LEARN FROM MARTHA
1. Serving Jesus
2. Being served by Jesus

We are familiar with the story of Mary and Martha. We remember from Sunday School and worship how Jesus came to their house. We remember how Mary sat at his feet listening to his Word and was greatly rewarded while her sister, Martha, was distracted with all of her service and was gently reproved.

How many times have we been reminded that we are to be more like Mary and less like Martha? Probably too many times to count. The truth is, I don't know if I will ever really be like Mary. I am more like Martha. I know I should read my Bible every day, sitting at my Lord’s feet, listening to him. I know that. I want to do that, but things intrude. Things have to get done. People need to be visited. People stop and chat or call. And it all takes time. Don’t get me wrong. I do not resent people stopping by. I do not resent ministering to people. But the truth is, too often I become so busy doing ministry that I do not have time to sit at my Lord’s feet and listen to him. There are many times I do not think I will ever be like Mary and resign myself, with a bit of guilt, to a more Martha-like pace of life.

Poor Martha. She is like us in so many ways. But she is also the classic example of a person with misplaced priorities while her sister is extolled as the wise and spiritually discerning person we are all to imitate.

But is that really the lesson of this portion of Scripture? Or is there another lesson here? Yes, Martha did make mistakes. But we will only benefit from her example by looking closely at why she made the decisions she did.

Martha was a woman with outstanding qualities. At the very least, she was very hospitable. Notice that Luke makes the point that is was Martha who opened her house to Jesus and his disciples. She welcome Jesus into her home at a time when he was not well received, at a time when the religious leaders had rejected him and pressured the people to reject him too. A few weeks ago we heard Jesus say that foxes have holes and birds have nests, but he had no place to lay his head. Martha opened her home to him. And like the Jewish people of her day, she went to great lengths to ensure the comforts of her guests.

Martha’s servant spirit is also evident a few chapters ahead. Following the raising of her brother, Lazarus, from the dead, with his earthly ministry coming to a close, Jesus again enjoyed the company of Mary and Martha. Lazarus was seated at he table. Mary was preparing to anointed Jesus’ body. And Martha? Again, she was serving. But this time, there was no record of reproof.

Martha is a strong person. She is a doer. She is a woman who knew how to run her household. And when she welcomed Jesus and his disciples into her home, she was going to do things right and be a great hostess to him and his friends.

But somewhere in the course of events that day, Martha’s welcome became wearisome and her service became slavery. Was she having a bad day? Maybe. But Martha is an example for us because she reminds us that service to God can sometimes keep us away from God if we are not careful to listen to him in his Word. Like Martha, when we shift our eyes from Jesus to the demanding tasks around us, our distraction can lead to a progression of small decisions that quietly take farther and farther from our Lord.

Martha’s first mistake seemed innocent though. Luke tells us she was distracted by all the preparations she had to make. That implies that at first she focused on the Lord. She did not immediately run off into the kitchen and start all of her preparations. Like Mary, Martha
loved Jesus and enjoyed his company. Like Mary, she heard him begin to teach and was
moved by his words. But soon she heard another voice, the voice of urgency, the voice calling
attention to the little things that had to be done. And that voice became louder and louder. And
Martha got up and followed that voice into the kitchen and into distraction.

As Martha attended to the urgent tasks calling for her attention, Martha’s distraction
mushroomed into worry. But how could Martha worry when Jesus was in her home? He who
stilled the storms, fed the hungry and healed the sick was sitting in her living room ready to
minister to her. And there she was, **worried**. Her activities cut her off from Jesus. She isolated
herself from him.

The Greek word we translate as worry literally means **to be pulled in two**. Martha was
torn in two. She wanted to be with Jesus, yet she also desired to be a great hostess. And in her
mind, the two were mutually exclusive. And her worry about preparations pulled her in two. It
pulled her away from Jesus.

Let’s be sure of one thing. Martha loved the Lord. She wanted to serve the Lord. She
also wanted to hear the Lord. But on this occasion, she could not be in two places at the same
time and she became distracted and her distractions tore her in two. Little things took on a life
of their own. They loomed large in her mind - as they do ours - and she forgot what was
important. That is what happens when we let urgent and not so urgent tasks isolate us from the
Lord.

And these little worries bore deep into Martha’s soul and exploded to the surface. Her
temper flared. We know what that is like. We know when the cabinet door is intentionally
closed too hard. We know when the pots and pans clang a little too loudly on the stove.
Perhaps Martha tried to get her sister’s attention, but to no avail. And the frustration increased.
Perhaps she tried to get Jesus’ attention, hoping he would say something to her lazy sister. But
that did not work either. And Martha’s frustrations grew and mounted.

When all this failed, Martha decided to appeal her case directly to Jesus: **Lord, don’t you
care that my sister has left me to serve alone?**

**Lord, don’t you care?** How many times has our Lord heard those words? **Lord, don’t you
care about me? Why are you letting this happen to me? Don’t you love me?** Too
often we dig the pot holes in our life. We are the ones who jump in and then we blame the
Lord. It is too easy to blame others for our problems, for our circumstances. We blame
everyone, including the Lord, instead of ourselves. And we go through life as victims, thinking
we are not loved and no one cares.

**Martha, Martha**, our Lord responds. The love in his voice is evident. Our Lord offers a
reproof, but it is a gentle, loving reproof. And Martha could see that Jesus indeed loved her. He
indeed cared for Martha. He saw what was happening. He knew what she experienced. He did
not want the burden to fall upon her. But the solution was not for Mary to get up but for Martha
to sit down and listen and grow and believe. Instead of trying to minister to Jesus, she should
have let Jesus minister to her.

Now Jesus was not unappreciative of what Martha was doing. But he felt that what Mary
was doing was far better, far more important and far more necessary than what Martha was
doing. Jesus pointed out to Martha that her kind of service caused her **much care and
trouble**. Though her service may have made Jesus’ visit in her home more comfortable, it did
not beneﬁt Martha’s soul. What Mary was doing, however, beneﬁted her.

**Martha, Martha**, he said, **You are worried and upset about many things, but one
thing is needed. In fact, Mary has chosen that better part, which will not be taken away
from her.** Mary heard the voice of Jesus and chose the better part. Martha also heard Jesus,
yet chose something else. Sometimes the best thing we can do is sit at Jesus’ feet, just as
Mary did, and simply listen to him. At other times we may be called to action by our Lord, but it is action grounded in his Word.

Jesus says **only one thing is needed.** From what is said about Mary here it is clear what the **one thing needed** is. We are told **Mary was sitting at Jesus’ feet** and heard his Word. The **one thing needful** is Jesus’ Word. It is what **makes us wise for salvation.**

It is in that Word we meet our Lord and Savior – our Lord and Savior who loves us and gave himself on the cross for us. In the Word we receive the assurance that our sins are forgiven; that Jesus loves us, continues to love us and will never stop loving us. In the Word we receive all of God’s promises, the promise of life with him now and life with him forever in heaven. The promise that he will make everything work for the good of his believers. These are the promises which God gives us in his Word and the promises will never be taken away from us. They are indeed the better part and our Lord has given to us.

As we go through life, things the world labels as bad will happen to us – that is a given. That is the reality. We will suffer sickness and disease. We will bury our loves ones. The day will come when we face our own burials. But, as we sit at our Lord’s feet and listen to him, he reminds us of his love, of his presence, of his help in our time of need and that will **never** be taken from us. That is why he wants us to sit and listen and learn and grow - grow in him.

Amen.

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