

The One Thing Needed

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LUKE 10:38-42

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

A full exposition of our passage should explain how it fits into the broader concerns of the Gospel, noting the Lukan motifs of hearing, service, hospitality, journey, and so forth.¹ For our modest purpose, however, a brief and narrow treatment will have to suffice.

Although the episode begins with "Jesus and his disciples" traveling together, it immediately narrows its focus on Jesus.² Then, for the rest of this narrative unit, we read only about his relation to Martha and Mary, and perhaps also a little about the relation between these sisters (v. 40), while the disciples fall to the background.

Luke does not identify the "village," but he mentions that Martha and Mary had their "home" there. John also mentions these sisters, and there he writes that they lived in Bethany (John 11:1), about two miles from Jerusalem (John 11:18).

The verse says that "a woman named *Martha* opened her home." Martha seems to be the one who takes the initiative in the biblical narratives (v. 38; also John 11:20), who is responsible for the affairs of the household, and who is more socially active and aggressive. Probably for this reason, it is often assumed that she is the elder sister.

Mary, on the other hand, appears more passive (v. 39; John 11:20, 28-29), but nevertheless thoughtful and passionate (John 12:3). In fact, she appears more spiritually advanced than some of the others in her grasp of Christ's significance and in the way that he ought to be treated (see John 12:1-8).

While Martha welcomes Jesus as an honored guest, Mary welcomes him as a spiritual Teacher. One welcomes him from a social perspective, and the other from a spiritual perspective. The two are not in inherent conflict, but one cannot act in a manner that gives equal emphasis to both. So the question remains: Is Jesus *a Teacher* who happens to be a guest, or is he *a guest* who happens to be a Teacher?

¹ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), p. 433.

² Even if it is *possible*, contrary to one interpretation, it is not *probable* that the disciples have temporarily parted ways with Jesus by the time he arrives at the village.

Luke writes that Mary sat at the feet of Jesus to hear his words. At this point, Luke refers to Jesus as "the Lord," and this is to be repeated before this episode is over. That she "sat at the Lord's feet" indicates more than her physical posture, or even a submissive attitude, but the expression identifies her as a disciple. Paul was "brought up...at the feet of Gamaliel" (Acts 22:3, KJV).

The idea of discipleship is reinforced when Luke writes that Mary has assumed this posture to hear the teachings of Jesus. This directly connects this episode to the "hearing" motif so evident throughout this Gospel. Consider Luke 6:47³ and 11:28,⁴ and of course, the parable of the sower (8:4-15), too long to reproduce here.

What Luke describes here is unusual not only because a woman has taken a disciple's position under first-century Judaism, but also because Jesus permits and then even defends her decision to be his disciple. We will say more about this later.

Martha, on the other hand, is so distracted by all the things she does to welcome her guest that she fails to pay attention to his teachings. Her behavior is not obviously wrong. She is the hostess and a woman, and she is acting according to social propriety and expectation. But man or woman, then or now, it is never socially proper or expected for one to become a true disciple of Christ – to hear and obey his teachings will always entail defiance against the world's standards and expectations.

Finally, Martha bursts out in frustration, not directly at Mary, but at Jesus: "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" She could have said, "Lord, I would like to be a good host and give you and your disciples a warm welcome, and usually I would be expected to perform all that I am doing. However, instead of helping me, my sister Mary is sitting at your feet listening to your teachings. Should she be helping me, or should I sit down with her and listen to you?"

Instead, without asking what Jesus prefers, and more than assuming that Jesus would side with her, Martha assumes that he *should* side with her, and she is annoyed *at him* that he has not already done something about the situation. Her frustration has led her to falsely judge Mary's behavior, and then also the Lord's tolerance of what she perceives to be Mary's negligence.

Lenski thinks that Martha's complaint exhibits no irreverence or faultfinding against Jesus. He writes, "But this would have been open impoliteness and rudeness, and Jesus' reply indicates nothing of this kind."⁵ However, this argument begs the question, as it is based only on Lenski's speculation as to what Jesus' reply *would have been* if Martha's statement had exhibited "open impoliteness and rudeness." In fact, one may more

³ "I will show you what he is like who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice."

