

Mary's Choice

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[0 : 00] Let us now turn to the passage that we read, the Gospel according to Luke, chapter 10, and we may read the last verse of the chapter.

At verse 42, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion which shall not be taken away.

One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion which shall not be taken away from her. The last time I was with you in the prayer meeting, I reflected with you on the words of verse 39. She had a sister called Mary who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching.

[1 : 08] If my memory serves me right, I quoted something I read that in my view encapsulates the distinction between the two sisters, Martha and Mary.

And that writer said something like this, Mary's bent was to meander through life, pausing to smell the roses. Martha was more likely to pick the roses, quickly cut the stems at an angle, and arrange them in a vase.

And I think that encapsulates much of the difference between the two sisters. I reflected with you under three headings, her location, her lowliness, and her listening.

Well, tonight I'd like to continue reflection on this passage from the words that I have read as our text under three headings too.

First of all, the clause that is at the beginning of the verse, one thing is necessary. Secondly, the contrast that Christ makes between one and the many.

[2 : 29] And finally, the choice that Mary makes. I'm quite sure that you yourselves have noted how the words one thing are found several times over in the Bible.

Mental exercise for you right now. How many places can you locate with the word one thing? In fact, it might be a series of lectures for one of your elders to make on the words one thing.

For example, in the book of Psalms, Psalm 27, the psalmist speaks of a supreme, overriding desire. And he puts it like this, one thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.

And the purpose of this one great, overriding desire was to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple.

[3 : 43] And let us ask ourselves, just in passing, do we share this all-consuming desire that the psalmist had?

Paul, writing to the Philippians, speaks of a certain one thing in his own life. Remember how he put it?

But, brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own, but, he says, one thing I do.

Forgetting that what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

And he sets before us the picture of an athlete, all pumped up, every sinew and muscle stretched as he presses forward.

[4 : 45] So, he says in another place, writing to the Corinthians, I do not run aimlessly. The apostle has a particular goal in view, the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

What is the prize? Is it to get rid of his troubles in life? I think it's much more than that.

Is it to go to bed every night without the pangs of hunger, sheltered from the storms?

Much more than that. Is it to be free from pain and discomfort or illness? Or delivered from what yet might lie ahead on the road?

Could it be the privileges of sitting at the marriage feast of the Lamb? While pleasant and desirable as that might be, I don't think that is the prize.

[5 : 58] It's not even the fact that every tear will be wiped from every eye, typifying the end of sorrow and sign in the life of the believer.

What else is the prize? In my view, the prize is to see his face. The face of Christ. You know how in this life, the desire is awoken in the hearts of men and women that they wish to see Jesus.

They wish to see Jesus. That was the crave of the Greeks. It doesn't say in the Bible that the crave was granted. But they wanted to see Jesus in the sense that they wanted to meet with Jesus.

And Jesus saw in that the fulfillment of prophecy. And you remember how he went on to expand and interpret what the craving of the Greeks meant.

Well, the apostle Peter also uses the phrase one thing in the context of the last times. Do not overlook this one fact or this one thing, says Peter, Beloved, that with the Lord one day is a thousand years and a thousand years as one day.

[7 : 23] And it's a solemn text and context in which the apostle Peter writes about one thing. Then there is the man spoken of by the apostle John.

We don't know his name, but we are told that he was blind from birth. And as a consequence of Christ meeting with this once blind man, he is given sight.

And although there are many deficiencies in his knowledge regarding Christ, of this the man was absolutely certain when he was questioned one thing.

I do know that though I was blind, now I see. What a wonderful experience. Even on a physical, literal level.

But how much more wonderful on a spiritual level. The Bible also speaks of a rich young man. I suppose, humanly speaking, he had everything.

[8 : 28] But Christ puts his finger on this glaring void in his life. One thing he says to the young rich ruler, you still lack.

The one who makes the assessment of this void and emptiness in the life of this man has insight into the very core of his being.

Jesus was not dazzled by the claims that he makes. And so, he sends him away, so to speak, with a flea in his ear.

One thing you still lack. We can have many things in life. Enjoy many privileges. But without this one thing, we have nothing.

And so in this passage, we have Jesus saying, To Martha, one thing is necessary. And of course, that poses and raises many questions.

[9 : 29] But I want to leave it there for the moment, because I come secondly to the contrast. It's as if Christ is contrasting the one thing with the many.

Remember what he says, Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things. In other words, she was distracted by many things.

The word translated anxious can be translated distracted. It means to be dragged away. She wanted to do one thing, but ended up getting pulled in another direction.

That's what it means to be distracted. We are attracted to something, but we get distracted, and our attention wanders away.

