

The Gospel According to Luke

“Twisted Sister”

Chapter 10:38-42

Introduction

There have been some great movie taglines. (A tagline is a short, one sentence summary of the entire film). See if you recognize some of these:

1. *A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away...* - Star Wars.
2. *Just when you thought it was safe to go back in the water –*
Jaws2.
3. *Houston, we have a problem –* Apollo 13.
4. *The toys are back in town –* Toy Story.
5. *There are 3.7 trillion fish in the ocean. They're looking for one –*
Finding Nemo.

If our text today were made into a movie, we'd have to come up with a tagline. We could say:

1. *A long time ago, in a village far, far away...*
2. *Just when you thought it was safe to sit at the feet of Jesus.*
3. *Jesus, I have a problem.*

Those don't really work. It's harder than you think! Maybe something like this would work: *Two sisters. Two choices. One priority.*

I'd better stick to my day job!

The story of Martha and Mary, the two sisters, does present you with two choices; and it does emphasize one priority:

1. The two choices were **work** or listen to the **Word**.
2. The priority – what Jesus called **that good part** – was the **Word**.

There was definitely work to be done and, as we will see, both sisters did their share. But at some point Martha was *distracted* by the work while Mary remained *attentive* to the Word.

It's a story that helps us understand our own priority as Christians, and what we should emphasize as we work for Jesus.

We'll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 Emphasize God's Word And It Will Impact Your Work For God, and #2 Emphasize Your Work For God And It Will Distract From God's Word.

#1 Emphasize God's Word
 And It Will Impact Your Work For God
 (v38-39)

I'm going to tell you, throughout this study, that the Word of God – the Bible – should be your priority, both *personally* and *publicly*. Most Christians would agree; but, as we will also see, they don't always emphasize God's Word. Instead, they emphasize your work for God.

You go to Church, or a Bible study. Maybe things are going well for you, not too many trials; still, you need to be refreshed and encouraged from God's Word. More likely, you're struggling with a relationship, or a physical problem, or a financial hurdle; you're wounded, spiritually spent, needing desperately to hear a Word from Jesus.

Too often, what you hear is how far short you are falling in your work for God! You're not praying enough... You're not serving enough... You're never giving enough! Some project is failing for your lack of commitment. In short, your work for God has taken priority over the Word of God.

Martha and Mary illustrate what I'm saying. They were the sisters of Lazarus, whom Jesus would later raise from the dead. Jesus was often in their home, in the little village of Bethany, about two miles outside of Jerusalem. Luke is the only one of the Gospel writers who presents this dramatic scene of the two sisters, the two choices, and the one priority.

Luke 10:38 Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house.

They went, meaning Jesus was accompanied by His twelve disciples. Although the scene focuses on Jesus and the two sisters, it is likely that the Twelve were also **welcomed into the house**.

The verse says **that Martha welcomed Him [them] into her house**; but that doesn't exclude Mary from showing them hospitality. In verse forty, Martha let us know that Mary had been helping her, when she said, **My sister has left me to serve alone**. Mary had been helping, or she could not have **left** helping.

As for Mary, we read,

Luke 10:39 And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word.

Mary was Martha's younger sister. Mary appears three times in the Gospels, and each time she is **at Jesus' feet**:

1. Here, she sat at Jesus' feet and listened to His Word.
2. In John 11:32, after Lazarus had died and before Jesus raised him from the dead, she fell at Jesus feet and shared her woe.
3. In John 12:3, she would anoint Jesus' feet as an act of her worship.

We sometimes describe her in our verses in Luke as worshipping at Jesus' feet. Certainly, she was a worshipper, and she was being worshipful. But the emphasis in this story is not on her worship, but on God's Word. When you sat at the feet of a teacher, you were taking the position of a learner - listening to what was being said in a posture that indicated your submission to him and his teaching.

Notice something else from a careful reading of verse thirty-nine. You're told **Mary... also sat at Jesus' feet**. The word, **also**, lets you know that Martha **also** was there, for a while.

