

When priorities are decided

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[0 : 00] From Luke's Gospel, chapter 10, beginning at verse 38. Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village.

And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching.

But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone?

Tell her then to help me. But the Lord answered her, Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things.

But one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her. Now Jesus was praying in a certain place.

[1 : 01] And when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples. And he said to them, when you pray, say, Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread and forgive us our sins. For we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us.

And lead us not into temptation. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

Heavenly Father, we pray to you again, as we have already done. But we pray to you again that you are indeed a God who speaks. And we pray, please, this morning that your word would indeed be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, our key verse this morning is there in verse 42 of Luke chapter 10.

[2 : 11] Let me read it once again for us. But one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.

God's purpose for us this morning, as we look at these verses, is to discover the one thing necessary if we are disciples of Jesus Christ. The one thing necessary.

The story is told of a man who bought a parrot to keep him company. The next day, he went back to the pet shop. This bird doesn't talk, he said to the shop assistant, who replied, well, does the parrot have a mirror in its cage?

Parrots love mirrors. They see their reflection in the mirror and they start talking. They think it's another parrot. So he bought a mirror and took it home. The next day, the parrot was still not talking. How about a ladder?

Parrots love ladders. Makes them happy. Happy parrot is a talkative parrot. So he bought the ladder. The next day, the same thing happened. And so rather reluctantly, he bought a swing for the parrot.

[3 : 16] Well, the fourth day, the man returned looking very downcast. The parrot has died, he said. Well, the shop assistant, as you can imagine, was rather shocked.

I'm sorry to hear that, the shop assistant said. Did the parrot ever say anything? Well, yes, right before it died, in a very weak and frail voice, it asked, does the pet shop sell food?

I'm sorry if you're sensitive about parrots. Just one thing necessary. Now, Luke chapter 10, verse 38, marks the beginning of a new section of Luke.

At the start of the year, those of us who are here, we began the second half of Luke's gospel as Jesus begins his journey to Jerusalem on the previous page, chapter 9, verse 51, when we read, When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.

And in the first phase of that journey, in January, we saw, didn't we, how... We saw the times in which we live. You and I live in the great age of gospel proclamation and invitation.

[4 : 34] The harvest is plentiful. The workers are few. Until Jesus returns, we live in this great age of gospel advance.

And now, chapter 10, verse 38, we begin the next phase of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. And because Luke writes an orderly account, he signposts it for us, verse 38, as they went on their way. And it's a section which takes us right up to chapter 13, verse 22. You could just flick over a couple of pages. Chapter 13, 22. Those of us who are in growth groups will be familiar with this.

13, 22 marks the beginning of the next section. He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying towards Jerusalem.

So this section is a section where the key issue is discipleship. Discipleship. And at the very start of it, just verses 38 to 42 of chapter 10, we're looking at today, we see the one thing that is necessary if we regard ourselves as disciples of the Lord Jesus.

[5 : 50] Well, as usual, there's an outline on the back of the service sheet, which I hope you find helpful. First of all, let's think about these two sisters. Have a look at verses 38 and 39.

Now, as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching.

On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus welcomed into the house of Mary and Martha. It's a special family. They have a close relationship with the Lord Jesus. It's their brother Lazarus, whom he later raises from the dead.

I think it's very striking for Luke as he starts this new section, a section dominated by two women in a culture where so often women were dismissed and where they certainly wouldn't have been expected to receive formal teaching from a rabbi.

It's a reminder in our Me Too culture, I guess, that the message of Jesus Christ is indeed good news for everyone. Throughout the Gospels, we see how the Lord Jesus gives enormous dignity to women.

[7 : 05] He's willing to go against the culture, the cultural grain of the day, as he does so here for their sake. And of course, throughout history, the Gospel has liberated women from oppression and inequality.

It's clear too, isn't it, that these two sisters, well, they're very different characters. They're very different personalities. Martha, I guess, we might describe as being active.

She's impulsive. She feels strongly. She speaks out about what she feels. And clearly, she's practical. She's focused, busy, perhaps you might say, with a slightly kind of controlling or perfectionist personality.

