

Two Lessons on Work and Worship, Part 1

Scripture: Luke 10:38–42

Code: A369

The story of Mary and Martha has long been one of the most treasured narratives in the Scripture. Who doesn't identify with hardworking Martha, frustrated with her captivated sister at the feet of the Lord? And who doesn't admire the single-minded devotion of Mary? She was so enraptured with Jesus' teaching that, to quote the beloved hymn, "the things of earth [had grown] strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace."

It all started when Jesus came to Bethany, to visit the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. They had become cherished personal friends of Jesus during His earthly ministry. He had a profound love for their family, and it's clear from Luke's account that Jesus made Himself at home in their house.

Certainly hospitality was a special hallmark of this family. Martha in particular is portrayed everywhere as a meticulous hostess. The fact that her name was usually listed first whenever she's named with her siblings implies strongly that she was the elder sister of Mary and Lazarus.

But this older sister, a noble and beloved follower of Jesus, was in for a surprise. At the end of Luke 10, Jesus gave Martha a mild rebuke and a strong lesson about where her real priorities ought to lie. The passage is short but rich. Luke writes:

Now as they were traveling along, He entered a certain village; and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. And she had a sister called Mary, who moreover was listening to the Lord's word, seated at His feet. But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up to Him, and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me." But the Lord answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only a few things are necessary, really only one, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:38-42)

Martha's complaint sounds callow and girlish. And yet Jesus' reply, while containing a mild rebuke, has an almost grandfatherly tone to it.

Jesus had apparently come at Martha's invitation. She was the one who welcomed Him in, signifying that she was the actual master of ceremonies in this house. On this occasion, at least, she wasn't merely filling in as a surrogate hostess for a friend; she was plainly the one in charge of the household. She fussed over her hostess duties. She wanted everything to be just right. She was a conscientious and considerate hostess, and these were admirable traits. Much in her behavior was commendable.

I love the way Jesus came across in this scene. He was the perfect houseguest. He instantly made Himself at home. He enjoyed the fellowship and conversation, and as always, His contribution to the discussion was instructive and enlightening. No doubt His disciples were asking Him questions, and He was giving answers that were thought-provoking, authoritative, and utterly edifying. Mary's

instinct was to sit at His feet and listen. Martha, ever the fastidious one, went right to work with her preparations.

Soon, however, Martha grew irritable with Mary. I'm sure it's easy for you to imagine how her exasperation might have elevated. At first, she probably tried to hint in a "subtle" way that she needed help, by making extra noise—maybe moving some pots and pans around with a little more vigor than the situation really required, and then by letting some utensils or cookware clatter together loudly in a washbasin. Martha might have cleared her throat or exhaled a few times loudly enough to be heard in the next room. Anything to remind Mary that her sister was expecting a little help.

When all of that failed, Martha probably tried to peek around the corner or walk briskly through to the dining room, hoping to catch Mary's eye. In the end, however, she just gave up all pretense of subtlety or civility and aired her grievance against Mary right in front of Jesus. In fact, she complained to Him and asked Him to intervene and set Mary straight.

Jesus' reply must have utterly startled Martha. It didn't seem to have occurred to her that she might be the one in the wrong, but the little scene earned her the gentlest of admonitions from Jesus. Luke's account ends there, so we're probably safe to conclude that the message penetrated straight to Martha's heart and had exactly the sanctifying effect Christ's words always have on those who love Him.

A couple of important lessons emerge from Jesus' reprimand of Martha. As you read on, try to imagine yourself in Martha and Mary's home and contemplate your own work and service for the Lord.

Lesson One: The Preference of Others over Self

Jesus' gentle admonition to Martha is first of all a reminder that we should honor others over ourselves. Humility had been a constant theme in Jesus' teaching, and a difficult lesson for most of His disciples to learn. Even on the night of Jesus' betrayal, each of the disciples had ignored basic hospitality rather than take a servant's role and wash the others' feet (John 13:1-7).

