



One Thing Is Necessary

Luke 10:38-42

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Like we have been talking about over the last couple of weeks, returning to our first love for Christ demands that we do what Jesus said we must do – that we remember, repent, and repeat. I know we want to love Christ, to love Him as He deserves to be loved and that we want to feel deeply and passionately about Christ. As I have been thinking about what it means for us to return to our first love as a church, to have our hearts renewed, our devotion and love to Christ reawakened and deepened, I believe that one of the best things that we can do is to see pictures of what having Christ as our first love looks like. Last week, we looked at the story of the former prostitute, now a fully forgiven child of God, as she comes to the house of Simon the Pharisee in order to anoint Jesus with expensive ointment. And in that account, we saw how the simple intention to anoint Jesus' feet became one of the most picturesque expressions and accounts of free, unreserved, unrestrained and abundant love for Christ in all of Scripture. Today we are going to look at the story of two sisters and their choices. Look with me at Luke 10:38-42.

“Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.” But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.”” (Luke 10:38–42, ESV)

It's a funny thing, but whenever I preach from this text, someone in the congregation will run up to me afterward and remind me of what a really good person Martha was, how she is misunderstood, how she has a good heart, and so on. It may come as a shock, but let me just tell you that Jesus does not commend Martha, her priorities, her attitude, or her service at all. And that is because, at least in these five verses, there is absolutely nothing to commend. Nothing.

That sounds like a shock, if you have heard this passage preached before. You know why? Because many preachers tend to characterize Martha and her sister Mary in this way: Martha, they will say, was a type A personality, industrious, hard-working, practical, determined, driven, someone who gets things done that need to be done. Mary, on the other hand, is relational, the introspective and thinking sort, disinterested in practical things that need to be done, etc. They focus on some perceived personality differences between Martha and Mary and will many times make that a major part of the message. The problem is that it is all conjecture, assumption, and speculation. Could some of this be true? Perhaps. But rather than try to invent some contrast between the perceived differences between the sisters, let's deal with fact.

Here's what we will see about Martha from this passage and the others in the Scripture where she shows up. She acts often out of her flesh. She can be abrasive, not very discerning spiritually. She has poor priorities and sometimes does not recognize the relative worth of things. Mary, on the other hand, is spiritually sensitive. She is responsive to Christ. She has right priorities, rightly discerning between what is of eternal worth and what is not. The story of these two sisters is not the story of contrast between two ways of serving Christ or of the perceived personality differences that have been invented throughout the ages. This is a contrast in two sisters in the actual issue that Jesus Christ addresses, their hearts, their choices, and the difference those choices make. The difference between these two women, as far as this text goes, is the decision by Mary to commune with Christ and sit at His feet and Martha's decision not to

Jesus has just finished an encounter with a lawyer who had asked Him what the greatest commandment was. When Jesus asked the lawyer what he thought, "And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live."" (Luke 10:27–28, ESV) Jesus affirmed that as true and then tells a story, the parable of the good Samaritan, that illustrates in perfect detail what it means to love your neighbor as yourself. Now, as He gets to Bethany, we are going to see the first part – Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength -- demonstrated in this encounter with the sisters in Bethany.

The Scripture tells us that when Jesus got to town, He went to Martha's house and she welcomed into her home. That's great, so far so good. It is what happens next that is the problem. "And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. "" (Luke 10:39–40, ESV) When Jesus comes into the house, both sisters make a decision. They both choose what is of most importance to them. Martha chooses to go to the kitchen and Mary sat at Jesus' feet and

heard His Word. Mary chooses to sit at Jesus' feet and hear him teach and be served by Him, drinking in time with Him, while Martha gives her attention to making a meal and bustling around and serving drinks and what ever else makes for successful hostessing.

Now we might think, "Wait a minute. What's wrong with what Martha does? This isn't all that bad. Someone has to make a meal. Someone has to serve. She is sacrificing for her sister's sake." Well, let's think about it. Martha never took a moment to ask Jesus what He wanted. She never even considered His desires, never thought to ask what would please Him. Certainly, as the matriarch of the house, she would have received Jesus into her home and gotten him seated and after hearing him begin to teach, she turns and leaves the room to get to her preparations. She related to Jesus at a distance, doing things rather than being with Him and she expected that He would be pleased and flattered by what she did. Rather than valuing Christ, what she did actually devalued Him and devalued a relationship with him. She was about much serving but little about devotion and intimate communion. She did a bunch of stuff apparently, but she gave no thought to sitting at His feet.

