

Martha- A Chatelaine

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[0 : 00] A Chatelaine is a mistress of the house, of the castle or the chateau. I know that I have sometimes thought that it might be a rather indiscreet lady, but it's not at all indiscreet.

She's just, she's the head of the house. And that's what Martha was. And the picture is one of two... I'm trying to get a lot more of these done. This is Martha, this is Christ, and this is Mary sitting at his feet.

So there you have it. And that's what you might call a lightning sketch. And the thing about it is that Luke gives several lightning sketches in brilliant words.

And one of his lightning sketches is this story of Martha and Mary. So she lived in Bethany.

[1 : 12] We know this because there's a long story about Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus, who was sick, then died before Jesus came, and who was a great personal friend of Jesus.

Jesus came and wept at his grave and commanded him to come forth. And he raised him from the dead. And the raising of Lazarus was part of the ferment that stirred up the crop and the opposition of the high priests that led to the crucifixion, because the high priests realized they had to do something about this man, Jesus.

So here they were in this home, about two or three miles perhaps from Jerusalem, on the road down to Jericho. And that was the place to which Jesus often retreated, and apparently he was very much at home there.

It is also the place where Simon the leper lived. But who he was in relationship to Mary and Martha is hard to figure out. Some suggest he was Martha's husband.

Others said he was a brother to them and maybe just a friend. But he was there, and it was in his house that you read in Matthew and Mark that Jesus went and took part in a feast.

[2 : 34] And while that was happening, Mary, and probably not this Mary, came and broke a jar of ointment and anointed him with it.

And that becomes one of the powerful pictures of Christ anticipating his death when he was anointed with oil and, as he said, prepared for burial.

So that's the home which I want you to visualize just outside of Jerusalem, a place of hospitality for Christ, a place where these friends provided a retreat for Jesus to go to.

But the story itself really starts further back. It starts with the story of a lawyer.

A lawyer who, remember, the law was all connected with the church, the synagogue, the Sanhedrin.

[3 : 41] The religious leaders of the community were also the lawgivers of the community. And if you saw Time Magazine last week, you will see the great conundrum which exists in the Western world because the lawgivers are, in a sense, well, it's best if they don't go to church.

They get biased if they go to church. And the true impartiality of the law cannot be observed by a lawyer who goes to church or a judge who goes to church. It's somehow a phenomena which I thought was well handled in the article in Time Magazine, the phenomena where, in most of the countries of the world, religion and law go together because the ultimate law is the law of God, and that just dribbles down to what affects human beings.

Now, we live in an emancipated society in which we're trying to work out what laws should apply between people without reference to any divine law.

And I think we're finding it extremely difficult. But I think it's going to lead to some major discoveries about our humanity as we push on with this and decide that politics can't define who God is.

And politics for most of the history of the world, and in many parts of the world, defines exactly who God is. So you have that interesting problem of a lawyer coming to Jesus, representing the law of

the land, and asking Jesus the question, What must I do to inherit eternal life?

[5 : 30] Now, we don't ask those kind of questions because we know that the only life we have is the one we've got right now, and we've got to hold on to it with our fingernails, and hopefully it will pass in due course at what we hope will be an appropriate time, and then the struggle is over and we're finished and they're done.

But back in the brave old world that used to exist then, they really believed that there was a life which was far greater than this life, and this was just a foreshadowing of it.

And they thought there was the possibility of eternal life. Well, of course, I think that we have been, by our secularism, sort of persuaded that, no, that can't be.

So we don't even have the courage to ask the question anymore. What must I do to inherit eternal life? We live with such a low image of ourselves, and our society around us is so helpful in telling us in so many ways how meaningless our existence is, and how much better it would be if you weren't in my way, that we don't try and, you know, we don't fight for the possibility of staying in somebody's way forever.

So that question, I think, is a very good question. What must I do to inherit eternal life? I don't know how you would deal with the problem of deciding what the big question is in your life.

[6 : 56] This was obviously the big question for these people. What must I do to inherit eternal life? It was the ultimate question for which they needed the ultimate answer.

And it was interesting. The only story I know about lawyers is the one about the, and I haven't told this for a couple of years, so I'll tell you it again, about the guy in the balloon, you know, who drifted over the countryside one lovely afternoon and then suddenly came down.

And he crashed in a big field, which was obviously part of a big estate, and the owner came huffing and puffing up to him and said to him, as he sat there among his collapsed balloon and basket and so on, he said, you are on private property.

And the balloonist said to him, you must be a lawyer. And the owner said, how did you know that? And he said, because you're absolutely right and totally irrelevant.

I... The... This lawyer, when he asked the question of Jesus, was really playing a kind of game because he knew the answer.