Martha's external behavior at first appeared to be true servanthood. She was the one who put on the apron and went to work in the task of serving others. But her treatment of Mary soon revealed a serious defect in her servant's heart. She allowed herself to become censorious and sharp-tongued. Such words in front of other guests were certain to humiliate Mary. Martha either gave no thought to the hurtful effect of her words on her sister, or she simply didn't care.

Furthermore, Martha was wrong in her judgment of Mary. She assumed Mary was being lazy. "Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls" (Romans 14:4). Did Martha imagine that she, rather than Christ, was Mary's true master?

In reality, Mary was the one whose heart was in the right place. Her motives and desires were more commendable than Martha's. Jesus knew it, even though no mere mortal could ever make that judgment by observing the external behavior of the two women. But Jesus knew it because He knew the hearts of both women.

Martha's behavior shows how subtly and sinfully human pride can corrupt even the best of our actions. What Martha was doing was by no means a bad thing. She was waiting on Christ and her other guests. In a very practical and functional sense, she was acting as servant to all, just as Christ had so often commanded. She no doubt began with the best of motives and the noblest of intentions.

But the moment she stopped listening to Christ and made something other than Him the focus of her heart and attention, her perspective became very self-centered. At that point, even her service to Christ became tainted with self-absorption and spoiled by a very uncharitable failure to assume the best of her sister. Martha was showing an attitude of sinful pride that made her susceptible to other kinds of evil as well: anger, resentment, jealousy, distrust, a critical spirit, judgmentalism, and unkindness. All of that flared up in Martha in a matter of minutes.

Worst of all, Martha's words impugned the Lord Himself: "Lord, do You not care...?" (Luke 10:40). Did she really imagine that *He* did not care? She certainly knew better. Jesus' love for all three members of this family was obvious to all (John 11:5).

But Martha's thoughts and feelings had become too self-focused. She turned her attention from Christ and began watching Mary with a critical eye. Naturally, it began to ruin the whole evening for Martha.

Mary, by contrast, was so consumed with thoughts of Christ that she became completely oblivious to everything else. She sat at His feet and listened to Him intently, absorbing His every word and nuance. She was by no means being lazy. She simply understood the *true importance* of this occasion. The Son of God Himself was a guest in her home. Listening to Him and worshiping Him were at that moment the very best use of Mary's energies and the one right place for her to focus her attention.

One thing that stood out about Mary of Bethany was her keen ability to observe and understand the heart of Christ. Mary seemed to be able to discern Jesus' true meaning even better than any of the twelve disciples. Her gesture of anointing Him in preparation for His burial at the beginning of that final week in Jerusalem (John 12:1-7) shows a remarkably mature understanding. That was the fruit of her willingness to sit still, listen, and ponder. It was the very thing that always made Mary such a sharp contrast to Martha, whose first inclination was usually act—or react. (Martha had a lot in common with Peter in that regard!)

If Martha had truly preferred Mary over herself, she might have seen in Mary a depth of understanding and love for Christ that surpassed even her own. She could have learned much from her quieter, more thoughtful sister. *But not right now.* Martha had a table to set, a meal to get out of the oven, and "many things" she was "worried and bothered about" (Luke 10:41). Before she knew it, her resentment against Mary had built up, and she could no longer restrain herself. Her public criticism of Mary was an ugly expression of pride.

We'll think about a second lesson in Part 2, but ask yourself a few questions as you reflect on this narrative. Is your service characterized by your consideration *from the heart* of others, or do you think primarily of yourself? When you work hard, especially when others don't join you or notice you, do you notice yourself becoming more critical of others, more judgmental, assuming the worst of their

thoughts and motives? Like Martha, do you subtly impugn the goodness of God?

If we're honest, we'll see that we're not so different from Martha. We really need to be more like Mary in this regard, fully devoted to Him as of first importance. It's okay to let the dishes sit in the sink, leave the vacuuming or dusting or whatever else so easily distracts you from sitting at the feet of your Lord. The work will get done in good time. Like Mary, you need to spend time each day worshipping the Lord and focusing on "the good part, which shall not be taken away from [you]." It'll soften your soul, put your work into perspective, and enable you to prefer others over yourself.

(Adapted from [*Twelve Extraordinary Women*](#).)

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