It happens in sermons. Maybe sometimes it's something that is said, and it triggers off a train of thought in your mind, and you lose the thread of the sermon because you are taken up with the train of thought that has been triggered in your mind.

[10 : 36] You are distracted. She was distracted. You know, the picture that I have in my own mind of Martha is if she were living today, I would imagine Martha would be something like this, that the cutlery settings on the dining table would have to be just right.

That's the kind of picture that I have of Martha. You know, the placements on the table and the cutlery lined up neatly on either side of the placements, the side plates, the water glass, perhaps even wine glasses or both, a deep setting, proper serviettes, perhaps arranged in a special way in the glasses on the table, the water jug with ice, salt, pepper and mustard, sauces of various kinds. You know, that's the kind of picture that she gives us of hyper-efficiency when it comes to domestic duties. And in addition, all the preparatory work for the meal, whatever that meal was.

You see, we can be easily distracted. Martha believed she was serving the Lord. And we can be easily distracted when we are serving the Lord.

Distracted, perhaps, by other things. We begin serving because we are attracted to Christ. We want to show our devotion and our love.

[12:19] For example, perhaps getting involved in youth work, in Sunday school, or some other Christian service. And our motivation is to honor God.

But because, but we become distracted, perhaps sometimes by behavior lizes, in the youth group. We forget why we became involved in the first place.

Or we get caught up in seeking to teach others. And in doing so, we fail to listen to what the Word of God is saying to us in His Word.

And in the life of Martha, destruction gives way to self-pity. The more Martha felt and had to be done, the more overwhelmed she began to feel by what she saw requiring to be done.

She began to feel sorry for herself. You see, there is progression. Here in the downward spiral, self-pity gives way or gives rise to resentment.

[13:32] It's not fair. Only Mary would come to assist. And you transfer that attitude of mind to church or congregational life.

Why aren't there other people volunteering to help? Why aren't others supporting this work? And then there is the element of fault-finding.

See how quickly that happened in the context here. There is the element of irritation mingled with resentment. It's almost as if saying that Jesus is encouraging Mary to neglect her duties.

Lord, do you not care, she says, that my sister has left me to serve alone. You tell her then to help me.

Here she is dictating to the Lord what he should do. You know, I often think that when poor Martha reflected on her behavior that day, she would be deeply upset at how she had let her self-pity become resentment, leading to irritation and to rage and attempting to dictate to the Lord what he should do.

[14:57] How gracious the Lord is to us. Often we too try to tell the Lord what he should do and how he should do as if we knew better than the Lord himself.

Well, yet, whatever we might say about Martha, for me at any rate, she comes across, despite all of these shortcomings and who doesn't have shortcomings, she comes across from the Bible as a warm-hearted, generous, kind woman for whom Christ is precious.

And so Christ gently rebukes her. The book of Proverbs tells us faithful are the ones of a friend. Here, we have the true friend. Doesn't try to camouflage. The true friend doesn't try to hide or to flatter you.

The Bible also says a friend loves at all times. That friend never becomes an enemy.

[16:13] He loves at all times. And this friend, and I am ascribing that term to Christ, this friend is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

brother. You know, generally, when difficulties arise, be it illness, tragedy, or whatever it might be, you turn to the friend or to friends.

That's just what these sisters did in the illness of their brother Lazarus. They sent a message to Jesus, Lord, he whom you love is ill.

It's a brief message, but loaded, a loaded statement. And so now Jesus turns to Martha with his gentle rebuke, Martha, Martha, you are distracted or anxious and troubled about many things. Certainly wasn't the answer that Martha was hoping for. The response would be all the more wounding for one who held the Lord in such high esteem.

[17:31] You know, rebuke from those who are close as to you in life is much more effective than rebuke from those who are distant from you.

Surely, then, something could be done as Martha sought to redress the unfairness of the matter as she sees it, and how altogether different is the response of the Savior.

It's not Mary who is rebuked for sitting at his feet, but busy, fretful, kind, caring, generous Martha. She is so taken up with the burdens of the old that she neglects to sit at his feet and to seek the blessing that is so evidently enjoyed by Mary.

Martha, Martha, for added emphasis. You can almost hear Martha's sharp intake of breath. Not the reply she expected.

[18:38] She possibly expected some recognition or even commendation for the way she had, for the trouble she had gone to.

Not a word of admonition. Jesus is drawing her attention and our attention to, I believe, to the fact that it is much more needful to sit at his feet and to hear his word.

Many things are lawful and many are our duty, things are not to be. But it seems to me that in the context here, the Lord is emphasizing that one thing takes preeminence.

Jesus didn't take sides. He didn't say, Mary, go to help Martha, nor did he say, Martha, you ought to be more like Mary, at least not in as many words.

He didn't tell her, stop doing what you're doing, but by speaking to her like this, it seems to me that he exposed her underlying idolatry.

[19 : 56] The Bible teaches, do not be anxious about anything, says Paul, writing to the Philippians. Martha was anxious about almost everything.

Martha had a, for want of a better term, a to-do list. You know how people sometimes write down the things they're going to do. Well, she had a long list.

She didn't know how to let go. She didn't know how to stop worrying, but all the things she could not get done. And you notice Jesus doesn't state what is the one thing necessary.

But the words must have echoed and re-echoed in the mind of Martha, one thing is necessary.

When you hear those words from Jesus' lips, you are all ears, and you want to know what is the one thing that is necessary.

Tell me the one thing that is necessary. The contrast, the clause, the choice. And Christ then says, Mary has chosen the good portion.

[21 : 10] Martha chose to stand and to wait, for she thought that what was really important was her service for God, and that he needed her.

Mary, on the other hand, chose to sit and learn, because she understood that she had need of Christ.

We all need to be served by the Lord. You notice Christ doesn't spell out what is the good portion, and that raises the question, what is it?

Is it the same as the one thing necessary? There are differing views. things. And however you define the good portion, it is something that can't be taken from it.

You know the most precious things, things that you hold precious in life, will be taken from every one of us in death. The riches of this world, great or small, will leave them all behind.

[22 : 23] Remember what the psalmist says, like shadows, people go about, they bustle to and fro, they heap up wealth, but do not know on whom their wealth will go.

How often you see that scripture fulfilled. Your vocation here will come to an end. Your family will pass away.

Your relationships will come to an end. The institutions that you perhaps have given your life to will pass away.

The communities which you have invested yourself will pass away. All of these things will go.

Death will take from us those whom we love and treasure and cherish the most. Christ. But what it says here is that the good portion never be taken away.

[23 : 29] So it can't be any of these things. All of the things I mentioned are taken away. That prompts the question, is the good portion Christ himself?

It's a blessing to have Christ, isn't it? It's well worthy of the name, the good portion, if you have Christ in your life. Certainly that was the view of the psalmist, whom have I in the heavens high, but thee, O Lord, alone, and in the earth whom I desire, besides thee, there is none.

The apostle Paul counted all things lost, that he may gain Christ and be found in him. So you cannot deny but that Christ is an eternal portion.

the Lord is my chosen portion and my cup. You hold my lot, says the psalmist, the lions have fallen to me in a pleasant place.

Indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance. And all of that is well and good and true. But is that what we are meant to understand by the good portion that will not be taken from her?

[24 : 51] Are we going to say at this stage that Martha was an unbeliever? If she was, then she didn't have Christ.

But can you really say that on the evidence of the Bible, that Martha didn't know Christ? Where then does that leave us? If Christ is not the good portion, if Christ is not what is referred to as the good portion, where does that leave us?

Does it leave us in a fog of misunderstanding? Well, the word translated portion here, Greek word merida, often refers to a meal.

While Martha was busy preparing a meal, Mary was having one, she was feeding on the living word. Feeding on the living word, the good portion.

You're happy with that definition of the good portion. If it is not Christ, is it the word of God? Do you think that is the good portion?

[26 : 05] And when she was feeding on the word, what was true? She was enjoying spiritual fellowship. And it seems to me that that is the key to what Christ is speaking about here.

Fellowship with him is the good portion. No one will take that away from Mary. The soul's communion with Christ is one necessary thing.

fellowship is important. What does the word fellowship, what does it suggest to you? Do you think of fellowship as just a cup of tea and a cake or baking?

Do you think of fellowship as just sharing a meal? Do you think that is fellowship? fellowship? No, I'm not knocking any of these things, congregational meals, cups of tea, anything like that.

But is that what is meant by fellowship in the Bible? Because fellowship is something that is necessary. It is a requirement for the spiritual health and growth of the believer.

[27 : 29] it lies at the very heart of the life of the church of Christ. It is used in the description of the early church and they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and the fellowship and to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

They were sharing the life that is common to them as believers and I believe that is something that is very important in the life of the church.

Spiritually the church of Christ becomes strong where there is the element of vibrant spiritual fellowship where that vibrant spiritual fellowship is lacking then the church will be weak and vulnerable.

So it entails in sharing with one another that. You will find these statements in the Bible the cup of blessing that we bless is it not a participation in the blood of Christ the bread that we break is it not participation in the body of Christ there is one bread and we who are many are one body for we all partake of the one bread or what fellowship has light with darkness again the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you.