By contrast, that is precisely where Mary was -- at Jesus' feet. In fact, if you read through the Scripture, you find that "at Jesus' feet" was one of those places that Mary spent a lot of time. That's where you find her. Sitting at Jesus' feet, falling down at Jesus' feet, anointing His feet and wiping His feet with her hair. What makes this scene a little unusual is that Mary is a woman. It was uncommon in ancient Jewish culture for women to be allowed to be involved in such intimate discipleship. So, how did she come to be at His feet? I have a theory -- just a theory -- that since she was the youngest sister and most likely would have had the responsibility of washing Jesus' feet, that as she washed His feet and as He began to speak she was captivated by Him. Mary's eagerness and hunger was for the Word of God and for the Lord who was teaching her. She was as close as she could get to Jesus, intensely interested in Him and in all that he said. This is the idea being conveyed here.

Mary sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. The word "listened" comes from the Greek word akouo. In addition to "hear" and "listen," the word also carries with it the idea of considering what is being said and understanding what you hear. In other words, Mary did not simply enjoy listening to Jesus teach because she found Him to be entertaining but because she wanted to comprehend everything He was saying, she wanted to know His heart. She was riveted to the most powerful, and profound teacher and teaching she had ever heard. More than simply learning and knowing the truth, Mary desired communion with the Truth giver. She wanted to be with Jesus. She wanted to commune with Him, to connect with Christ. What does that mean? To commune with Christ just means to focus, to center, to concentrate on Christ—on the words and the person of Jesus. Martha preferred to feed Jesus; Mary chose to feed upon Jesus. Mary understood the relative worth of things, but Martha did not. She misses

the big picture here. Christ is in her home, speaking divine truth. She has the incredible privilege of having the Messiah of God in her home, a private audience with the Holy One of God. Christ had come to her house to commune with her and she misses the wonder of that privilege because she is busy and distracted.

But Martha was distracted with much serving. That word distracted comes from a Greek word that means “to be pulled away; to be dragged away.” And she was. She had dragged herself away from Jesus and it was about to show. Finally she can’t take it anymore. She bolts into the living room and interrupts Jesus as He is teaching. “And she went up to him and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.”” (Luke 10:40, ESV) Get this now, He is teaching and Martha just interrupts Him, just butts in, and lets Him have it. “Don’t you care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her to help me.” I want you to see the magnitude of this. This isn’t a small thing that she does. Think about it. Put it in these terms and you can see how messed up this is. She may as well be saying: “I know that you are talking about divine, life-changing, soul-transforming, sin-destroying, blessing bestowing, glorious truth. I know that. I know that you know all that truly matters when it comes to life and death, and hell and heaven, and salvation and damnation, and righteousness and holiness, but do you not care Jesus, that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me. She has lost all concept of what is valuable. She is so consumed with doing, doing, doing that she demonstrates with these words how foolish she has truly become. One of the things that I have told you before is that one of the common characteristics of an unsaved person is that they do not know the relative worth and value of things. They value what is of little worth and treat carelessly what really matters. Lost people do this all the time, but even believers can fall into this trap when they are not communing with Christ as they should. Look at how messed up she is.

She questions Jesus’ care for her. She questions Jesus’ heart. You know sin will make you do stupid things, but to question whether or not Jesus’ cared? Talk about being in the flesh. He is the one that would bear Martha’s sin on the cross, who was to be beaten, whipped and scourged and judged by God the Father on the cross in order to save His church.. This was the one who came to lay His life down. How could she question Jesus’ heart? Maybe we should give her a break. She didn’t know all of this right? Even the disciples were still kind of clueless when it came to this. That’s true, she didn’t know and she didn’t know because she never sat at Jesus’ feet long enough to hear. Mary did. Keep that thought in mind.

Notice something else. Don’t miss the fact that Martha is taking a shot at her sister as well. It struck me in looking at this passage that Martha was not envious of Mary, but angry with her. If Martha had said, “I would like to sit at your feet, too, Jesus,” that would have been one thing. But Martha did not say this. Martha seems to have felt that working in the kitchen was the

“better thing,” not only for her, but also for Mary. Martha did not have the longing which Mary demonstrated, the longing to do nothing else than to sit at Jesus’ feet, and to hear Him teach. Mary’s desire to sit at the Lord’s feet, to listen to His every word, speaks of communion and fellowship and desire for the Lord Himself.

Instead, Martha was being busy, busy, busy, and Jesus didn’t appreciate it. She was distracted from the Lord and her sinful and natural response was to be twisted up and out of sorts. We do the same thing. When we are distracted from the Lord, when we are keeping ourselves distant from God, we complain and even accuse others, because it is easier to complain and blameshift than it is to deal with the fact that we are too busy to commune with Christ, to spend time with Him, because of our own doing, our own neglect.

