

Two Lessons on Work and Worship, Part 2

Scripture: Luke 10:38–42

Code: A370

Martha and Mary are two of Scripture's extraordinary women. In some ways they were as different as night and day, but they shared a profound love for the Lord Jesus Christ that brought them together in harmonious unity. The Bible commends each woman as possessing admirable qualities that are worthy of emulation (John 11:17-27; 12:1-7), but there are a couple of special lessons in Luke 10 I'd like to focus on.

Here's Luke's narrative of Jesus' visit to their home in Bethany:

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)

In Part 1 of this article, we saw how Martha needed to learn to prefer others over herself. She'd become self-focused in her hard work, something we can all identify with, and her self-centeredness manifested itself in an ugly, public rebuke of her sister and a maligning of the Lord's character. It's probably not what she intended at all.

But there's another lesson here as well, one that lies at the surface of the narrative yet penetrates to the depths of the human condition.

Lesson Two: The Priority of Worship over Service

It's interesting to read this narrative and try to imagine how the average woman might respond if placed in a situation like Martha's. My strong suspicion is that *many* women would be inclined to sympathize with Martha, not Mary. After all, it would normally be considered rude to let your sister do all the hard work in the kitchen while you sit chatting with guests.

So in a real sense, Martha's feelings were natural and somewhat understandable. That may be one reason Jesus' rebuke was so mild. In normal circumstances, any older sister would think it obligatory for the younger sister to help in serving a meal to guests. In other words, what Martha expected Mary to do was, in itself, perfectly fine and good.

Nevertheless, what Mary was doing was better still. She had "chosen the good part" (Luke 10:42). She had discovered the one thing needful: true worship and devotion of her heart and full attention to Christ. That was a higher priority even than service, and the good part she had chosen would not be taken away from her, even for the sake of something as gracious and beneficial as helping

Martha prepare Jesus a meal. Mary's humble, obedient heart was a far greater gift to Christ than Martha's well-set table.

This establishes worship as the highest of all priorities for every Christian. Nothing, including even service rendered to Christ, is more important than listening to Him and honoring Him with our hearts. Remember what Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well: God is seeking true worshipers (John 4:23). Christ had found one in Mary. He would not affirm Martha's reprimand of her, because it was Mary, not Martha, who properly understood that worship is a higher duty to Christ than service rendered on His behalf.

It is a danger, even for those of us who love Christ, that we not become so concerned with *doing things for Him* that we begin to neglect *hearing Him* and *remembering what He has done for us*. Never allow your service for Christ to crowd out your worship of Him! The moment our works become more important to us than our worship, we have turned true spiritual priorities on their heads.

In fact, that tendency is the very thing that is so poisonous about all forms of pietism and theological liberalism. Whenever you elevate good deeds over sound doctrine and true worship, you ruin the works too. Doing good works for the works' sake has a tendency to exalt self and depreciate the work of Christ. Good deeds, human charity, and acts of kindness are crucial expressions of real faith, but they must flow from a true reliance on *God's* redemption and *His* righteousness.

After all, our own good works can never be a means of earning God's favor; that's why in Scripture the focus of faith is always on what God has done for us, and never on what we do for Him (Romans 10:2-4). Observe any form of religion in which good works are ranked as more important than authentic faith or sound doctrine, and you'll discover a system that denigrates Christ while unduly magnifying self.

Not that Martha was guilty of gross self-righteousness. We shouldn't be any harsher in our assessment of her than Christ was. She loved the Lord. Her faith was real, but by neglecting the needful thing and busying herself with mere activity, she became spiritually unbalanced. Her behavior reminds us that a damaging spirit of self-righteousness can slip in and contaminate even the hearts of those who have sincerely embraced Christ as their true righteousness. Martha's harshness toward Mary exposed precisely that kind of imbalance in her own heart.

Jesus' gentle words of correction to Martha (as well as His commendation of Mary) set the priorities once more in their proper order. Worship (which is epitomized here by listening intently to Jesus' teachings) is the one thing most needed. Service to Christ must always be subordinate to that.

The fact that worship has a higher priority than service in the Christian life is exactly what the gospel teaches us: what we *believe* is ultimately more crucial than what we do.

Martha's "much serving" was a distraction (Luke 10:40, NKJV) from the "one thing" (v. 42) that was really needed—listening to and learning from Jesus. Religious works often have a sinister tendency to eclipse faith itself. Proper good works always flow from faith and are the fruit of it. What we do is vital, because that is the evidence that our faith is living and real (James 2:14-16). But faith must come first and is the only viable foundation for true and lasting good works. All of that is wrapped up

in the truth that works are not the instrument of justification; faith is (Romans 4:4-5).

Human instinct seems to tell us that what we *do* is more important than what we believe. But that is a false instinct, the product of our fallen self-righteousness. It is a totally wrong way of thinking—*sinfully* wrong. We must never think more highly of our works for Christ than we do of His works on our behalf.

Of course, such a thought would never consciously enter Martha's mind. Martha loved Christ. She genuinely trusted Him, although her faith was imperfect and had moments of weakness. Still, on this occasion, she allowed her anxiety about what she must do for Christ to overwhelm her gratitude over what He would do for her.

I'm very grateful that Christ's rebuke of Martha was a gentle one. I must confess that it is very easy for me to identify with her. I love the privilege of serving the Lord, and He has blessed me with more than enough to stay busy. It is tempting at times to become swept up in the activity of ministry and forget that faith and worship must always have priority over work. In our sometimes hectic lives, we all need to cultivate more of Mary's worshipful, listening spirit and less of Martha's scrambling commotion.

Martha and Mary also remind us that God uses all kinds of people. He has gifted us differently for a reason, and we're not to despise one another or look at others with contempt, just because we have differing temperaments or contrasting personalities.

Martha was a noble and godly woman with a servant's heart and a rare capacity for work. Mary was nobler still, with an unusual predisposition for worship and wisdom. Both were remarkable in their own ways. If we weight their gifts and their instincts together, they give us a wonderful example to follow. May we diligently cultivate the best instincts of both of these extraordinary women.

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

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