
Prayers

To God

Lord God, we offer You our praise, knowing that the lives we lead often fall far short of the glories of faith we would want to display. Forgive us, dear Lord, for the failings we bring into Your presence, and in Your mercy, lead us on the pathway of repentance that turns us from sin to righteousness. We praise You for the love of Jesus, by which we are set free to rise above our humanity to the heights of heaven itself. Thank You, Lord God, thank You: **AMEN**

For myself

Weekly theme: discipleship

Write down a list of the things you do as a consequence of following Christ. Offer these things again to the Lord and ask Him for His judgement on what you are doing and how you do it.

For others

Pray for the people of Egypt as the 'reins of power' are being handed over and no one is quite sure yet of whether the elected President or the military are really in control of the country.

Meditation

Is this the time we have been waiting for my friend?

When people are fooled and lead astray
By those who reject the Word of God?

When false prophets appear everywhere
Claiming to be all things to all people?

When the world is consumed by violent strife
Because nations have turned against nation?

When earthquakes and famines cover the world
But the end has clearly not yet come?

When many of God's people fall from faith
And become consumed with hate for each other?

When the Church of God is loathed by nations
Because they hates the sound of Jesus' name?

When believers are handed over to death

Yet those who endure will know God's salvation?

When at dead of night and unexpectedly
The 'thief in the night' will surely come?

Yes, this is the time, my friend, this is the time.

Bible Passage

Luke 10:38-42

³⁸ Now as they travelled along, Jesus went into a certain village, where a woman whose name was Martha made Him welcome into her home. ³⁹ Now, this woman had a sister named Mary, who sat near to the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. ⁴⁰ But Martha was preoccupied by all the work she had to do; so she came to Him and said,

"Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work myself? Tell her then to come and help me!"

⁴¹ But the Lord answered her,

"Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled by many things, ⁴² but only one is required. You see, Mary has chosen that good part, and it will not be taken away from her."

Review

The name 'Martha' means 'ruling lady', or perhaps 'the lady of the house'. So when Jesus came to stay with Martha, she was responsible for the hospitality, and made sure that everything was in place for her honoured guest. Her sister Mary, most likely a younger sister, and perhaps known elsewhere in Scripture as Mary Magdalene, did not carry this responsibility and spent her time with Jesus, the guest. Once we have read the story that unfolds, our primary impression may be that Jesus disapproves of Martha's work, but approves of Mary's commitment to Him. This is not far from the heart of the matter, but a fuller and more subtle meaning of this Scripture will emerge.

This incident comes immediately after the 'parable of the Good Samaritan', and Luke includes it here because it gives us complementary information about what it means to be a disciple. The 'parable of the Good Samaritan' urges Jesus' disciples to have open hearts towards others so that God's love might be shown in the world, but this is neither the whole of the Gospel nor a complete reflection of discipleship. The story of Martha and Mary turns the spotlight back on Jesus, and the '*one thing required*' (10:41) of His disciples. Jesus does not say what this 'one thing' is, but we are led to the conclusion that it is to be devoted to Him and to listen to His teaching.

Who were Martha and Mary, and where did they live? The two sisters lived in Bethany, a few miles outside the city of Jerusalem (John 11:1f.). However, Luke does not mention this, and in his story, Jesus has not yet come near Jerusalem! We should not let this worry us too much, however, because Luke does not give us a clear 'itinerary' of Jesus. For him, this is simply one of the many stories of Jesus from before he came to Jerusalem.

There is only one Martha mentioned in the Gospels, but many Marys! So which Mary are we speaking about here? Certainly, Martha and Mary were sisters (10:39); and if we look into this further (see 'Going Deeper'), it is just possible that she is the woman we know as 'Mary Magdalene' (8:2, 24:10, John 20:1f.). However, Luke does not say this, even though he certainly knows who Mary Magdalene is (8:2); so although this is possible, we should allow the story to speak for itself without making this connection, as Luke clearly intended.

