

Opening Words

Martha has been gently humbled by the Lord. All her busy-ness got her into a mess, but what lessons does her story and that of her sister Mary have for us?

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The story of Martha and Mary teaches us many important things. First, it tells us that Martha was distracted. She did not begin with anger. She began Jesus' visit with joy. She had welcomed him into her home. She had wanted to do her best for him. All was commendable.

But we receive our first clue that something had gone wrong when the story tells us that Martha was distracted with all her preparations. This tells us that she also wanted to hear from the Lord. Women were taught in synagogues. When Jesus preached in villages women were in attendance. Women received healing from him. And Martha probably looked forward to spending time with Jesus and hearing him. But somewhere along the way she became distracted from hearing him. After a few minutes, the preparations took precedence over listening to Jesus and she began to focus more on things than the Lord. The ancient language of the story tells us that she was “dragged away with her many services.” How interesting that service to the Lord can drag one away from the Lord!

Second, the story tells us that Martha became worried. Jesus said, “Martha, Martha, you *are worried* about so many things.”

The original language also provides an interesting picture. The word “worry” originally meant to be pulled in two. At first, Martha was just distracted. She wanted to hear the Lord, but there were so many things vying for her attention! Once she began to pay more attention to them, it is as if they sunk their hooks into her and pulled her away from Jesus.

She wanted to hear the Lord, but she wanted to make this a grand occasion. She could not be in two places at one time. Distraction grew into the bondage of worry and her heart was pulled apart.

Third, the story tells us that she was bothered. Jesus said, “Martha, Martha you are worried *and bothered* about so many things.”

The word “bothered” literally means a “confusion and disorder.” It refers to something being agitated or stirred up like waves of the sea stirred by high winds. Her distraction became worry which then began to affect her face, her body movements, and the pace and noise of her service. Don't we all know what that is like? Don't we know the difference between a cupboard door closing and a cupboard door being closed a little too hard a few too many times and the pots and pans on the stove clanging around more than normal?

Martha's distraction turned into worry which caused her to bustle about the house in her service. She was in a storm.

Fourth, Martha questioned the Lord's love. Martha went to Jesus and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone?" I love the first words of her question, "Lord, do you not care?" I have found one other story in the Gospels where this exact phrase was used. When Jesus was in a boat with his disciples, a great storm came upon them while Jesus was resting. The disciples were bailing water from the boat as Jesus slept on. Finally, some of his disciples came to him at the height of the storm and said, "Jesus, do you not care that we are perishing?"

Martha used the same words. It's almost as if she is blaming God for her problems. I wonder, if, after she could not get Mary to respond to her efforts to get her attention, she began to look at Jesus with a "don't you care about what is happening! Don't you see what is going on!" type of face?

And I wonder, how many times we have said those things to the Lord or we have felt that way. Believing that no one cares or that God doesn't care that we are perishing.

There is one more step that Martha took in her downward spiral from joy to distress. She became demanding. After Martha asked Jesus if he cared, he probably replied, "Yes, I do care" to which Martha replied, "Then, tell her to help me." Martha thought she had the solution to her problem. Her solution was to drag Mary away from the peace of the presence of Jesus into her disordered world of chaos and stress.

Martha's solution is an example of how people can get trapped into thinking that their problems are because of others. Martha thought her problems were because of her sister. But Martha's problems were because of Martha.

The Lord did care for Martha. He knew what was happening. He saw everything. And though he surely did not want the entire burden to fall on her, there was something far more important than Mary helping her ... something far more important that needed to happen than having a fabulous meal.

Jesus said, "only a few things are necessary, really only one and Mary has chosen the good that will not be taken away from her." What did Martha need? – to learn to choose what was best.

This story is not teaching us to pursue a life of quiet contemplation instead of a life of deeds. This story is not teaching that a life of quiet devotion is better than a life of activity. The issue is choosing what is best in each situation and what is best for life. The issue is choosing that which will last forever.

In this story, the best was to sit at the feet of Jesus. There was no need for an elaborate meal with all kinds of preparations. Martha did right in welcoming him. Maybe a meal was in order. But these good things became wrong. She lost sight of the priority in her life and in her home ... and that priority was listening to Jesus.

This is a picture of us who do good things, who do things we should do but who lose focus in our work and miss the important part of life, loving God with all our heart. How interesting that Martha's slide began with being distracted, losing sight of what was most important.

Some of us may need to ask, “What am I doing with my life? Am I caught up in activity after activity with no purpose and not growing in my love for the Lord? Am I distracted or focused on hearing God? Do I tend to worry? Do I get bothered? Do I feel that God doesn’t care? Do I blame others and become demanding thinking that I have the solution and only if other people see things my way then everything will be OK?”

If you answer yes to any of these, you need to ask God to show you what is important.

It is possible to be busy and to be in the center of God’s will. That’s why I said this story is not about sitting at Jesus’ feet vs. doing things. It’s not the amount of activity or type of activity, but it is if our hearts are at rest. Jesus was so busy at times in his life that he did not have time for a meal. The difference between him and Martha is that he was obeying God and his heart was at rest. God calls us to obedience and rest, not busy-ness. Martha’s problem is not that she was busy but that she was busy with the wrong things. Mary was busy too – sitting at the Lord’s feet.

This story teaches us that whatever we are doing, preparing a banquet or reading God’s word, we need to enjoy God, the people he puts into our lives, and the work he has given us. When Jesus was extremely busy he was enjoying the company of other people, and enjoying His Father in heaven, and if we are not enjoying God that should be a caution that we need to take a break and refocus on what is most important.

It was quite possible that Martha could have listened to the Lord for a while, then quietly got up and made a few preparations with a calm heart and mind. She could have gone into the cooking area and prayed, “Lord God of Israel, I would like to be in there for the whole thing, but I know that you are right here with me, and as I make these preparations, I make them for you. And Lord, I’m glad that Mary can hear what Jesus is saying and I ask that you bless her. Thank you for her example of devotion. Help me to follow that devotion.”

Then, she could have served the Lord with a sweet spirit and instead of hearing, “Martha, Martha you are worried and bothered about so much,” she could have heard, “Martha, Martha, you have such peace and such sweetness as you go about your duties. You are truly an example of one who worships God with her service.”

And my friends, I ask you today, “What does Jesus say about you?”