Jesus rebukes her gently, but firmly, Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Jesus calmly goes right to the root of the problem. Jesus sees that Martha’s anxiety and trouble and complaining heart stems from her self-imposed distractions, from her lack of communion with him, from her choice to neglect His fellowship and instead give herself to other things – unnecessary things. Blaming Jesus and Mary was not going to help. Instead Jesus says, “One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.” One thing is necessary – indispensable, essential, imperative, vital. One thing is necessary. What is the one necessary thing that Mary chose? The one necessary thing is communion with Christ, sitting at His feet, hearing His word, abiding in Him, getting to know Him, seeking to learn of Him. Mary found everything that she needed, in being with Him first, above everything else. Martha could have had the same thing, but she chose poorly.

Do you see? All this comes down to choice and Mary chose Jesus. Though to Martha it appeared to be inactivity or laziness, it was in reality a decision of Mary’s will to bow and sit before Jesus, to be still and listen. Mary chose Jesus as her highest treasure. It is not that she had no other responsibilities, but she discerned what was the most important and chose accordingly. Though it was lost on Martha, both of them were laboring, but it was Mary’s labor that was most valuable. Building a relationship with Jesus takes focus, energy, and a choice of your will. Activity and projects and business can mask an empty soul and create a false air of spirituality, but a relationship with Jesus requires a relinquishing of your life to Him. That marked Mary. She labored to conform her mind to His, her life to His pleasure, her heart to His. She labored to know Him. She received the greatest of rewards, intimacy with Christ. That is what Jesus desires. Jesus wants friends, lovers, disciples, and intimates. Christ desires and delights in being intimately loved by His people. He welcomes intimate and lasting communion with sinners whom He has forgiven.

And here's the thing. It is not like: you can either serve Christ or be intimate with Christ, but not both. Intimacy with Christ and serving Christ are not mutually exclusive as if you can have one or the other but not both. Only service that is born out of intimacy with Christ results in ministry that matters to God. All that Martha was doing was disconnected to Christ and so it was worthless. Moreover, do you really believe that if Jesus wanted a cup of water or a biscuit that Mary wouldn't have jumped right up and gotten it for Him, that's absurd. Martha was busy, she was making dinner for Jesus, but worked, but Christ did not commend it. She left the one necessary thing, communing with Christ, undesired and undone.

Before we doggypile on Martha, though, let's look at our own hearts, beloved. It is so easy for us to act in the same way as Martha. We sanctify and "holify" lesser things. We spiritualize distractions, undue preoccupation with responsibilities, ministry obligations even – and justify our lack of communion with Christ because all of these other things just have to get done. What lame excuses keep us from communing with Christ as we should? What hinders us from communing with Christ, sitting at His feet, hearing His word, learning from Him and getting to know Him more deeply? A TV show? A repair job? Some recreational pursuit? The snooze button? Company? Some pastime? Work? Listen, here is what I have discovered, if I try hard enough, I can spiritualize and justify every distraction from Christ. Even something as worthless as surfing the internet. Think about it. I have to get on Fox News so I know what is going on in the world, check out the latest movies so I know what is popular and trendy, look at all of the sports headlines so I can talk with the guys...and on and on. You do it. Checking all the Christian blogs so I know what is going on in Christendom and so I can know what I am supposed to think about the latest trends, because if I don't have Mohler or Piper or Platt or Chandler to tell me what I should think or to give me my Jesus though for the day, what will I think? Do you see how dangerous this is? When I need someone to think my thoughts about Christ for me, that is dangerous, dangerous, place to be. We can spiritualize almost any excuse for failing to commune with Christ. But what is most necessary?

I saw a really excellent illustration this week that puts all of this into perspective. A time management expert was speaking to a group of business students. He pulled out a one gallon, wide-mouthed jar and set it on a table in front of him. Then he took about a dozen fist-sized rocks and carefully placed them, one at a time, into the jar. When no more rocks would fit inside, he asked the class, "Is this jar full?"

Everyone answered, "Yes." He said, "Ahhh." He reached under the table and pulled out a bucket of gravel. He poured some in and shook the jar so that the gravel worked its way in between the larger rocks. Then he asked again, "Is the jar full?"

By this time the class was unto him, so they replied, "Probably not." "Good," he replied. He reached under the table and brought out a bucket of sand. He dumped the sand in and it went

into all the spaces left between the rocks and the gravel. Once more he asked, "Is the jar full?" "No," the class shouted. "Good," he said again. Then he grabbed a pitcher of water and poured it in until the jar was full to the brim. Then he asked the class, "What was the point of the illustration?" One eager beaver said, "The point is, no matter how full your schedule is, if you try really hard, you can always fit some more things into it." "No," the speaker replied, "that's not the point. The point is this: If you don't put the big rocks in first, you'll never get them in at all."

Now listen, beloved, time spent in communion with Christ, sitting at His feet and listening to His word is the biggest of rocks. If we aren't careful, busyness will crowd out that essential time we need with the Lord. Even good things, like serving the Lord, can wrongly crowd out the necessary thing. Communion with the Lord, pursuit of Christ to know Him more deeply....that is the one thing, the necessary thing. David talked of it when he said: (Psalm 27:4, ESV) Paul spoke of it in Philippians 3 when he was talking about His longing to know Christ more and more and then expressed this thought: (Philippians 3:12–14, ESV)

Mary had chosen the good portion Christ was not about to take it away from her. Mary had chosen Jesus Christ as her portion. She had chosen intimacy with Him. She had sought Him first, as a matter of urgent priority. Mary was at Jesus' feet because she wanted to hear every word he said, not because she wanted to dodge the kitchen chores. Mary's heart was with her Lord. She had chosen to sit at His feet and to receive the wisdom of God and to come to know Jesus Christ and His mission and His character and Christ was well-pleased with her choice. Ultimately we only have one portion and that is Jesus Christ our Lord. He is the only portion, the only reward which is substantial, satisfying, real, and lasting. Our portion is good in sickness and good in health--good in youth and good in old age, good in adversity and good in prosperity--good in life and good in death, good now and good for eternity. He is the good portion and He is the antidote to depression, to hopelessness, to aimlessness, to apathy, to besetting sin, to overwhelming temptation – to all sin. He is the good portion. He is our portion and amazingly, He has chosen us to be His inheritance. His portion is the Lord's people, and we can scarcely plumb the depths of that. Jesus Christ delights in fellowship with you.

We need to see, when we look at this text, that far from being an apologetic for laziness, Mary is an example of proper priorities that leads to loving and proper serving of Christ. Let me show you what I mean. Jesus would come back to Bethany again. He would come to heal Lazarus at one time and then six days before the Passover, Jesus was back at Bethany, this time on His way to the cross. They are at Simon's house, a man who Jesus had healed from leprosy. Where is Martha? She doesn't have to be, since it isn't her house, but she is in the kitchen again, Lazarus is sitting at the table, but where was Mary? At Jesus feet again. (John 12:1–8, ESV)

Mary, who chose the good portion, the one thing necessary – ministered to Christ and served Him well because she communed with Him first.

Those who make the choice to place Jesus first, the one thing needed, share the innermost secrets of the heart of the Lord. Mary anointed Jesus for His burial. How did Mary know? Jesus had revealed it to her. None of the others knew, but she knew. Why did Jesus reveal it to her? Because Mary had chosen to listen, she had chosen the good portion in her life. She knew what it was to have intimate fellowship with her Lord; there for she received a great reward; the incomparable honor of sharing the deep things of Jesus' heart. That is the necessary thing – sitting at Christ's feet, communing with His heart.

How do we begin sitting at Jesus' feet? Beloved, I want to make sure that we guard ourselves from false thinking that we must wait for God to zap us and we do not need to do the things that make for a growing love to Christ. While it is true that we have no ability before we are saved to create love in our hearts for Christ, once we are made new creatures in Christ, we are freed by God's grace to do the things that will lead to a growing love for Christ. And one of those things, like we see today, is sitting at His feet. How do we do that?

1. Repent and reorder your priorities. Martha had to stop blaming the Lord for not caring, stop blaming Mary for not helping, and sit down with a teachable heart and listen to what the Lord was teaching -- she needed to realize her foolishness to neglect sitting at the feet of Christ. No excuses.

2. Begin spending time at the feet of Jesus. Commune with Christ. Communing with Christ requires that we focus, center, and concentrate on Christ—on the words and the person of Jesus. Focus totally and completely upon Him. Discipline your mind and your attention to focus your gaze upon Christ, to focus your mind on His Word and to set your heart on His person and character.

Sitting at Jesus' feet is something Mary chose to do. She chose to do it because she loved and treasured Him and sitting at His feet and communing with Him, she came to love and treasure Him more. Sitting at His feet, she grew in love for Him and served Him well out of a heart of devotion and understanding. It won't happen accidentally, because there are too many other things, many of them good things, to crowd it out. It's not something you choose once for life and it's settled. You have to keep choosing it over and over again, day in and day out, by saying no to other things so that you can say yes to this one necessary thing.

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