[8 : 23] And Jesus said, well, you know the law. What does the law say? And the lawyer said to him, the law says, thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy mind and with all thy strength.

And thy neighbor is thyself. And Jesus said to him, well, the answer to your question is simple, isn't it? Do it and live. You don't need any more, do you?

But you see, he's like so many people, this lawyer, that he knows the answer, but he's never tried to work it out in his life.

In fact, most people consider even the gospel as being a wonderful story, but not relevant to me. Not...

Doesn't have any... It doesn't pertain to my existence. And so Jesus said to him, well, you know the law. I don't need to tell you anymore. But the lawyer wanted the conversation to go on a little longer, so he said, well, who is my neighbor?

[9 : 27] Let's get some definitions worked out here. You know, that's what lawyers do. And so he said, who is my neighbor? And then comes that magnificent story which is exclusive to the gospel of Luke and with which you are all familiar.

Here, a certain man fell among thieves and was beaten and robbed and left by the roadside to die. And a priest came along the road and seeing him passed by on the other side.

And a Levite came along and seeing him passed by on the other side. and then a Samaritan came along, saw him, dressed his wounds, put him on the donkey, took him to a hotel, made provision for him to be looked after and said, I'll be back to help if there's anything else you need.

No, he said, which was neighbor to the man who fell among thieves. And the lawyer was perceptive enough to say it was the man who treated.

And Jesus said, well, there you are. You've answered your question now, haven't you? You see what the answer is. And it's an amazing answer, you see, because it cuts through all the barriers.

[10 : 47] It cuts through the barriers of race. It cuts through the barriers of religion. It cuts through the barriers of prejudice. It cuts through the barriers of economic class. It cuts perhaps through the barriers of language.

That this man, this Samaritan, who was as far as the lawyer was concerned an outcast, this man in his heresy, knew who his neighbor was.

He didn't have any trouble with that. It wasn't hard for him to see who his neighbor was. It wasn't an academic question to him.

And you know how often in our spiritual world we get all tied up with academic questions. And creatures I guess are like the lawyers of the New Testament in that they have all the answers for you and they have the proof texts to tell you about them.

But obviously there is something terribly important about how you relate to your neighbor and whether or not you can even identify your neighbor.

[12:00] it's you see it cuts through all the I mean what we spend our life doing is building up barriers between ourselves and other people sort of drawing hedges or fences that we can hide behind or that we can live behind or that we can at least make some meaning of our own life by not constantly being exposed to the horde of people that are out there that have a multitude of needs and with whom I can't possibly afford to relate to them.

It just you can't do it. And so it's very difficult. Well that's why why I think Jesus tells this very poignant story of the Good Samaritan.

But remember he's still on the question from the lawyer what shall I do? Now that question is that question is a very tough question.

There are 60,000 charities in British Columbia that will tell you the answer to it. There are countless denominations that will tell you the answer to it.

There are endless hordes of preachers that will tell you the answers to it. What shall I do? Once you have asked the question you are in some way vulnerable to a whole lot of people who are ready to tell you what the answer is.

[13:39] I hate to bring this subject up because it's so difficult. It's very difficult when when when you meet somebody on the street who asks for a handout and you've read the story of the Good Samaritan.

You know how do you handle that? Very difficult indeed. It's difficult because it very often happens that that particular beggar whoever he is is trying to help you.

He's trying to make you feel better. he's trying to make you feel that if you help him you'll do something for yourself which will make you feel better about yourself and therefore instead of you helping him he in fact is helping you and he's helping you in a moral and spiritual way while all you're doing is shelling out a few bucks or nickels whatever it is and you go away feeling better and so he has ministered to you in that wonderful way.

Well he comes along to answer at least for the moment for you and to give you the warm religious glow of having done something to help somebody and you should say thank you to him for it.

Now you may think that that's cynical but I think it's still true a lot of the time but how do you tell the difference and how do you discern how do you discern who your neighbor is and imagine this sort of staggering possibility that Christ seems clearly to teach by this story that loving your neighbor means that that neighbor could be anybody of any color any language anything any creed whatever there is a basic human identification and you see the wonderful part about this story is that God's business is relationships how you relate to the people that you encounter from day to day that's where God is active life and all of us spend most of our days trying to deal with relationships relationships to our children relationships to our spouses relationships to our employees relationships to our employer relationships to the parking lot attendant our whole life is full of relationships and somehow by saying you're to be on the lookout for your neighbor means that all those relationships are heightened in meaning and somehow the relationship that you have to God finds expression that way and the relationship you find that way helps you in understanding

