business and saved enough money and bought the house so that house was literally hers, not Lazarus'.

[3:47] Not the one he would inherit when the parents die. Or that maybe it was his house, but she's the older sister and she ran it. And maybe she ran it with firm hands and managed the house.

But in any case, when we look at this incident, Mary is at Jesus' feet and Martha is working in the kitchen.

And two things we need to notice. Mary, who sat at... I'm sorry, verse 40.

But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. Notice, she's not cutting the grass outside.

She's not rearranging the furniture. She's not repairing the faucet. She is making reparations that needed to be made.

[4:51] So she's not wasting her time. She has to do something. She's not making reparations. She's not making reparations. She's not making reparations. She's not making reparations. She's not making reparations. She's not making reparations. And then later on, Jesus says to her, you are upset and worried about many things.

The question is, of course, who decides what reparations need to be made? Is it the rules of society?

When you invite people to your house, this is how you should treat them? Is it her own standards? Is it her personality? Who decides what needs to be made?

And who decides how many are many? I asked a good friend of mine a question, knowing very well that he is not a theologian.

And so I asked him, what did he think of this story? The reason I asked him, and not some other friends that I could have asked, is that he is a chef in a restaurant.

[6:04] He is in charge of all the cooking. So I asked him, what do you think this passage is about? He said, it depends on the kind of meal that you want to prepare.

That on occasions, on really special occasions, if like a chairman of a company is eating at that restaurant, they might ask for a five-course meal, or a seven-course meal.

I want you to know I've never had a seven-course meal. I think I had three, but not seven. So he looked at this passage, and he thought that when Jesus says, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed, he thinks that what Jesus is saying to Martha, you don't have to do all this cooking, just, you know, hamburgers.

That's enough. You know, you don't have to have salad, and soup, and first-course appetizer, and second-course appetizer.

Maybe Jesus is saying to her, simplify it, you know, just do one thing, don't do everything. That's the one thing that matters. I'm not sure that I agree with him, but that is probably the most interesting interpretation of this passage I've ever heard.

[7:42] And when I write a commentary on Luke, which is not anytime soon, I will incorporate it as a possibility. Let's take a look at another part.

Look at verse 39, second interpretation. In this second interpretation, she had a sister called Mary who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said.

She could have stood in the corner, she could have stood in the back, she could have stood next to the window, but it is interesting enough that she sat at Jesus' feet, and Jesus didn't forbid her.

That's an awkward thing to read about. When I see this passage, I see Mary doing something that any good Jew would understand.

To sit at the master's feet means you're the favorite disciple. She is not even one of the twelve.

[9:06] And yet she's taking the position of the favorite disciple. This, of course, raises the issue. Is this story dealing with a very basic question?

Where is the place of women in society? In our days, we have probably thought a little bit more about this than maybe 40 years ago because of the rise of ISIS and then trying to reinforce codes. So in some places in the Middle East, a woman cannot walk to the market alone. If you walk to the market alone, you get arrested by the police.

Therefore, a woman has to walk with her brother or son or father. A male has to escort a woman if she wants to go shopping in the market.

Otherwise, it's a crime. Women have to wear clothes, clothing that covers from top to bottom. So you can't exactly wear clothing that only go up to your knees.

[10:25] If you wear up to your knees, you get arrested for violating clothing laws. So as ISIS is trying to enforce laws about the place of women, we find that those laws are very, very strict, much stricter than anything that goes on in our West.

Try to think, for example, of women cheerleaders in a basketball game or in a football game and think of the attire, the clothes that they wear. That would be unheard of in a Muslim culture, completely unheard of.

So the question is, where is the place of the woman? I remember an incident from my childhood very, very well.

I mean, it was like a revolution. It was like, you know, 1776. The reason for that is that we were a Christian home, so we were not Muslims. We were a Christian home.

And the thing that happened is that whenever the family got together to eat, all of us would sit at the table except my grandmother.

[11:43] She would eat all by herself in the kitchen after everybody has eaten. So she makes sure that everybody is served, and of course there is some food left, but when she puts it on her plate, she wouldn't come and sit with us.