⁴ "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it."

⁵ R. C. H. Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament: The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel* (Hendrickson Publishers), p. 614.

naturally say that her statement indeed exhibits "open impoliteness and rudeness," only that Jesus' reply demonstrates his patience toward her.

Lenski continues: "Some have found open disrespect in the words, 'carest thou not' but forget Martha's address, 'Lord,' and the obvious reply that Jesus would have had to make, namely promptly to withdraw."⁶ In other words, he thinks that it is impossible to address Jesus as "Lord" and show disrespect at the same time.

But this is a naïve interpretation, and it is Lenski who has forgotten all the biblical examples in which, even the prophets who addressed him as the Sovereign and Almighty in the same breath, have sometimes expressed frustration against God. Of course, any complaint that is more than an expression of personal need and distress, but that amounts to finding fault with God, is illegitimate and sinful. At times, they were patiently encouraged; at other times, they were sternly rebuked.

Lenski's argument implies that one must always speak as a thoroughgoing atheist or non-Christian when one exhibits irreverence, but this is false. One mode of irreverent behavior is precisely to recognize who God is and then speak as if he is not who he is, or to acknowledge his wisdom, power, and justice, and then speak in a way that questions his wisdom, power, and justice.

To call Jesus "Lord" and then criticize or contradict him only makes one's irreverence all the more sinful. By Lenski's reasoning, Matthew 16:16 would neutralize any irreverence in Matthew 16:22. But to "rebuke" Jesus, as if to correct him about his own mission on earth, and after one has just called him "Christ, the Son of the Living God," only makes Peter's irreverence all the more glaring and inexcusable. Thus the response, "Get behind me, Satan!" (v. 23), is altogether appropriate.

So, let us qualify and soften our criticisms against Martha in whatever way that is appropriate – let us say that she errs out of frustration and ignorance, but not malice – but we must not dismiss what she says altogether. Her statement is indeed impolite and irreverent.

This is, therefore, a warning to us about the frustration that can arise when we are anxious over doing what we think is appropriate and necessary, instead of following God's program of discipleship. And this frustration can lead to a false judgment against our brothers and sisters in Christ, and an outburst of irreverence against the very God that we claim to promote and worship by our distracted condition.

In response, Jesus offers Martha a rather gentle correction. His criticism is twofold. First, she is "worried and upset." Her agitated state of mind prevents her from maintaining correct judgments and priorities, and to assume the position of a disciple of Christ.

⁶ Ibid. Lenski again refers to "the *obvious* reply that Jesus *would have had* to make." But this is nothing more than speculation, and it is not obvious at all. It is illegitimate to speculate about what Jesus *would have* done unless Lenski can demonstrate that it is a necessary implication of something that is *in the text*, or in some other parts of the Bible.

Second, she is worried and upset "about many things." Thus she errs both qualitatively and quantitatively.

Martha's condition prevents her from obtaining the spiritual benefits that is readily available because of Christ's presence, and from focusing on the one thing that is needed. In contrast, Mary is sitting at the Lord's feet, in the position of a disciple, to hear his teachings.⁷ She has chosen rightly, and Jesus defends and protects this choice, saying, "it will not be taken away from her."

From a "history of redemption" perspective – that is, from Luke's own broader concern about how this episode fits into the rest of his Gospel and then also the rest of Scripture, and its significance in the progressive unveiling of God's plan, in which the work of Christ is a climax (Hebrews 1:1-2) – this passage is concerned not only with showing us the priority of the contemplative over the active and the spiritual over the social, or even the fact that *women* as well as men are to become the disciples of Christ and to receive doctrinal instructions. It teaches us all these things and more.

Christ is the highest revelation of God, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). His coming is a personal manifestation of God's kingdom, and for one to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness is to become his disciple, to give him the priority, and to hear and obey his teachings (Matthew 7:24-29). To become his disciple means more than to make him one minor aspect of our lives, but it means to let his teachings invade every area of our thought and conduct. This in turn transforms our beliefs, agendas, expectations, and relationships.