Now this participation takes a double form. May exist through giving someone else a share of what you have or through you receiving from them a share of what they have or what doing.

[29 : 18] I suppose in some ways you know if you have seen the Lord's Supper commemorated it. When you see the bread being passed from person to person or the cup being passed from person to person a person is receiving it and a person is giving it.

That in essence typifies what is at the heart of spiritual fellowship. It is a giving and receiving. And that giving and receiving must first of all be vertical in your experience before it becomes horizontal. In other words you must have a connection with God first in order for you to have horizontal for the fellowship to be horizontal.

Our fellowship says the apostle John is with the father and with his son Jesus Christ. And I suppose that you could say that fellowship defines what a Christian is.

If you ask the question what is a Christian a person who is in fellowship with God the father and God the son. That defines a Christian.

[30 : 30] A person who walks in the light. See in order to have this fellowship you must be in the light. You must have been illuminated by the Holy Spirit of God.

The darkness has been dissipated and light has flooded into the soul. So where the person is in fellowship with God the father and God the son they are walking in the scene.

A compulsion to share it with those in the world with whom are like minded. You know I'm reminded just now of something that I hadn't intended to say but I'm reminded of a man I knew who died just at the very beginning of this year.

And in the course of his life he was a seaman. He was an officer as I think he had a captain's ticket. But at this stage he was a mate on I think on a supply boat and he was allocated a black crewman and for some reason that I didn't quite understand he determined to make life life life misery for this black crewman and the black man never responded in kind not once and you know that only made him more antagonistic toward him until ultimately he realized that this was one of the Lord's people oh man how shamed he felt and if you would hear himself telling the story one moment you would be in tears of laughter and the next in tears of sorrow as he told the story and how the black man came to him one night and said let us break bread the effect that had upon his life as they began to

share their experience of the dealings of the most high and that is involved in fellowship and believe you me where that fellowship is vibrant it strengthens the communion of the church where it is not there it is weakened and the witness of the church tends to be weakened too because that is in essence what

I believe is set before us here and it reminds me of an elder who was in Stornway when I was a young Christian telling us one evening of the pleasure that he had of fraternizing with young Christians it took me a long time to understand what he meant how could an old Christian benefit from being with young Christians totally inexperienced so ignorant and lacking in knowledge but then I felt I understood because it's as if the exuberance of the young Christian despite their lack of knowledge it's as it were it sparked in the life of this old Christian and there was a reciprocal exchange of what they had heard and seen and felt and tasted and you see the

[34 : 34] Bible tells us let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works not neglecting to meet together the habit of some but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day draw near well there is this element of sharing I think perhaps I can illustrate it time is going I illustrate it one other way remember in the book of Revelation and in one of the letters Christ is saying I stand at the door and knock if anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come into and eat or as it might be translated supper with him and he with me I will eat with him literally I will supper with him and he with me no that doesn't involve a boiled egg in a hurry or a cup of tea in your hand

I can't sit you know I'm in too much of a hurry to sit down that's not the kind of thing that is set before us here you you you see in the east they spent a lot of time around supper it was an unhurried meal and is that not just the picture that we have of Mary here she's not to be hurried she's not to be rushed even by her sister's tantrum she's not to be rushed she sits and she makes the most of the choice that she has made of having fellowship with the Lord and what the Lord says I will supper with him and he with me here is the Lord imparting here is Mary receiving and the Lord is receiving back from the reception that Mary is giving to the teaching that he is giving how wonderful that is you know there is this two way process between

Christ and the church and you see he has chosen the good portion which will not be taken away from it you see fellowship doesn't end when you leave this life oh when you go to be with Christ fellowship is perfected in the realm above it is something that is continuous it only merely begins here in life and the world they shall never more remember says the dr.

mcDonald all the sufferings they bore for the father treasured for them has abundance laden store but what I have ever seen it or what ear has ever heard all the greatness and the glory God has for his own prepared they are blessed and they are happy who have learned Messiah's name for in him their bliss unbroken shall forever be the same oh well are we giving fellowship with Christ that preeminence in our Christian life this evening so that we don't have the rebuke that Christ gives that we are truffled for want of a good word truffled with the things of this life distracted by the first legitimate things good things doing service in the kingdom of

Christ but oh are we letting that distract us from the one thing necessary from communion with him in order you know there's a certain sense when you have communion with the members of the body you are having communion with him through them it's a wonderful thing in the lives of those who are in Christ but my time has gone now I've kept you let us pray you