[16:54] God that they're tied together so that they are quite inseparable and it's in that area of relationships that the story goes on and says there was a village into which Jesus entered and a woman named Martha received him into her house and this woman named Martha was a strong dominant aggressive hospitable caring thoughtful good person even the good man who prayed today hoped that we wouldn't be like her I would love you all to be very like her I don't think this story is to tell you that Martha was no good for a long time one of the commentators says the Roman Catholic Church has taken this line of interpretation and said that the contemplative life is the life that belongs to the true

Christian and anybody who's out working washing the dishes or preparing the meal is somehow not where it's at and the commentators that on this passage say that that's not what the story says what the story says is that the little sister went and sat at the feet of Jesus and Mary who was busy about many things and torn in many directions under the stress of her circumstance interrupted Jesus who was teaching and said to him master bid my sister come and help me what she's doing there is wasting her time and there's work to be done and so Jesus immediately went to the defense of the little sister and said she has chosen the better part now you may think that if you read the passage look at it there and look at that passage which says

Martha Martha you are anxious and troubled about many things one thing is needful the documents on which the New Testament is based have five fairly dominant and different translations of that line because nobody has been able to understand this story or quite figure out how it fits in because of that line and it's been misinterpreted lots of times and in lots of places so I'm glad that I'm giving you the official interpretation this afternoon but when Jesus turns to her and says that the picture is of a woman who is very busy she has anxiety in her that anxiety in her is resulting in this reaction that she knows what her sister should be doing and of course this is what happens over and over again in the pattern of relationships which exist in all the homes in which we live it is utterly impossible for me to do the dishes after supper without thinking that somebody else should probably be doing this and the fact that I'm doing it demands some kind of recognition and that this kind of corrosive thinking which happens because you've got too many things on and you can't apply yourself to the job that you have and your job is to prepare the supper to serve the meal to clean up afterwards to get ready for tomorrow all those things keep coming on and all of us are involved in those things all the time and most of us spend most of our time while we're doing those things thinking who should be helping and why they should be helping and why

I shouldn't be left to do this by myself when in fact it's probably a glorious privilege that you haven't even recognized yet so that's the tension that is there but Jesus makes the remarkable statement about Mary when he says Mary has chosen the good portion which shall not be taken away from her now I think that the kind of activity that Martha is involved in is inescapable I don't think we can get along without it I think that kind of hospitality is one of the basic responsibilities we have in ministering to people I think that can be justified if you want by the story which proceeds about the sensitivity of the Samaritan who saw somebody in need and met that need so I don't think there's anything wrong with what Martha was doing I think what Jesus is saying is that there was nothing wrong with what

Mary was doing and that her choice was a good choice and it and it was the recognition that God had something to do in her life and she wanted it to go on happening and it was going on happening as she listened to Jesus teaching now remember where we started we started what shall I do to inherit eternal life I will sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to him teach you know that's and that's that's the hardest thing for us to come to grips with because you see and somebody expressed this beautifully I think last week and when in saying that the basis of the Christian life is not what I do it's what God has done for me in Christ and mediated to me through

[23 : 25] Christ which I appropriate by belief in Christ that's what Christian life is it's not something I do it's the recognition of something that God has done for me and that I receive that as Mary sat and received it as she sat at the feet of Jesus and so Jesus in a sense rushed to her defense when she was under the expectation of her big sister to go out into the kitchen and help and said no you got to recognize the important thing for all of us is to be in the place where we are receiving what God has done for us in Christ that that's the place you're to be that's the process by which you inherit eternal life to accept what God has done for you rather than to spend your time occupied with what you should do for him now I could go on and I probably will but it's so important that we find the place of

Mary don't condemn the place of Martha because all of you know it or else you wouldn't survive but that you need to find the place of Mary in your life where you can allow God to do for you what ultimately you can't do for yourself the question what shall I do to inherit eternal life has to be turned around and Jesus by these stories turns it around and says what God has done for you is the basis of eternal life not what you do for him and that you need to be able to receive that into your heart and notice that there's there's a there's just this last thing that I'll say about it which I think is Mary has chosen that good portion she's made a choice which has been a good choice but then it says something else it's not going to be taken away from her that's a choice which nobody is going to rob

her of that's good isn't it that's what it means let me pray our God and Father we ask that you will help us to understand in this highly domestic little sketch of a home a guest a meal to be prepared and the ultimate need of our lives to find that for which we were born and that is your gift of eternal life so grant that the things you teach here we may quietly receive into our hearts and lives we may be encouraged to make the choice which the lawyer dithered around and refused to make we may quietly make that choice and know that having made the choice it will not be taken away we ask this in
Jesus name Amen