By contrast, Mary seems to be the quieter one, still contemplative, perhaps, feeling deeply, but saying less than she feels.

And yet, both sisters appear equally devoted to the Lord Jesus. And yet, they express their devotion in different ways. Mary sits at Jesus' feet, listening to his teaching, whereas Martha is the one who seems to take the initiative in welcoming Jesus.

[8 : 14] and serving him. And in a culture where it was regarded as shameful not to provide lavish hospitality for a guest, then surely anyone would say she has chosen the right thing.

And yet, look where Martha ends up. As she kind of rushes in ever-decreasing circles between the oven and the fridge and the microwave.

verse 40, But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone?

Tell her then to help me. But the Lord answered her, Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things. I wonder if some of us can begin to see ourselves in Martha as she responds to pressure and stress and busyness.

Notice she's out of sorts with Jesus. Verse 40, Lord, do you not care? I guess we've all been there at times. Perhaps when we felt overwhelmed or unappreciated, rushing around, doing too much.

[9 : 33] Lord, do you not care? She's also out of sorts with her sister. My sister's left me to serve alone, she says.

Tell her to help me. Perhaps we can imagine the tone of voice in which it was said or the look that she kind of shoots across the room at her sister or the way in which she snaps at her.

Does Mary really think that meals just cook themselves? But it's not, of course, that she's out of sorts with Jesus and out of sorts with her sister alone.

She's clearly out of sorts with herself, isn't she? Verse 41, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things. I wonder if we can hear the alarm bells ringing, all pointing in one direction. Something is not right. I wonder if you can see yourself in Martha. I know I can when I'm out of sorts with myself, anxious and troubled, when I'm out of sorts with others, quick to fire off, quick to blame, when I'm out of sorts with the Lord Jesus.

[10:50] Lord, don't you care? And I find myself feeling thoroughly hard done by. It's a familiar picture, isn't it? I guess we've all been there and I guess there'll be some of us here this morning and actually we are there, we're here, right at this very moment.

Martha has clearly lost perspective. She's abrupt, she's brittle, criticizing others without really looking inside her own heart and seeing what's going on there.

It's often the way, we blame our circumstances, we blame other people, when actually the real problem lies in our own hearts and the way in which we respond to things.

Two sisters. And yet, one priority. Verse 42, but one thing is necessary.

Mary has chosen the good portion which will not be taken away from her. I guess we might expect Jesus to suggest to Mary that she ought to be in the kitchen helping her sister.

[11:59] Instead, she responds to Martha and she does so with great tenderness. Only one thing is necessary. There's one thing in life that's to take priority over every other pressing need and demand that is laid upon us.

Listening to the words of Jesus. Now, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, listening to the words of God, listening to the words of Jesus, is what we might call key stage one of discipleship.

It is basics of discipleship. So just keep a finger in Luke chapter 10 and turn to that first reading which we had from Deuteronomy chapter 8 on page 183.

God's people are about to enter the land of Canaan, the land that God had promised his people. It's where the whole of the Old Testament, if you like, has been heading up to this point. Deuteronomy chapter 8 verse 1.

God says to his people, the whole commandment that I command you today, you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land that the Lord swore to give to your fathers.

[13:14] so here they are there at the point of entering the promised land. And what is the most important thing for them to remember? Well, verse 2, and you shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you these 40 years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not.

And he humbled you, and let you hunger, and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know, that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives on every word that comes from the mouth of God.

Do you see what the Lord God is saying? Over the last 40 years, he has been working in his people to get them to see this one point, man does not live by bread alone, but from every word that comes from the mouth of God.

And just as listening to God's word is key stage one of discipleship in the Old Testament, so listening to Jesus' word is key stage one of discipleship in the New Testament.

So turn back a page from where we were in Luke chapter 10 to Luke chapter 9. Remember the transfiguration of Jesus? The disciples see Jesus in his heavenly glory, in his heavenly splendor, as he really is, so to speak.

[14:41] And then Luke chapter 9, verse 35, we hear God's voice. And a voice came out of the cloud saying, this is my son, my chosen one, listen to him.

