

The One Thing Needed in a World of Distractions

Luke 10:38-42 (EHV)

³⁸ As they went on their way, Jesus came into a village, and a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. ³⁹ She had a sister named Mary, who was sitting at the Lord's feet and was listening to his word. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted with all her serving. She came over and said, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her to help me." ⁴¹ The Lord answered and told her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, ⁴² but one thing is needed. In fact, Mary has chosen that better part, which will not be taken away from her."

It's such a short but memorable interaction with Jesus – this story of Mary and Martha. The point and application are easy: be a Mary and not a Martha, right? Sermon's done. Let's move on with the service... But is it that cut and dry that: Mary's the good one; Martha's the villain? Let's spend some time pondering the actions of Martha.

In this encounter, Martha is the first of the sisters that we meet. "As they went on their way, Jesus came into a village, and a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home." (verse 38) Martha is the one who takes the initiative and welcomes Jesus. She wants to host him, and, undoubtedly his disciples as well. She's getting things ready for at least 15 people - 1 Jesus, 12 disciples, her and her sister – but probably more. And this is not a catered event. She didn't have 12 frozen pizzas sitting in her freezer that she could throw in the oven. She was willing to painstakingly prepare enough food for everyone that she invited. This was a lot of work.

Martha hosting Jesus and his disciples is not a bad thing. Last week we heard from the Apostle Paul that we were freed from the law of sin so that we can serve our neighbor. Martha is living out that freedom by serving them with a meal, displaying those fruits of the Holy Spirit – love, kindness, goodness. Martha is doing a good thing. She's not the villain for being busy with serving.

What was not good is this: But Martha was distracted with all her serving. She came over and said, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her to help me." (verse 40) Martha's serving turned into a distraction – one where she was maybe only half-listening to Jesus while she was putting everything together for the meal. She grew more frustrated as the number of things that had to get done were proceeding slowly and she wasn't getting to fully listen to Jesus. What's worse is that in her distraction and frustration, she tried to take her sister Mary away from listening to Jesus with a bit of an accusation against Jesus that he was not empathetic to her needs in serving others.

Do you see yourself in Martha? There are quite a few volunteers for every worship service here at Light of the Valley. For the musicians, as they are looking ahead to what comes next, making sure they play the right song at the right volume at the right time, are they distracted from listening to Jesus while they serve us? Is that the same for the ushers who are making sure everyone has a worship folder, as they count how many people came to worship, as they gather the offering, as they direct people up to the Lord's Supper counting the right number for each row or table? Is that the same for the people who serve on the altar care as they wonder if there will be enough bread and wine for everyone, that the paraments are in just the right spots, that there's enough oil in the candles? Is that the same for the people who make sure that the livestream and the video recording are happening, that the feed is going to the nursery, the sound system and the microphone transponders are on and working and are at an appropriate volume? For the acolyte who is thinking about the right time to put away the candle lighter or to put out the candles at the end of service?

What about the people here with kids? You try so hard to get your kids ready to come to church, to have snacks and activities for them so that they're quiet during the service and so that you can sit at the feet of Jesus and hear God's Word and benefit from it. But as soon as they make a noise, when they look the wrong way at their sibling or poke them, when they meltdown, you feel as if all eyes in the sanctuary are turning toward you, judging you and your parenting, silently wondering, "Why can't you control your kids?" Then the guilt sets in that your kids might be distracting people from sitting at Jesus' feet to worship him, learn from him, be fed by him, especially because you are. Then you wonder why put all this effort into getting your kids here if you and everyone else are distracted. Seems like I should wait for a better day when they are better behaved, making you not want to come to church.

Then there are all the other possible distractions we face. Who of us has never once thought during a worship service about the plans for the rest of the day – what I'm going to eat for lunch, what I need to do on my last weekend day before it's back to the weekday grind? Who of us can say that we have never let our worries encroach during this time, that I've silently wondered what I'm going to do about my anxiety, about my weight, my rent, my near empty tank of gas, the state of the world, the state of my house? We think about people to visit, conversations to have. Or we simply daydream. We're distracted by many things, things that need our attention, need to be done, but things that we allow to take us away from sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to his Word.