She grew up in a culture that said, women, sit alone. We're talking about even before, you know, like 1870s, when she was growing up.

And so she would sit alone, and the rest of the family would be eating at the table. And one day my uncle just lost his cool. I mean, he, my uncle, the most easygoing person I know in the world, one of the kindest people I know, who had enormous respect for his mom, left the table and yelled at her in the kitchen, yelled and yelled.

And he said, we have to stop this nonsense. You're not going to eat here while everybody's sitting there. You will eat with us. If you don't eat with us, nobody will eat. And we're all sitting there, this is my uncle, yelling, you know.

I mean, he wouldn't yell at the dog, much less yell at his mom, like that. And from that day on, she would eat with us. He said that, you know, maybe that was your cultural upbringing in our house, this is your place, your place is with us, not with eating alone.

[13:24] I remember the second revolution because my grandmother was a little bit old. She had a servant who sat and took care of her.

That servant was not part of the family, but she was her servant. And so my dad, not to be outdone by his brother, went to the servant and demanded that she has to sit with the rest of the family. And said, but she's not family. She's not Masu. He said, she is part of this household. She is sitting with us. when you read the New Testament, one of the questions that arises, what is the role of women?

And they are treated a lot better than either the Roman culture or the Old Testament culture. you can see it in some small ways that is telling us, you know, the church is changing drastically.

In the synagogues, the woman would not sit with men. You couldn't sit next to your husband even if you wanted to. All the women sat on one side, all the men sat on the other side.

[14:42] And therefore, if the pastor said something and you didn't understand and you wanted to ask, guess what you'd have to do? Yell across the hallway, you know, the divide.

And so, it turns out that the New Testament is saying the woman's role is more than just in the kitchen.

maybe in Old Testament culture they would have thought that that's the place of the woman. And then you have two exceptions. Deborah, Ruth, Esther.

But when you think about it, who is the first one who saw the resurrected Lord Jesus? Mary Magdalene, a woman. Who was the first convert in Europe?

Lydia, a woman. Who supported Jesus financially? Women. And now, you see a woman sitting at Jesus' feet.

[15:55] Jesus does not call her a disciple. She is not one of the twelve. But Jesus is permitting her to sit and listen to him.

and Jesus is elevating the role of woman from just a little bit above a servant to a full citizen in the kingdom.

That's why Paul, for different reasons, says there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female. Of course, there are differences between male and female. We all know that. but he is saying in relationship to the church.

And so, maybe this parable is trying to say, maybe this incident is trying to be part of this larger package that women can do other things than just work in the kitchen. There is nothing dishonorable about working in the kitchen. I don't want anybody to think that. But there is more than just working in the kitchen. Maybe it's okay for a woman to study God's word. [17:05] And if you believe that, you should join women's ministry that was just introduced and announced earlier. Maybe women should be able to talk to each other about growing in the Lord, supporting each other, endorsing each other, walking side by side with each other.

So, a passage like this means that even women are free to have access to God. Knowing God is not limited to men.

Studying scriptures is not limited to men. You may remember a movie a long time ago by Barbara Streisand called Yentl. This woman, a musical, this woman who could not study the Old Testament, the law, because in Jewish schools, women were not allowed to be rabbis.

And so, theological education was closed to them. So, Barbara Streisand disguises herself as a boy to get theological education.

and Jesus saying, there is no need for that. Women can have access to God. The third thing, the third way of looking at this passage is, this is a special event.

[18:34] Jesus does not live in Bethel. He is not their next door neighbor. He lives in Galilee and Bethel is about two miles away from Jerusalem. So, apparently, he is on a visit to or from Jerusalem.

This is a special occasion. This is a special occasion. If he was, if he lived next door to them, it wouldn't be special.

They could see him every day. But this is a special occasion. And so, the question is, what can you do on special occasions as opposed to ordinary occasions?

I have never come to this church wearing a tuxedo. The last time I wore a tuxedo happens to be ten years ago. In the last ten years, I have not worn the tuxedo once.

Maybe if I were a professional musician, I'd wear it every weekend when I'm working, but I am not a professional musician. So, I don't wear tuxedos.