The story line is straightforward, but we should read it carefully to avoid unnecessary or unhelpful conclusions. When Jesus came to stay, Martha, being responsible for providing hospitality, greeted Him and set about the necessary work (10:38). It is possible that in providing for Jesus, she had to cater for the disciples as well; this could well account for Martha's worries about many things (10:41). She had to prepare washing facilities for feet as well as sleeping quarters, and provide a meal for everyone. Yet while Martha set herself to do this, Mary placed herself at the Teacher's feet, ready to learn from Him and receive His blessing; it was not a place where women were usually to be found, and we can feel the tension rising in the house!

Martha was the one who spoke first. In her preoccupation she was clearly indignant (10:40), and spoke harshly, not to Mary but to Jesus! She was cross that He had detained her sister and was preventing her from working, and she said to Jesus, '*do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work myself?*' (10:40) In no other Scripture does anyone accuse Jesus to His face of not caring, or of committing a sin of omission! Martha then told her honoured guest firmly what to do, her sister must leave Him and do her bidding (10:40)! In her distress, Martha had turned upside down all the good priorities of her hospitality, and was in danger of offending her guest! Later on, she was probably mortified to realise what she had said, and perhaps asked Jesus' forgiveness. But once words are said they cannot be retracted, and words said in anger cannot be avoided, they must be dealt with.

The message we take from this powerful and well known incident comes from Jesus' reply to this outburst. Now we often like to say in church today that Jesus 'accepts people as they are'. This is an encouraging thought, often used in evangelism when appealing to people to accept that God loves them, in whatever state they come. However, Jesus did not accept Martha 'as she was'! Firmly but with great care and gentleness, He told her she was wrong, and needed to change. He identified the source of Martha's angst; she was '*worried and troubled by many things*' (10:41), and then told her, as an older sister, to accept the attitude of faith and obedience found in her younger sister, Mary!

We do not know the result of this exchange, but we hope that Martha did not turn away in anger at being rebuked. Perhaps she was able to accept Jesus' words, and then repent and change; and we like to think she did not stand on her superiority as an older sister. Jesus did not want Martha to stop doing her work of hospitality, He wanted her to let go of the worry and aggravation that made her angry with her guests, dominate her sister, and have a wrong attitude towards Him. Jesus wanted Martha to love Him and learn from Him like Mary.

One other thing should not pass us by. It is extraordinary that a woman should sit at the feet of Jesus. In those days, disciples 'sat at the feet' of a rabbi to receive his learning and become like him. Was Jesus saying that a woman could do this as well? In the first century, such a suggestion was scandalous, as was the implication that a woman could learn as a disciple and eventually teach others. Today, I hope we hear what Luke is reporting about Jesus. He accepts that before God, women are no different from men, and they are welcome at His feet to learn from Him as disciples without distinction from men. In Him '*there is no longer male and female ... you are one in Christ*' (Gal 3:28).

Going Deeper

Notes on the text and translation

V38 *'made Him welcome into her home'*

Other translations:

'opened her home to Him' (NIV)

'welcomed Him as her guest' (CEB)

There are only two Greek words for this phrase, and these may be loosely translated as *'welcomed Him'*. Why then do all the translations add more than this, some adding phrases such as *'into her home'*? There are two reasons.

Firstly, the Greek word *'welcome'* means so much more than it does to us today. It was not a form of greeting; it meant doing everything possible to give hospitality, including the offer of board and lodging.

Secondly, a number of the important early manuscripts of the text have corrections in them adding these exact words, *'in her house'*; so it is unclear whether these words were in fact part of what Luke wrote.

I am of the opinion that they should be included because whether these words are a part of the ancient text or not, they convey what the text broadly means.

VY *'but only one is required'*

Other translations:

'but only one thing is better' (NIV)

'there is need of only one thing' (NRSV)

The Greek can be translated literally, *'but one thing is a necessity'*. Each translation attempts to convey the sense of comparison made by Jesus here, but many of them do not read very well. Mine keeps close to the Greek and maintains the sense of necessity found in the Greek phrase; it reads, *'but only one is required'*.

For those who are concerned about the original Greek text, there is evidence that some ancient copyists believed the original to read, *'only a few things are required, perhaps one'*. This however, is not supported in the best manuscripts, and waters down the essential point made here by Jesus. However, this uncertainty over the actual text shows that there has been keen interest in this passage from the earliest of times.

Further Comments

Who was Mary?

The information we have from this passage is that Martha and Mary were sisters, and that is all. However, we cannot help trying to work out whether this Mary is one of the other Marys mentioned in Scripture. The choices are clear enough. Apart from Mary the mother of Jesus, and her sister, Mary the mother of Clopas (John 19:25), these are the candidates:

- **'Mary Magdalene'**. Mary Magdalene was the woman from whom Jesus cast out seven demons (Luke 8:2). Every other mention of her name is in the story of Jesus'

death and resurrection, where she is one of the women who tend Jesus after His death, and who first see the empty tomb. Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene in the Garden of the tomb, calling her 'Mary'.

- **Mary, the mother of James and Joseph.** It seems unlikely that the Mary we read about here was a mother, but it is not impossible. She was present with Mary Magdalene at the burial of Jesus and the empty tomb (Matt 27:56f.)
- **The 'other Mary'.** This Mary appears in some of the Gospels at the burial of Jesus and the empty tomb (Matt 27,61, 28:1f. Luke 24:10,)

The most obvious candidate is Mary Magdalene, though the other Marys in the Gospel records suggest to us that the name was common and we should never discount the possibility that the Mary of Martha and Mary was just another Mary, one of the many in Israel.

One thing is relatively clear, and this is that John describes the Mary who lived in Bethany as the one who anointed Jesus' feet with oil and bathed his feet with her hair (John 11:2, 12:3). In the other Gospels, including Luke, the woman who does something similar to this is called a 'woman of ill-repute' (Luke 7:37f.). It is only a short intellectual distance to join up these dots with Luke's report of having cast seven demons out of Mary Magdalene (Luke 8:2f.) and conclude we are indeed talking about Mary Magdalene. Some traditions suggest that the woman caught in adultery was this same Mary (John 8:3f.).

In addition to this, the fact that Jesus clearly knew Mary Magdalene as 'Mary' (John 20:16) is used by some to suggest that she is therefore the same 'Mary' we find here in this Scripture. However, there is no clear and conclusive answer to our search, and we do best to hold our ideas with care.

Sitting at Jesus' feet

To sit at someone's feet was to give them full attention and grant that person authority over you. The idea is a homely version of what happened in ancient courts, when kings sat on thrones and everyone else sat 'at their feet'. Those present in the throne room benefitted from being at the King's feet, and they were well placed to receive His grace and favour. They were also well placed to receive His wrath, if things did not go well! Mostly, they were His servants, standing ready to do His will.

The idea of being at someone's feet was later taken to be a position of learning, so in Israel, a rabbi would have disciples who sat at his feet, and in a male dominated society, rabbis and their disciples were all male. Jesus' acceptance of a female disciple at His feet was radical and new; in Jesus' day, some may have been scandalised by this, but Luke does not report it. One feature of this story is the fact that Jesus does not speak about Mary as being in a position of servitude at His feet, but a position of privilege. Martha is the one in bondage to her worries and fears, and the one at Jesus' feet is simply the recipient of His grace and love.

Those who listen and do the will of the Father

It seems hard to condemn Martha for doing her best to be hospitable, but her problem is that the task has grown to become out of hand and unmanageable. Her problem is her worries and her fears, not her appetite for work to serve the Lord.

Notice that Jesus does not tell Martha to come and sit at His feet, He only tells Martha that Mary's choice is right. Martha must take Jesus' rebuke and decide whether to accept it or reject it. If she accepts it, then she takes the first step towards being willing to sit at Jesus' feet herself, when she is ready.

Jesus wants disciples, male and female, who are ready to receive God's Word, '*Then pay attention to how you listen; for to those who have, more will be given; and from those who do not have, even what they seem to have will be taken away.*' (8:18)

A parable of salvation?

In this story of Jesus, He points to the 'one thing' that is required, and this is Himself. There is only a short distance between this and a full blown description of the doctrine of God's saving grace; this says that 'people are saved by the grace of God in Jesus Christ alone'. A preacher might then quote from the story of Martha and Mary and say that what God requires is for us to come and sit at Jesus' feet, submit to Him and learn from Him, and thereby receive God's love and grace through the Saviour.

Most would suggest that this is not an adequate explanation of salvation by grace, and we had better look in Romans 1:16,17, 3:26f. 5:1f., or Galatians 2:16. There is no doubt however, that Christians today often need to rediscover the importance of discipleship and the need to learn from Jesus, and remember that doing the work of the church is not the totality of what it means to be a Christian. Being a Christian is not all about finding ways to serve the church according to individual abilities, however important each job is. It is about being ready to receive God's salvation from Jesus.

Discipleship

Application

The stress of work in the church and its consequences

The message of this passage is powerful at several levels. How often do both men and women colour their faith with many 'deeds that must be done' to serve the church? Too often, people do their deeds as if they represent God Himself, and risk making idols out of their work, even placing them above God Himself. Then, when times are rough or there is no time for anything else, they become consumed by the stresses of work, and as with Martha here, their state makes them become angry, offend their Lord, and dominate others around them!

It is only when with Mary we release ourselves at Jesus' feet, and let go of the worries and cares of our religious practice, that we find peace and salvation. This means that we will then cease to be a threat to our brothers and sisters due to any misplaced zeal or fault of our passions. How many arguments in church have started when people have become upset as Martha was in this story? Too many, I guess, and we need to hear Jesus' rebuke. We have become too good at treating people who have problems with spiritual cotton wool rather than facing them with the truth, in the love of Christ.

Accusing God of not caring?

Martha accused Jesus of not caring about her, and she does what so many of us do when things do not go our own way. When there is tragedy in our lives, we may be tempted to blame God, or if we have worked for the church and been offended by others, we come to the conclusion that Jesus does not care about us, and leave. The world is full of people who have left the church after something that has gone wrong, because they have decided that God doesn't care.

Yet all this is immature faith, and just as Jesus had to deal with this in Martha, He must deal with such things in us. There may be one level at which it is necessary to accept people 'as they are' because wounded, they cannot take any other steps yet towards faith. However, the only way forward must be for the challenge of Jesus to lead a person to repentance and change, and if necessary, confess to God their unbelief and anger. Without walking down this path, according to this passage of Scripture, people remain lost in their own worlds and not in the Kingdom of God, whether they attend church or not.

Ideas for what to do

- Ask yourself how much 'work' you do for the church and for the Lord, and how much 'sitting at Jesus' feet' you do. By the latter, I mean spending time in devotions, listening to God, worshipping etc. Is the balance right, and should you do anything about this?
- Do you see yourself as a Martha or a Mary, or perceive that others think of you like this? What can we do about this in the church, when Jesus has rebuked Martha and praised Mary?

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Why do people still say today 'you may be a Mary, but I am a Martha', and remain proud of this and their service? How can we square this with the message of Luke's story?
2. What does this passage mean to you? What would you say is the key teaching of Jesus found here?
3. How can those who do the essential work of the church, from cleaning to leading worship, be enabled to both do their work and also receive from the Lord like Mary?

Final Prayer

Thank You, Lord God, for the place I have at church; I am grateful for the things I do to help the running of the church, and this work expresses my faith. Grant, gracious Lord, that I do not immerse myself so much in this work that I fail to sit at Your feet, and learn from You; and change me every day for the better. **AMEN**
