

Opening Words

Martha has welcomed Jesus into her home and is hoping to make it a grand occasion. But calamities in the kitchen soon make a mess and Martha loses control and complains. Jesus' response to her is a lesson she will not soon forget!

15 In the Home of Martha and Mary 1

Jesus had just finished telling a life-changing story. It was the story of a man left for dead on the side of the dangerous road between Jerusalem and Jericho. Jesus stunned his audience with the story. The hero in the story was not a Jew. The hero was a hated Samaritan and it drove home many important points that his audience and the world needed to hear about loving one's neighbor.

But the story was now finished and the refreshing time in the warm Jericho valley that Jesus and his disciples had enjoyed was finished also.

"Come," Jesus said. "Let's walk the road that the man left for dead travelled! We go to Bethany." Bethany was a small village 1½ - 2 miles east of Jerusalem. It was an important village in Israel. The Jewish people designated three places east of Jerusalem to care for the sick. One of these was Bethany. Bethany was also a favorite site for pilgrims travelling from the north in Galilee to Judea in the south. In order not to encounter the hated Samaritans, the Jews would bypass Samaria by travelling east of the Jordan River, come to Jericho, and then traverse up the steep road to Jerusalem and lodge in Bethany, a final resting place before arriving in the great city.

Hospitality to travelers and care for the sick, Bethany was indeed a special village and in it lived a man and his two sisters. They were a leading family in the village and their names were Lazarus, Martha, and Mary.

As Jesus entered the village, the family welcomed him and his disciples.

"Jesus, we have heard so much about you. Please, would you do us the honor of staying at our place where you can find refreshment. This will also be a place where you may instruct your disciples."

"I gladly accept your invitation, Lazarus," Jesus replied, and he and his disciples followed this noble family to their estate.

As Jesus entered the home, Martha, the older of the two sisters welcomed him.

"Greetings, rabbi, in the name of the Lord. We have heard so much about you and have eagerly hoped that this day might come where we can serve you."

The younger sister, Mary, said, "Master, the stories we have heard have been the joy of our hearts. We long to hear you speak."

The house was large, large enough for a great meal for Jesus and his disciples and large enough for him to teach his disciples.

Hospitality in the ancient world, and in many parts of our world today, was a blessed gift to travelers. Among the Jewish people its virtue was extolled. A faithful Jewish household would eagerly look forward to entertaining people. In Jerusalem, no man was to count his house as his own, and this attitude spilled over to the surrounding villages such as Bethany. During the feasts when the population of Jerusalem would swell, there was room for all. Owners of homes would hang curtains at their front door to show travelers that room was available. And many would stay in Bethany during the feasts as well.

“Let your house be wide open, and let the poor be the children of your house,” was one saying among the people. Some said there should be four doors to every house to welcome guests from every direction.

The rabbis, the teachers of the people had many things to say about the importance of hospitality. Some said that hospitality involved as great a merit as attendance at an academy of learning in Jerusalem. Some said that to entertain a wise man and to send him away with presents was as meritorious as the daily sacrifices in the temple.

One rabbi read Psalm 109:31 – “God shall stand at the right hand of the poor,” and commented, “Whenever a poor man stands at your door, the Holy One, blessed be his name, stands at his right hand. Give him alms, knowing that you shall receive a reward from him who stands at his right hand.”

The rabbis taught that when giving hospitality, they were imitating God who clothed the naked (for he clothed Adam and Eve). God also visited the sick (for he visited Abraham in the heat of the day). God comforted the mourners (for he blessed Isaac after his father Abraham’s death), and God buried the dead (for he took care of the body of Moses when he died on Mt. Nebo). Thus, to be hospitable was to imitate God Himself.

As Jesus and his disciples entered the home, the customary greetings were given. Kisses were exchanged, feet and hands washed, and oil given for anointing. Jesus and his disciples went to an area of the house where they could rest and talk about Scripture. Martha and the servants, and she thought her sister Mary, went to another part of the house to prepare a meal for everyone.

Jesus sat with his disciples and the lessons about God’s kingdom began for everyone.