[19:37] But I did wear it ten years ago. Do you want to guess what was happening ten years ago? My daughter was getting married. So, I thought for her sake, I would do something special.

But that's not what I normally wear. I invited 350 people to dinner. I don't invite normally 350 people to dinner ever.

I've only done it once in my life. not even for my son's wedding. On special occasions, you do things that are different than normal occasions.

On normal occasions, you worry about food and you worry about many things, but this is a special occasion. But I am not upset with her.

Let me just give you an idea. If you want to scare your wife to death today and ruin her day, after church, tell her, honey, I forgot to tell you, I invited 13 people to have lunch with us.

[20:55] At home. Jesus is walking, she invites him to her house. no wonder she panics.

She's not just cooking for herself, Mary, and Lazarus, she's cooking for all of them. And she's scrambling to try to find food and all of that.

But maybe on special occasions, it's okay to skip lunch. Maybe on special occasions, it's okay to do the bare minimum and sit and listen to Jesus teaching.

Maybe that is the one thing that matters most. You don't have Jesus every day. They certainly didn't have him every day. It was a special occasion.

He was visiting. Which is more important, to wash the dishes or to listen to Jesus? I would like to suggest a fourth interpretation.

[21:59] question. But again, please keep in mind, these are not either or. They're not either or. They're all valid. Let me suggest that maybe we started in the wrong place.

Maybe by starting in Luke 10.38, that was the wrong place to start. Maybe we should have started in Luke 10.25.

So I'm going to go back in the chapter to the earlier starting point. And so turn with me to Luke 10.25.

It's a familiar passage. One of the most familiar passages in all of the Gospels, actually. 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 of your heart and with all of your soul and with all of your strength and with all of your mind and love your neighbor as yourself.

[23:08] These are, of course, the two greatest commandments. You've answered correctly, Jesus replied. Do this and you will live. But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, who is my neighbor?

If the commandment is love your neighbor as yourself, then who is my neighbor? And what happens next is the parable of the good Samaritan.

And it ends with the question, who was a neighbor to this man? And of course, it was the good Samaritan who took care of him. So here is a wounded person who needs help. The good Samaritan sees him and helps him.

He was the good neighbor. Look at what's happening in 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 and invited them to stay and to have dinner.

What is Martha doing? She is being, she is illustrating in the real flesh and blood a good Samaritan. Jesus is in need, she is helping him out.

[24:19] He needs food, she feeds him, he needs shelter, she provides him shelter. She is being like the good Samaritan. She is loving her neighbor as herself.

But when I go back to the lawyer's answer, the answer is love the Lord your God with all of your heart and with all of your soul and with all of your strength and love your neighbor as yourself. the parable of the good Samaritan illustrates what it means to love your neighbor. What is it like to love God? Jesus didn't give us two parables, he only gave us one parable.

And that parable illustrates loving your neighbor. What about the first commandment? Love God. I think what is happening in this story about Mary and Martha is that Martha in some sense shows how to love your neighbor and Mary shows how to love God.

So that Mary and Martha are designed to balance each other and to illustrate this and this. Should we love God or should we love our neighbor?

[25:38] both? Both. Both. Both. And so when we do love God and we do love our neighbor, both of them are scriptural, but loving God is first.

it is more important than loving your neighbor without minimizing that loving your neighbor is the second greatest commandment. And so I think this is trying to give us concrete example that maybe in the business of doing things, helping your neighbor, you know, in this area, in that area, in the other area, that in the process of being very, very busy about so many things, you may forget God. And you need to stop and say, God comes first, I'm going to listen to Jesus at his feet, rather than keep doing more good, busy things.

And so the one thing that I take is to obey God, keeping in mind that loving God is the greatest commandment and loving your neighbor is your second greatest commandment.

And we should keep both, but remember which is first. Amen. Let's have a word of prayer. prayer. Thank you, Father, for this wonderful passage in scriptures.

[27:17] Thank you for two wonderful sisters and their brother, whom, in whose lives you worked so much and in the process revealed a lot about yourself.

Thank you because we have passages like that to remind us how to love you and how to love our neighbor. Help us excel in both of them, Father.

Help us to be godly church. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen.