

Encounters With Jesus (1): Martha - The One Thing Necessary

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 07 October 2018

Preacher: Rev James Maciver

[0 : 00] Looking at the final part of this chapter from verse 38 to the end of the chapter, let's just read through these words again. Luke 10 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 from her.

It's quite common to see a plaque at one time. It's still seen, I'm sure, in many homes, but when I was younger, it was seen in many homes that you went into.

A plaque which said, words like these are very similar to these. God is the head of this house, the unseen guest at every meal, the silent listener to every conversation.

[1 : 13] And the reality of that was certainly true in this house in Bethany, house of Martha. She seems to have been the owner of the house.

And here we read that she welcomed him into her house. And we know from elsewhere in the Gospel of John that this house in Bethany was one that not only welcomed the Lord, but that the Lord himself was pleased to be in.

And that when he entered into this house, he was assured of a very loving welcome indeed. We hope that that's how it is with all our homes.

That Jesus is always a welcome guest. That he's an ever-present presence and guest in our homes. Whether we're at our meals or in conversation, the home that welcomes Jesus is a blessed place.

And as we look at these two sisters, sisters of the Lazarus we read about in John's Gospel, there are a number of points that come across to us from this passage this evening.

[2 : 21] And while it seems to be a passage that's pretty much set on its own, there are some connections with the previous passages in this chapter as well, especially in the fact that you find an emphasis on the words of Jesus in different places, and an emphasis on giving heed to the words of Jesus or hearing the voice of Jesus.

That's what you find central to this passage as well. So we're looking first of all at the two contrasting choices, as these are represented by these two sisters.

Two contrasting choices. Martha, who made the choice of much serving, and Mary, who made the choice of sitting at the Lord's feet to listen to his teaching.

Secondly, we look at the one thing necessary, as Jesus mentioned it. Martha has been troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. So you have the two contrasting choices and the one thing that's necessary.

Now as you look at this, it's not really a study, although you might find some people with the idea that this is really a study in the contrast between the kind of Christian who is always active, and the kind of Christian who is always more contemplative.

[3 : 39] It's not a study of being contemplative as against being very active or practical. It's not that sort of study. We need to be both of these as Christians.

Our lives should have both the activity of a Christian service, and the contemplative side of sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening to his voice, the more worshipful side, if you like, of our life.

And the important thing is to have these in balance, in a correct relationship and balance to one another. And it's not that we need to see one of these sisters as loving Jesus more than the other. It's nothing like that either. What you find here is that in balancing the contemplative side, or the meditative side, or the listening side of our lives, listening to Jesus, listening to his voice, especially through the scriptures, we are not to actually put our activities ahead of that contemplative side. We're not to put our activities ahead of spending time with Jesus. That's really one of the main lessons in the passage, as we'll see. And as we try and unfold that, and just bring out something more of what's in that, bear that in mind as we go through the passage and through the details of that, that's really especially what it's teaching us.

[5 : 08] That not only do we have to have a balance between Christian activities, and a practical Christian life, and the more contemplative side of it, but you must never put your activities as a Christian ahead of, or give priority to them ahead of spending time with Jesus himself.

Look at Martha, first of all. Martha welcomed him into her house, and she had a sister who sat at his feet. But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she went to him and said, Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me alone?

So there's the first thing you read about Martha. She was busy with much serving. She was concerned to make a good meal for Jesus. Nothing wrong with that itself. That's one of the lessons in the passage, that many of the things which are perfectly legitimate, we can actually have them displaced in our lives, so that they're put ahead of spending time at the feet of Jesus, spending time learning from himself.

Here is Martha. She is so busy in the kitchen. She's so busy setting about preparing this meal. And this word is really the key to finding out what's wrong with Martha at that time.

This word, distracted. She was distracted with much serving. Sometimes you'll find it translated, the word distracted, translated with the word, instead of that you have the word burden.

[6 : 39] She was encumbered with much service or burden. It's not a matter of the burden of the service that was troubling Martha at all. It wasn't that the work was so heavy. It wasn't a burden in that sense.

What it means is that she was distracted from doing what Mary was doing. She was putting what she was doing ahead of something even more important than preparing a meal for Jesus.

She was concerned, I'm sure, that Jesus would have the best possible meal that she could actually afford and place before them on the table. Whereas Mary sat at his feet listening to her.

In other words, you could say she was making food for Jesus ahead of receiving spiritual food from Jesus. She had her priorities the wrong way around.

And in a spiritual sense, that's very often easy for ourselves to do as well, to have it wrong in that sense as well.

[7 : 40] It's easier, if you like, to serve than it is to sit at Jesus' feet. Easier to find time for service, time for the practicalities of the Christian life than it is to actually just make the time to sit at his feet, to engage in prayer, to engage in meditation, to read the Bible, to listen to the voice of Jesus.

In other words, we can be so busy for Jesus to the detriment of spending time with Jesus.

It's a very clear distinction. It's a very important one. Now, this doesn't mean at all that we should have a minimum amount of practical Christian service in our lives.

It doesn't mean that you just do a bare minimum of that and that you spend most of the time in contemplative, meditative communion and fellowship with Jesus.

You have to maximize both, but not one at the expense of the other and not the practical at the expense of the more contemplative or spiritual or worshipful.

[8 : 50] That's one of the dangers not just for ourselves as individuals, but also a danger for ourselves as a congregation too. One of the most attractive things about this congregation is the amount of activity that's carried out in the gospel in relation to the gospel from week to week, from day to day, you might say.

And in some ways, you could say that this congregation is ahead of many other congregations in the amount of Christian service, the amount of different activities that take place both for young people, middle-aged, older people, whatever it might be.

The activities are all there and they're all such good activities. But here's the danger that we actually think of the Christian life or congregational life as activity-driven.

That is the biggest mark, the most important mark of a congregation is or of an individual is how much we do. How much we do in our Christian service.

Now, please don't mistake me. I have already said that it's not a matter of minimizing how much we do. It's not a matter of thinking we can get off with just a little bit of service for Jesus, a little bit of doing things and just keep that to a minimum.

[10:10] It's not about that, but it's about priority. It's about balance. It's about putting what Mary was doing here ahead of what Martha was doing because what Mary was doing was in its own way more important and more foundational and of more lasting benefit as we'll see than what Martha was doing in her practical service.

We prioritize sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening to Jesus, spending time in prayer with Jesus. Let me put it this way. If I as a minister or if Kenny, I as your ministers in the gospel, if we prioritized in our ministry week by week the number of practical activities that we engaged in and managed to tick off.

Let's tick off the boxes. How many visits I've done this week? And we could say at the end of the week if we sit down and think, well, we managed, we did great, we did 20 visits this week. And maybe Kenny would say, well, I read Christian, two Christian books.

And I'd say, well, I read three. And that's all perfectly good and all absolutely necessary. As well as many other things we could say we've actually done.

But what's that if it's at the expense of spending time at the feet of Jesus? What benefit is it going to be to you if our practicalities in that way outrun our more spiritual, if you like, or more contemplative or our receiving for ourselves into our own souls the Word of God?

[11:41] There are so many ways in which we can be distracted even in terms of Christian ministry from spending time at the feet of Jesus. And you know, that's one of the dangers and one of the things to bear in mind when you're praying for us.

That when we're actually composing sermons or studying for sermons, which of course is absolutely necessary and giving enough time to that, please pray that we don't neglect our own souls.

That we don't actually spend so much time in doing that so that it's at the expense of our sitting at the feet of Jesus and feeding our own souls.

Not just so that we can get something by which we then relay the truth to you and compose sermons so that we then preach in the name of Jesus. Absolutely crucial though that is.