Many expositions of our passage fail to note its redemptive-historical context. On the other hand, it would be wrong to think that the grand purpose of this passage forbids us to derive from it some narrower lessons. In fact, it is these specific and practical implications that teach us how to daily operate as Christ's disciples in this world, and thus fulfill the broader concern of this passage. A correct approach, therefore, would keep both aspects in mind.

Christ calls his elect to become his disciples, and this means the same thing in our day as it did in Mary's day – we are to hear and obey the teachings of Christ, and to build our lives on his word. To become a disciple means that we are to give our Master and Teacher the priority in our lives. For us to become attentive to Christ's teachings implies that we cannot be equally attentive to other things at the same time. In other words, if our agendas and activities remain exactly the same as before, then there is no sign that we are his disciples at all.

Then, being his disciples will often require us to defy the expectations of others and the roles that they assign to us. Indeed, our passage uses a female disciple to make a point, and in doing so, it makes a point about female discipleship. Whatever roles society and

⁷ "According to the rabbis, learning Torah is better than any other activity," Craig A. Evans, *Luke* (Hendrickson Publishers, 1990), p. 179.

even Scripture assign to women, our passage forever declares that women's first right and duty is to be disciples of Christ – that is, learners after Christ.

Some people may think that this is no longer an issue, at least in their parts of the world, but in many churches even today, while discipleship means "hear and do" for the men, it means just "do" for the women. Sometimes, this is not a policy that has been deliberately adopted, but simply assumed. But at other times, it is a philosophy that has been consciously adopted because of unrenewed thinking or a faulty theology.

The problem exists in a different form even in those parts of the world in which women have been "liberated." In these parts of the world, it is assumed that women have the right to become disciples of Christ not because of the teachings of Scripture, but because this right has been "given" by society, just as it is withheld by other cultures. In neither case is the policy toward female discipleship dictated by divine revelation.

On the one hand, the women's right to become disciples is withheld by suppression; on the other hand, the women's right to become disciples is granted by insurrection, even against the very roles assigned to them by the Scripture, so that they will "hear" but not "do." While it is right and necessary to defy the social expectations that hinder us from following Christ's teachings, it is self-defeating to defy the word of God also in order to seize the right to hear the word of God.

The right of women to become disciples of Christ and to benefit from all the teaching programs that the Church has to offer comes from the declaration of Christ himself, that this "will not be taken" away from them. Just as we must disregard society's prohibition against anything that Scripture commands, we do not need society's permission to perform that which Scripture demands. Therefore, there is no conflict between granting women full access to all the biblical and doctrinal training available to men, while at the same time enforcing what Scripture teaches regarding their roles in the home and the church.

As stated, the passage uses a female disciple to make a point – it does not just make a point about female discipleship. This "point" is that Christ calls all the elect to become his disciples, to learn and follow his teachings, and that one's role as a disciple supercedes all his other roles in family and society. And this is why being a discipleship of Christ will often entail defying social expectations and restrictions. It would be a mistake to apply this only to women, but we must see that the full rights and duties of discipleship apply also to the uneducated, to the laymen, and even to children. They must also "hear and obey," and not just "obey."

Most sermons and commentaries on this passage are careful to warn us against Martha's misguided priorities and to set up Mary's example as one worthy of emulation. However, a large number of them fail to note that Jesus also serves as an example that is directly relevant to many Christians.

It is true that Jesus is unique, and no one else can occupy his exact position in any situation. Yet, many of us play various roles in our lives that are analogous to the role that Jesus plays in this episode. That is, some of us are in positions to defend and protect the spiritual rights of the "Marys" in our lives, and to encourage the "Marthas" to imitate the "Marys." People who are in such positions include ministers, teachers, husbands, and parents.

Our passage teaches the minister to enforce a program of discipleship that emphasizes hearing and doing, instead of just doing, and to preach a spiritual gospel that is founded on faith that produces good works, rather than a merely social gospel. Churches should offer theology classes before lunches and picnics. Or, at least they should have lunches and picnics for the purpose of preaching and discussing the word of God.

Classes on theology and biblical studies must be opened to all kinds of individuals – men, women, the uneducated, the rich, the poor, and children *of all ages*. Contrary to the assumption of many, children who are only three to four years old are fully capable of understanding basic teachings on God, creation, sin, salvation, death, justice, punishment, heaven, and hell.

If not for the unfamiliar theological vocabularies, any child should have already read something on the level of Berkhof's *Systematic Theology* by the time they enter the first grade. The concepts are not difficult, but the words take time to learn. The solution is for the parents and ministers to teach them these things in simpler language. But in terms of content, there is no need for dilution at all.⁸

Some parents think that they are spiritual heroes if they have succeeded in teaching their children the Shorter Catechism by the time they are around fourteen or fifteen. I might agree with this if these children (or the parents!) have Down's Syndrome or something like that (but even then I wonder); otherwise, these parents have failed miserably in fulfilling their duty.

If children can be taught evolution by their teachers before they reach the third grade; if they can understand the adultery, sodomy, rape, murder, theft, and perjury portrayed on television and video games; and if they can grasp and apply the concepts of courage, revenge, death, demons, and the supernatural assumed in many children and teen novels, then surely they can understand much more theology than what most parents and ministers give them credit for.

As it is, many parents let the world indoctrinate their children first, starting in kindergarten, in the hopes that they will then turn everything around by teaching them biblical doctrines and ethics later, perhaps by the time they enter high school. Some segments of the Church are better than others in this area, but still too many tend to think that theology is a rather "adult" subject. But the time to start learning is the moment a child begins to understand language.

⁸ See my lecture series, "Great Expectations," on children's potential for early intellectual development, or as my position goes, their *normal* intellectual development.

If a child can attend a theology class without being disruptive, then he *must* be admitted. The church must accept him into the class, or make some appropriate accommodation for him. Children must be given the chance to excel, to read theology books and biblical commentaries, and to ask the ultimate questions. Some of us might have been extraordinarily slow, but this is no reason to hinder those who are normal, and there might be several who are geniuses. Never measure your child's potential by your own limitations and failures.

From this perspective, I oppose dividing classes into different levels according to age and gender, although it is appropriate to divide them into levels (beginning, intermediate, etc.) *regardless* of age and gender, at least so that the teachings are not completely unintelligible to the beginners, whether children or adults. Some churches, sometimes for very legitimate reasons, insist on dividing their programs by gender. This is fine, but do not begin by teaching the women to sew and cook – teach them basic theology and exegesis first. Make them *disciples* – make their service to God a *rational* service, and help them build their lives on biblical understanding.

Our passage is not only or even mainly about female piety, but it has a lot to do with it. In a marriage relationship, the husband's position is analogous to that of Jesus' here, having the authority to either encourage or hinder the woman's spiritual progress, and to pursue a normal course of discipleship.

The husband's first duty is to love the wife, and this is expressed by imitating the way that Christ loves his church, in sanctifying her by the word of God. That is, as a husband, you must love your wife by helping her progress in sanctification, in knowledge and in holiness. Therefore, to imitate Jesus' example in our passage, you must defend and protect her right to learn as a disciple of Christ, hearing and obeying the word of God.

This has a number of practical implications. For example, it might mean that when your wife wishes to serve you or the home in a particular way that she considers as part of her duty, you should sometimes encourage her to read a systematic theology or biblical commentary instead. But does it not remain that some things in the home must get done? This is true, so *you* go do them.

The point is that you must assist your wife to grow as a disciple of Christ, in both thought and conduct, in knowledge and in holiness, even if this entails making some sacrifices on your part. You must acknowledge that she is a fellow-heir to eternal life (1 Peter 3:7), that she is just as much a disciple as you are, and then you must act like it. This is the fruit of true love, as Christ loves his Church, and also your duty as a husband.