So key stage one discipleship in the Old Testament, listen to God's word. Key stage one of New Testament discipleship, listen to the words of Jesus. Indeed, it's the words of Jesus that the Old Testament prophets and kings longed to hear.

Remember Luke chapter 10, verse 24? For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see and did not see it, and to hear what you hear and did not hear it.

I received a digital invitation a couple of weeks ago to an event being hosted by the author of a book that's made a significant impact on me over the last couple of years.

And I was suddenly kind of excited at the thought of going to listen to this guy and see him. It sent me scurrying off to my diary to check the date and all that kind of thing. And it all happened bizarrely

as I was preparing this talk.

[15:53] at which point I caught myself and thought hang on a moment. I have the words not of some author who has crossed the Atlantic to come and speak in London.

I have the words of Jesus Christ himself. How very precious indeed is that. One thing necessary to hear the words of Jesus.

Just worth asking how do we do that? Well in the Bible maybe that some of us have read books or heard talks suggesting that we listen to God in prayer. But no the Bible never talks about prayer like that as we'll see next week prayer is talking to God not listening to God.

What is Jesus saying? The one thing necessary above everything else if we are disciples of Jesus Christ is that we listen to him. We listen to the Bible.

Of every other demand that life puts upon us. I think it's very striking that Luke begins this section of Luke's gospel which is all about discipleship with such a clear indication of what it is that lies at the very heart of discipleship.

[17:10] The importance of hearing Jesus' words and acting upon them. Well let's think about the implications. three things of vital importance for every Christian.

Firstly listening to Jesus' words. Being a disciple is about having a living active relationship with Jesus. It's not about rules, regulations or religion.

If we're looking in on the Christian faith this morning we are delighted you're here. And Mary is a wonderful picture of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

I wonder if you can see that. As she sits at his feet reconciled to him to the living God in a living relationship with him listening to his voice. It is a gloriously attractive and compelling snapshot of the relationship that lies at the very heart of discipleship.

For those of us who are followers of Jesus it is particularly sad therefore I think to read of what many Christians thinkers and writers have described as the decline of the quiet time over the last 20 years or so.

[18:27] That is the practice of setting aside time each day to read the Bible and to pray. The sad reality is that while regular Bible reading and prayer constitute the bread and butter of the Christian life we might say it seems that these are the very things we really struggle with on a day to day basis.

After all we all live don't we in an overactive world in an increasingly over active world. Many of us have huge demands upon us.

Life is busy life is stressful. The demands of home the demands of work for some of us the demands of caring for elderly parents who live far away. Not to mention of course the time which our electronic devices can just kind of suck out of us without really us being aware of it.

And of course on top of all that if we are gospel minded then there's always more we can do by way of gospel ministry and Christian service. And yet what does Jesus say is the one thing necessary each day?

It is to listen to him to hear his voice to be discipled by him. By the way I take it this means first and foremost actually reading the Bible rather than simply downloading and listening to sermons.

[19:53] There's value in that of course but it's not the same as personally engaging for ourselves with God's word the Bible. Just think for a moment of the people we listen to each day.

perhaps the news, perhaps a briefing at work, school teachers. How much more should we long to hear the words of Jesus who is Lord and King?

Let me just say if you've never been in the habit of doing this why not ask someone else here this morning what they do. Do they perhaps read the Bible through in a year? Or perhaps they use some of the Bible reading notes that you can find at the back on the bookstall?

Perhaps they make a point of revisiting the passage that's been preached on on a Sunday morning or the passage we looked at in growth groups on a Tuesday evening.

Perhaps they work slowly through a particular Bible book on their own. There are a whole variety of ways in which we can do this. Perhaps they do it first thing in the morning or perhaps there's another point at the day when they know they'll be free, reliably free, and which works better.

[21:05] Likewise, those of us with children, what is the one thing necessary for our children to encourage them in? More necessary than music practice, more necessary than homework, more necessary than Sunday sport, listening to the words of Jesus.

Likewise, for us as a church, I take it we should apply Jesus' words here to us corporately as well as individually. A busy church is not necessarily a healthy church.