We have to feed our own souls. And the devil is always active in saying, you know, you haven't really spent enough time on that passage. And so you've got to go back to it and read another book about it.

[12:42] Whereas many times the best thing to do would just go on your knees and spend time with Jesus. And it carries through into your Christian life, into my Christian life, into your home life, and into your individual life, into your relationships.

Every way in which we live in this world, we have to prioritize this time with Jesus. However much we can and need to tick off the boxes of the practicalities, and they are important.

Here is what Martha represents. She represents distraction from a more important thing than going about this much serving.

And then when you contrast what you read there about Mary, Mary sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching.

She had her priorities in the right order. The first thing she thought of when Jesus came into the house was not, we've got to make the best possible meal for this Jesus.

[13:46] He's so important. We can't neglect that part. The first thing she thought of was, I've got to sit and listen to him. I've got to hear what he's got to say to me. I've got to feed my soul from being at his feet, from being his pupil.

Incidentally, this would not have been something that any rabbi of the day would have found acceptable at all. And Luke, in Luke's gospel, more than the other gospels, you find that he is emphasizing that Jesus actually gave such a good lot of attention and concern for women that followed him as disciples.

They were not allowed to sit at a rabbi's feet. They were not allowed themselves to be in that position. That was for a man and for men only. But here is Jesus and as he goes into this house that welcomed him, he allows them, he allows this Mary to sit at his feet.

And all the gospel and indeed Jesus himself elevated women. The Bible does not denigrate women. It's not been the most harmful thing in the world for women and for womanhood to have had the scriptures come to be formulated the way they were and now seem to be basic and central to Christian teaching.

Sadly, as you know very well, that's one of the things that you have to face up to nowadays. The idea that somehow it's the Bible that's actually caused women to be denigrated and downtrodden and kept under and not given their rightful place.

[15 : 29] When you look at the gospel of Luke, you can see how Jesus actually treated women. How important they were amongst his disciples.

And here is Mary sitting at his feet, receiving his teaching. And he is concerned to actually impart that teaching to her.

Well, here she is and she has her priorities in that right order. Just when we were on holiday recently in the hotel we were in, just came down for breakfast one of the days we were there.

And as I was going up to the breakfast bar probably for a bowl of fruit or whatever it was I was beginning with. But I just came round the corner of the part of the buffet that I was at.

This fellow came round the corner and what he was doing was he was holding a mobile phone like this with his shoulder against his face and he was trying to fill the bowl that he had with whatever it was, cereal or whatever it was he was trying to fill and trying to actually answer the phone at the same time and speak to whoever he was speaking to so he could do neither thing properly.

[16 : 36] I remember thinking to myself I didn't say anything to him obviously but it was tempting to actually say to him look, get your priorities right. Leave your mobile phone for the moment. Get your breakfast.

Do the first things first. Fill your stomach. Start the day properly with your breakfast. Leave your mobile phone for the moment.

Don't be distracted from something that's necessary at that moment. And that was an illustration for me of this passage really here where here is Martha being distracted from something that she's doing is very important.

Something that she's doing is not illegitimate. It's not something that Jesus is going to criticize in itself because as if it was the wrong kind of work altogether to be engaged in.

No, that's not what it's saying to us. But she was distracted from something more important. From sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to him.

[17 : 40] We cannot overstress the importance of listening to Jesus, of spending time with him, of communion with Christ, of reading our Bibles and as we read them listening to his voice or seeking and praying that we will hear his voice.

And it's a question for myself. Am I making that top priority in my life? Is the word of the Lord of more importance to me today?

Was it more important to me this morning than beginning to do something else? What do we do each day when the day comes and when we get up?

What is our first thought? I'm not saying I'm not an example of a good pattern at all. I very often get it wrong. But what's the first thing we do?

Do we turn on the news? Do we turn on the radio to get some music or to get some news on the radio or on the television? Do we turn to Facebook? Do we do something of that? Or is our first thought and our first action, I must go and listen to the Lord.

[18 : 54] He's the most important one. And listening to him is the most important thing. And that carries through into your activities as a Christian as well.

They are so important but they are not as important as spending time with Jesus himself. Why do we have such things as midweek meetings? Why do we have Bible studies? Why do we have these in the middle of the week?

Is it not enough just for us to come to church on the Lord's Day and spend time with Jesus? Well, when you think about it, how long have we got here just now?

Probably an hour, maybe half an hour of a sermon, maybe a whole hour altogether as we're relating to the Bible either through preaching or through singing, whatever it is, or through prayer.

It's a whole hour. Let's just put it at an hour. An hour this morning. Two hours in the whole day. If that's all we have in the week, is that all the time we're spending together listening to Jesus, even if we're actually listening to him personally and individually for ourselves.

[19 : 54] It's so important to be together in worship, to be together, to listen to the voice of Jesus as a people. That's something, the principle of that is really here.

How concerned are we in the course of every week to actually hear the voice of Christ, to listen to him, to be at his feet, to put other things aside and to actually not be distracted from listening to Christ.

So there are two contrasting choices. A choice that Martha made was to be caught up in making a meal for Jesus. A choice that Mary made, which was the better choice, sitting at his feet, of listening to his teaching.

The two contrasting choices. But then you have the way Jesus came to deal with Martha, especially the one thing necessary. Notice what Martha did. She actually came to Jesus and she said, Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone?

It's not that Mary would have just hardly ever been in the kitchen. We don't believe that Mary would not really have bothered much to help Martha in the kitchen.

[21 : 14] That this was just a pattern that had gone on in that home all the time. It's not something like that at all. It's just that this occasion meant Mary was giving priority to the most important thing.

And here is Martha and you can see how she's worked herself up into this kind of not just distraction but she's quite disgruntled. She comes to the Lord and actually speaks very pointedly to Jesus as if Jesus didn't care.

And she's saying, Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me alone to serve alone? What a thing to say to the Lord.

You see, the way her mind had become so worked up, she came pointedly to the Lord and just blurted this out as if it was Jesus' fault for not having said to Mary, look, go and help your sister for the moment.

And sometimes, you know, we can be like that and find fault with God himself as if he was to be blamed for the things that we actually put the wrong way around in our lives and for the frustrations that we bring upon ourselves.

[22 : 25] Here is Martha and, you know, the way she puts it, the language that's here in the passage, the kind of question it is, those who know Greek grammar tell us that this is a question that expects the answer in a positive way, that expects an answer along the lines of what Martha herself is thinking.

Of course, Jesus doesn't actually respond in the way that Martha herself expects. And it's often like that, isn't it, as you find yourself going through the Gospels, all the Gospels indeed, you'll find people coming to Jesus with certain questions.

You read that in the passage earlier, this lawyer who stood up to put Jesus to the test, to try him out, to try and catch him out indeed, and putting this question to him and expecting the Lord maybe to answer in a certain way.

And of course, the Lord never falls for that. He always answers in a way that He knows addresses the issue in the person's heart, in the person's mind.

And so when Martha comes and says, Lord, do you not care? How does He respond? Well, He responds very tenderly. You see, the problem with Martha is her view of what has to be given priority.

[23 : 49] The problem with us, her own mind is really what she's relying upon. Her own thinking is what she's relying upon rather than what the concern of Jesus is.

That's how it can be for ourselves. Remember, back to Matthew and to the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus, again, it was to the disciples that He spoke this sermon.

As He went up, He spoke to His disciples. And so chapter 5 begins. His disciples came to Him and He opened His mouth and taught them, saying, and the rest three chapters after that are all to do with teaching for His disciples.

What is He saying? In chapter 6, He's saying, do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy. Lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven. And He goes on then to speak about no one can serve two masters.