Every single one of us can relate to being Martha when we want to be Mary. We want to listen to Jesus, or we wouldn't be here. But we also want to use our freedom to serve others. As we serve, we often want help. When we are overwhelmed and distracted by all the things we need to do and take care of, especially at church, we wonder why other people don't just notice what we need help with and jump in and do it. Then again, if we are being honest, we probably would refuse the person's offer to help because we have pride in being self-sufficient or we think we're a burden to people if they have to help us. Yet, we want someone to notice and care and just do the thing that we need help with, to take away the things that we are distracted by. Lord, don't you care that I have so much going on, so much to do, so many good things that I am doing for others but need help doing? Help me! (Even if that help comes at the cost of someone sitting and listening to God's Word.)

When Martha vocalized this, the Lord answered and told her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but one thing is needed." (verses 41-42a) Can you put your name in place of Martha's, that Jesus is talking to you specifically right now – not as an exasperated, disappointed calling you out saying your name twice, but a tender voice that cares about you and wants what's best for you?

We allow ourselves to be distracted by many things – some of them like godly serving like Martha was doing, thinking about things that need to get done, and then other things that simply aren't needed, aren't necessary, things we can't control, can't fix. Lord, forgive us for being distracted from your Word and from pulling others from sitting and listening at your feet. Give all of us this moment right now to sit at your feet and listen to your Word. Give us this moment as the one thing needed.

We need to hear that although we've been distracted and distracted others from listening to Jesus, Jesus did not let the distractions take him away from sitting and listening to God's Word. He was there Sabbath after Sabbath actively listening to and studying God's Word. When people tried to turn his attention away from his Word, he would steer them right back to it. When people were worried and upset about many things, he pointed them back to how God met those needs. When he felt the pain of the scourging, the unjust trials, the nails piercing his flesh on the cross, he was not distracted by them. He kept his focus, pure and unwavering. He gave his perfect life in place of ours.

He did this not so that we could have another wave of guilt wash over us of how easily we are distracted, but so that his perfect focus on God and his Word would be achieved for us by what he has done. His gift to us is that we are forgiven and covered with his perfect focus. This is the one thing needed. This is the thing that saves us and delivers us from this world of distractions to be with God in heaven. This is the one thing that lasts forever for us. Just as he would not take Mary away from sitting at his feet and listening to his Word, God will never take this one needed thing away from us.

There are many good things in being like Martha. It is good to serve others. It is good to usher, play music for worship, serve on the altar care, acolyte, help with the tech, provide the materials for our worship, bring kids to church, make plans, use our resources wisely. But may these all be done to help other people sit at the Lord's feet and listen to God's Word, never to distract us and take us away from him.

If you find yourself often being like Martha who's distracted by serving, especially during worship, then make some time to be like Mary, sitting at the feet of our Lord and listening to his Word. Maybe that means getting up a bit earlier or staying up a bit later than the rest of the family so that you can read from God's Word or listen to a sermon in a quiet corner. Maybe that means taking the kid's nap time for a moment to sit and rest with Jesus, having it play while you're driving or while you're cooking breakfast. Maybe to remove the distractions, you might need to write them down on a notepad or a digital document so that you can clear your mind, knowing that distractions can stay there and you can come back to them later. And if you find that your first plan didn't work so well, modify it. Adapt. Change. Try something different. If you're feeling guilty and distracted by bringing the kids to church, recognize that you are being like Martha and teaching them to be like Mary. You're doing a God-pleasing thing. And, no, we are not all turning around to judge you and your parenting. We're glad that you brought the kids, that you are being like Martha so that they can be like Mary. For the rest of us, we remember that worship requires active attention and participation, not just passive observation. We can work on ourselves to focus our minds and express our joy that these parents are here serving their children with the one thing needed: Jesus.

Martha served, and God be praised that she did. Mary sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his Word, and God be praised that she got to do the one thing needed. Help us to follow both Martha's and Mary's God-pleasing actions, but never let us be distracted from the one thing needed, from you, Lord, and your Word, filling us with all that you have done and do to serve us. Amen.