These details help us better recreate the scene. Jesus and His disciples came to the house of Martha and Mary. Probably the

sisters had some advance knowledge they were coming, and had been preparing for their arrival. The house needed to be picked-up, and the guest room readied. There would be a trip to the market to get what was needed for the meal. Back at home, both sisters participated in welcoming Jesus and (probably) the Twelve. This would involve greeting them, anointing them with oil, washing their feet, and then serving some kind of refreshment and a meal.

At some point, Martha and Mary both sat at Jesus' feet, to listen to Him teach God's Word. Martha kept getting distracted by work she thought needed to be done. Perhaps a bread-dipping bowl ran dry; or a loaf was consumed and she brought out another. Mary helped her, to a certain extent, but always ended up quickly back at the feet of Jesus.

By the way, I know Mary helped Martha, because, when Martha said, *My sister has left me to serve alone*, scholars tell me it is in a verb tense that means, *My sister **keeps on leaving** me to serve alone*.

It's important to establish all the details, to keep us from exaggerating the scene. Martha wasn't only working, ignoring the Word. Mary wasn't only listening to the Word, ignoring the work. It wasn't that Martha had a work-ethic, while Mary had a Word-ethic.

Both sisters were interested in the Word, and both worked. Mary seemed to understand better than Martha the priority of the Word, and thus she placed greater emphasis on listening to the Word.

The priority of the Word; emphasize the Word; your work is subordinate to the Word. These are the preliminary lessons you learn from this story.

This little scene, a long time ago, in a village far, far away, teaches us how to conduct ourselves as Christians, and as a Church. Our meetings should always be built around the teaching or preaching of God's Word. And, since our meetings should be built around the teaching and preaching of God's Word, **every other ministry becomes a support to the main objective.**

Let me give you an example of how this affects policy. We have a policy of encouraging children to attend Children's Worship, then go to their own age-appropriate Sunday School class. The policy is based upon the priority of God's Word:

1. First of all, we believe it is just as important that kids hear God's Word as it is for adults. They can do that best at their own age level. Sometimes folks will tell us their child is extremely well-behaved, and can sit quietly during the entire adult service. Even if that were true, the child is not hearing God's Word in a way that can best impact their life for Jesus.
2. Secondly, the adults need to be able to concentrate on the Word being presented. There's no denying that kids in the Sanctuary often become a distraction.

At the same time, we want to remain sensitive to the preferences of parents and families. We've established some alternatives for families who initially disagree with our policy: We have the cry room... We've set up the Foyer to accommodate folks with kids... The Fellowship Hall is available, where you can watch the main service. Wednesday nights, we invite all the kids to join us for worship before they are dismissed for their own Calvary Kid's Club.

Our policy towards kids puts emphasis on the Word. I could have used any ministry as an example, because every ministry must support the main goal of people hearing the Word of God.

Mary understood the priority of God's Word, and that is where she placed emphasis. Her work for God was subordinated to the Word of God.

Not Martha!

#2 Emphasize Your Work For God
 And It Will Distract From God's Word
 (v40-42)

Martha had been sitting with Mary at Jesus' feet. But we're told, in verse forty,

Luke 10:40 ...Martha was distracted with much serving...

Distracted is a word that means *pulled away* or *dragged away*. It implies that Martha wanted to be at Jesus' feet, but instead, her work for God took priority.

What distracts you from sitting at Jesus' feet? We can expand the question to include things besides our work for God. For example: You want to spend time with the Lord, in His Word, every morning or every evening. What hinders you? Is it really needful? You want to go to Church every Sunday and, maybe, every Wednesday. What hinders you? Is it really needful?

Luke 10:40 But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me."

Can you imagine interrupting Jesus, while He was teaching? Worse than that: Can you imagine accusing Him of not caring? Still worse: Can you imagine telling Him what to do?

I can! Because I do it anytime and every time I grow discouraged that I don't have enough help and support in my work for God. There is far too much complaining that not enough people are volunteering to do the work.

If Martha believed she was being led by God to get up from Jesus' feet and work in the background, to assist Him in His teaching, then she should have been content. She would have been experiencing fellowship with the Lord in her work, rather than think she was missing out on something. Instead, she missed out on everything.

Luke 10:41 And Jesus answered and said to her, "**Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things.**"

You know you've blown it when you're name gets repeated twice! **Worried** indicates her internal agitation; **troubled** is a description of how she was acting it out. You could tell, by looking at her, that she was irritated and frustrated. She was probably making a lot of noise; sighing; shaking her head; casting dirty looks towards Mary.

Luke 10:42 But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her.”

What is the **one thing** that was **needed**? The emphasis seems to be on the word **one**. In other words, it's not so much **one thing** from a list of things as it is establishing your number one priority – the **one thing** that is the title of your list, that suggests all of the items on it and their order.

The scene itself illustrates the priority of the Word:

1. Martha was busied and distracted serving the Lord; but she knew that Jesus had come to earth to serve, not be served.
2. Martha was focusing on the meal; but Jesus had often taught them that His food was to do the will of His Father, and that man does not live by bread alone, but by every Word of God.

Martha and Mary were in the same home, facing the same pressures. Martha **chose** to put the Word on hold, while she worked; Mary **chose** to put her work into perspective by keeping the Word as her priority. Thus, the first item on her list was to listen to Jesus teach. *The dishes could wait!*

Jesus said **Mary has chosen that good part**. Again, it is a matter of her priority. She chose what was best at that particular time. She chose to take advantage of Jesus being in her home as a time of learning rather than a time of serving.

You have choices to make. They should be governed by your priority; and you should chose the best each time.

Life doesn't come in a neat package. You can't always choose to sit at Jesus' feet. There is work to be done – not just in the Church, but in your world. When you *can* choose... What do you choose? A person's priority can be seen by examining their choices.

Mary's choice would **not be taken away from her**:

1. For Mary's part, this meant that her time spent at Jesus' feet would make a lasting difference in her life, both on earth and in eternity.

2. For Martha's part, this could mean that all her work that day could be taken away from her. When Jesus looked back on her life, to reward her, He might reveal her work on that day, in her home, to be fleshly, rather than spiritual. It might have no place in eternity; *and it certainly wasn't helping her attitude any on earth!*

Charles Wesley wrote a hymn about Martha and Mary. I like it, because it is sympathetic to both sisters. One line of it goes like this:

Faithful to my Lord's commands,
I still would choose the better part;
Serve with careful Martha's hands,
And loving Mary's heart.

Wesley was on the mark. It's not a matter of choosing the Word over work, or vice-versa. It's a matter of keeping the emphasis on God's Word while you are actively working for God.

John Newton was also inspired by Martha and Mary to write a hymn:

Martha her love and joy expressed
By care to entertain her guest;
While Mary sat to hear her Lord,
And could not bear to lose a word.

The principle in both the same,
Produced in each a different aim;
The one to feast the Lord was led,
The other waited to be fed.

But Mary chose the better part,
Her Savior's words refreshed her heart;
While busy Martha angry grew,
And lost her time and temper, too.

With warmth she to her sister spoke,
But brought upon herself rebuke;
One thing is needful, and but one,
Why do thy thoughts on many run?

How oft are we like Martha vexed,
Encumbered, hurried and perplexed!
While trifles so engross our thought,
The one thing needful is forgot.

Lord teach us this one thing to choose,
Which they who gain can never lose;
Sufficient in itself alone,
And needful, were the world our own.

Warren Wiersbe summarizes this scene with this tagline: “What we do with Jesus is more important than what we do for Him.”

Conclusion

One last thought, about your work for God. Don't get so engrossed in it that you forget **you are God's work!** He is at work, in your life, to make you more like Jesus. He will complete the work He has begun.