Don't be concerned to try and have a foot in both camps. Don't try and please the world and please Jesus. Don't try and please yourself and please the Lord. Therefore, He says, as I tell you, don't be anxious about your life.

[24 : 53] What you will eat or what you will drink or about your body, what you will put on is not life more than food and the body more than clothing. Look at the birds of the air.

Are you not of more value than they? Which of you, by being anxious, can add a single hour to the span of His life? Why are you anxious about clothing? And so on.

He goes on and on like that, teaching them using these illustrations. And then He comes really to the punchline if you like of His teaching. There where He says, But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

And all these things will be added to you. Therefore, don't be anxious about tomorrow for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. In other words, He's saying the same as He's now saying to, as now you're saying about Martha.

Don't be distracted from what should be your priority. Don't be distracted from putting first, seeking the kingdom of God, listening to the voice of Jesus, sitting at the feet of Christ, taking every opportunity you can to be where He is going to be teaching you, where you're going to receive His ministry, His teaching.

[26 : 10] And you see Christ's response. And the first thing you notice is the tenderness with which He corrects her. And you know, that's itself such a precious part of the passage.

She speaks to Him in such a way as we've seen that jumps to her feet as it were and goes to say this to Him. She's finding fault with Him. She's quite pointed in what she says to Him.

She's accusing Him essentially of not really having too much care for her as she's slaving away in the kitchen. How does Jesus respond? Does He say, come on, go away and leave me alone just now with Mary. Just go and do your work.

Get on with it. And He says, Martha, Martha. Twice mentioning her name just to convey to her the genuine concern that He has for her soul.

Martha, Martha. He doesn't respond in kind in the same way as Martha was to Him. He never does, does He?

[27 : 19] When Jesus is looking at your life tonight and my life and when our priorities are all wrong and when we know that accusingly He does in fact look upon us through His Word, through what we know of Him, through His Word, does He dismiss us?

Does He speak harshly to us? Does He say, why don't you grow up? Why don't you learn more? Why haven't you learned from what your mistakes so far?

No, He says, Martha, Martha. Gently but pointedly saying, look, you've got things the wrong way around. Let's deal with this.

Let's put it right. Let's look at it as you should be seeing it. Whatever your own name is tonight, everyone in here has their own name.

But you know, Jesus is so concerned for your soul that as He addresses you through the Scriptures, as He addresses you Himself personally, from Himself to yourself, this is what He's saying, John, John, James, James, Mary, Mary, whatever your name is, He is concerned gently to lead you into the right path.

[28 : 42] There's nobody else like that. You don't find this in any other religion. You don't find this in any alternative to the Gospel or in any rival to Jesus because He's the only one who really understands our need, who really understands where we're coming from and where we need to be brought to.

And He does so with such kindness, with such patience, with such compassion, with such concern, as just comes to repeat our name to assure us that He of all people and most of all has our interests at heart.

And you will never find, you will never find such ministry as that anywhere else. tonight, if you don't know the Savior for yourself, just think of what you're missing.

Just think of the pastoring that your soul is missing out on. Just think of the compassion that you haven't yet come to know and experience for yourself. Martha, Martha.

No one like Him. Nobody can measure up to Him. He is Jesus. And what did He say? He said, You are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary.

[30 : 04] Mary has chosen the good portion which will not be taken from her. Now, the one thing that's necessary is really the same thing as this good portion. What is that? Well, it's obvious from the passage that the one good thing, the good portion, the one thing necessary that Mary has chosen at that moment is doing what she's doing, is sitting at a sphere feet, it's receiving His

teaching.

And what He's saying to Martha is, You've just been distracted from what Mary is doing. This is what you should have done as well as a priority. The meal can take care of itself some other time. But if you miss out on my teaching, of my instruction, you may not have the opportunity next time. taking in the word of Jesus.

In other words, where Martha is so concerned to provide a meal for Jesus, Mary is more concerned to actually have the food that Jesus has prepared, the spiritual teaching that she's now receiving into her soul.