Endless programs where there's massive stuff going on, that's not necessarily the sign of health. A healthy church is one that prioritizes listening to Jesus and being reformed and changed by his word.

Second implication, ordering our lives. Because I guess what the Lord Jesus is showing us here, is that a major feature of Christian discipleship is that we choose to order our lives properly and well. In other words, our lives don't automatically, and all the different things we have in our lives, don't automatically find the right order. The reason, of course, is because of our sin.

[22 : 27] Our sin not only affects what we do and what we say, it affects the way in which we think. other things can suddenly look more important.

Reading the Bible can look less important to us. So we need our priorities to be shaped by the priorities that the Lord Jesus gives us.

In other words, choices have to be made. Presumably, Martha would have loved to have done both. Presumably, she would have loved both to have sat at Jesus' feet and to produce the meal. But she doesn't have time to do both.

She only has time to do one. Martha is simply too busy. And when we don't have time to listen to Jesus' words, then we are too busy as well.

Of course, I'm too busy. It can sound as if there are factors beyond our control, and sometimes there are factors beyond our control. But often, I guess, if we're honest, it more likely reflects the choices we have already made.

[23 : 38] If we don't have time for personal Bible study and regularly committing ourselves to hearing the Bible at church, then we do need to think about the way our lives are ordered. After all, to hear the words of Jesus is not a drudgery, but a profound gift of grace.

One Christian writer puts it like this, to speak to our Father is not a chore, but the privilege of the children of heaven. To hear from God is not a drudgery.

I take it, therefore, the practice of having a daily time set apart to read the Bible is not a kind of mere accent of Christian history, but is a profoundly spiritual response to God's kindness and grace.

I take it, if we've really grasped what God has done for us, why wouldn't we want to be reminded each day of God's great kindness and to hear the words of life for ourselves?

So, three implications. First, listening to Jesus' words. Second, ordering our lives. Thirdly, choosing well. Because, of course, if we're going to order our lives, we need to choose well.

[24 : 51] to-do list as quickly as possible.

Personally, it's always so encouraging to speak to people in the church family. who have demanding jobs, who have busy lives, and yet they've chosen well. After all, we're never too busy, aren't we, really, to do the things that we think are really important and which will be a real value and benefit to us.

I was hearing recently of one top city fund manager who never switches on any of his electronic devices in the morning until he's read the Bible and responded in prayer.

What a great thing. I guess it will mean that other things in life have to be organized under this one thing necessary. I guess it will impact our personal ambitions, our family life, our church attendance, our church activities.

If as a follower of Jesus we've chosen a career path, for example, that actually makes listening to Jesus' words impossible because of the demands of work, I take it that if we take the words of Jesus seriously in Luke chapter 10, then it's clear, isn't it, what needs to change.

[26 : 26] I take it that if as a family we've developed patterns and routines that have relegated listening to Jesus' words to a secondary place, I take it as we look at Luke chapter 10, it's clear what needs to change.

And likewise, I take it that if a disciple of Jesus finds themselves attending a church where the focus is not on listening to Jesus' words and responding to them, then again, I take it as we look here at what Jesus says is important in Luke chapter 10, it's clear what needs to change.

Ahead of work, ahead of family, ahead of the demands of work or school, ahead of acts of Christian ministry and service, one thing is necessary.

Let's spend a few moments in reflection and then I shall lead us in prayer. But one thing is necessary, Mary has chosen the good portion.

Heavenly Father, thank you very much in our busy world and our busy lives. We thank you for these words of the Lord Jesus which help us to see what the one thing necessary is each day.

[27 : 43] We praise you for your goodness and kindness. Thank you that the Lord Jesus speaks words of life and grace and truth. And we pray, Heavenly Father, please would you help us to take these words to heart, both as a church family, as we gather together week by week to hear your voice, and individually in our busy lives, help us to order our lives, help us to choose well.

thank you for this wonderful picture of Mary sitting at the feet of the Lord Jesus, and we pray that we would be able to do that each day, and we ask it in his name.

Amen.