“How my heart is filled with joy!” Martha thought. “I have so longed for Jesus to be in my home! I have heard so much about him! His miracles of healing, his teaching on the Scriptures, and especially his care for the poor and women. And now he is here! This is, indeed, a day I will never forget! I will make special effort to show our esteem for this great man. I will make Jesus and his disciples my best meal. This will be a day they will not soon forget!”

As Jesus began teaching in the common area where the men were, Martha listened for a moment. How wonderful his words were! But then, she thought, “I really need to get this meal going.” She went to the cooking area and began to work. She organized her servants into groups with specific assignments. Some were sent to the village to buy the necessary items for the meal. Others made

sure Jesus and his disciples had the greatest of care and were comfortable. Still others got the cooking fires ready and began to prepare the many dishes they would serve.

Everything was in motion under Martha's expert supervision. She looked on with satisfaction. She knew that her reputation as an honorable woman was dependent upon her ability to manage her household. How she wanted to do the best job possible. But then, a servant came to her, interrupting her thoughts and said, "I'm sorry ma'am, the market did not have everything we needed. That special spice to make the meal taste just right was not there." Martha's brow furrowed, and she said, "How odd! The market has never been out of it before. And of all days! But, we'll just have to find a substitute for it although, I fear it may not taste as good as I had hoped."

A few minutes later, another servant came to her and said, "Ma'am, I have just returned from the market and the vegetables were not as fresh as we have come to expect. The pickings were not that good today. Shall I use the vegetables that we have been storing? They are a few days old but should be alright."

Martha could not believe this report. How could these two things go wrong on this day? But before she could answer the servant's question, another servant approached and said,

"Ma'am I am so sorry but that special serving tray that is your favorite, I have just broken it. It slipped out of my hands and crashed on the hard, stone floor and it is now shattered.

Just at that moment she heard yelling from the cooking area. Martha ran to the area just in time to hear one servant say to another "You have made the flames too high. Look, the meat is scorched. And look at these pieces. These are burned, and most are inedible." Martha was horrified by what she heard and saw.

"Why are these things going wrong on this day above all days when Jesus is in my house!" Frustration mounted. She began to feel sorry for herself. "Why is this happening to me?" Then she looked around and realized someone was missing – Mary her sister was not there. Where was Mary?

Martha went into the courtyard and called out, "Mary, Mary, where are you?" But Mary was not there. Then she asked one of the servants, "Did Mary go with you into the village?" and the servant replied, "No, she has not been with me." Then, with some concern Martha asked several other servants and finally one of them sheepishly said, "I know where Mary is. She is with the men. She is sitting at Jesus' feet listening to him teach."

"Sitting at Jesus' feet? Sitting in the room with the men? This is inappropriate. Mary's place is by my side helping me to get everything ready for the men. No wonder things are going wrong. If Mary had been where she was supposed to be, there would not be this chaos."

Martha walked toward the room where the men were seated. As she approached she could hear their voices and then she heard Mary's voice asking Jesus a question about the kingdom of God. Martha could not believe it. She came to the doorway of the room, and there was Mary sitting at Jesus' feet.

“Pssst.” Martha tried to get Mary’s attention discreetly. She made faces, she made more hissing noises, she motioned to try to get her attention and looked silly doing it, but while some of the men looked in Martha’s direction, Mary remained focused on Jesus. Just at that moment another servant came up behind Martha and said, “I’m sorry to bother you ma’am, but your attention is really needed. You won’t believe what has happened now.”

And then Martha burst into tears and came forward to Jesus and said, “Oh Jesus, I am so sorry to disturb your gathering with these men. I have been busy preparing the meal and nothing is going right, and my sister, she is supposed to help. If she had been with the women, if she had been where she belonged, I would have had everything ready by now.” And Martha burst into tears again while Jesus remained silent and Mary continued to sit at his feet.

Martha dried the tears from her eyes. She looked at Mary. She looked at the disciples, and she looked at Jesus again and said, “Lord, say something. Don’t you care? Don’t you care that my sister has left me to do all this serving alone?”

“Martha, I do care for you.”

“Then, tell her to help me.”

“Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things. But, really, only one thing is necessary today. Mary has chosen this one thing. She has chosen the good part. And I will not allow it to be taken from her.”

Martha stood there speechless, humbled in the presence of the men, humbled before Jesus, and humbled before her sister. Why did Jesus say this to her? She had tried so hard.