That's Mary's meal. That's what she's feeding upon. That's what her priority is. And she has chosen, Jesus is saying, Mary has chosen the good portion.

[31 : 24] There is a deliberate choice on her part. She had given some thought to this. She didn't just sit at His feet without thinking about it. She has chosen that good part.

She has decided that this must come first. So must you and I make the time for it. Allocate the time in your life regularly to spend time with Him, to sit at His feet.

We can all and are all distracted by various things. our work, our family commitments, social media, sermon preparation, whatever. But what He's saying to us is, Mary has chosen the good portion.

And not only that, but He says, which will not be taken away from her. Now what does that mean? And why has He added that? Well, He's contrasting it with what Martha was doing.

She was preparing a meal, something physical. And supposing Martha had prepared the most amazing banquet, supposing it had been the best possible meal, the best meal that Jesus ever had on earth, but only it lasted a day or so.

[32 : 47] The benefit of it would not have been anything more than short-lived. but the meal that Mary was eating had everlasting benefits.

It was not going to be taken from her. In other words, this is going to remain with her, is what He means. And when you prioritize being with Jesus and feeding upon the teaching of Jesus, that has an everlasting benefit.

That's not going to be taken from you. That's not something that you will lose. It's going to remain with you. Whereas if you're distracted for the stuff of this world, for the things that Matthew 6 mentions, that we are so often anxious about, well, why are we anxious about?

What we shall put on and what we shall eat? the fashion of this world passes away. And even for you young folks, you can have the most expensive top or jeans or trainers that are fashionable at this moment.

It won't be fashionable within a few months' time. But the Word of Jesus will always remain with you. It never goes out of fashion.

[34 : 07] never grows old. Never needs to be replaced. And the more you and I sit at His feet and begin His teaching, the more we will have the benefit of the Word of Christ coming to dwell in us richly.

Two contrasting choices. One thing necessary. Let's make it out one thing individually and congregationally.

more and more as time goes by. Let's pray. Gracious Lord, bless. We pray Your Word to us again and help us as we receive Your Word.

Help us to listen to Your own voice as we leave this place. Lord, we pray on this week that we have entered upon that we may indeed give priority to Your words, to listening to You, to spending time with You, to engaging with You in fellowship and communion of our souls.

Speak to us, we pray, from Your Word. Give us, we pray, to make the time and have the discipline in our lives to do so. Receive our worship now, we pray, and cleanse us from all our sin.

[35 : 23] For Jesus' sake. Amen. Now let's conclude our service tonight singing in Psalm 73. Psalm 73, we'll sing in the Scottish Psalter, version page 316, and from verse 25 to the end of the psalm.

Remember, the psalmist here talks near the beginning of the psalm of how he himself was distracted, distracted from remaining close to God, he was envious at the foolish and at the wicked, and began to compare himself and the sufferings he was going through with what he saw as relatively few of these in the life of those who were not God's people.

And then, the Lord corrected his thinking. And just as he did with Martha, he got him to see his priority. And when he did so, this is what he came to say near the end of the psalm from verse 24,

thou with thy counsel while I live.

And then verse 25, speaking about whom have I in the heavens high but thee, O Lord, alone, and in the earth, whom I desire besides thee, there is none.

We'll sing to tune Weatherby and from verse 25 to the end of the psalm, whom have I in the heavens high. whom have I in the heavens high, but thee, O Lord, but thee, O Lord, alone.

[37 : 03] And in the earth, whom I desire, besides thee, there is none.

My flesh and heart, shall find and fail, but Lord, the field in heaven.

For all my heart, God is the strength and ocean forever.

For lo, in us are far from thee, forever perisheth.

Then thou, a ruling from thee, know thou hast destroyed all.

[38 : 34] But surely it is good for me that I draw near to God.

In God I trust that all thy words I need to declare abroad.

I'll go to the main door this evening. Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and evermore.

Amen.