

Bringing Jesus to Your World

Don't Just Do Something – Sit There!
Luke 10:38-42

This passage gives a good piece of advice for many of us who feel that we have to be active every minute of the day. Do you ever feel that way? We have a malady in our country called “americanitis.” It is seen in running up escalators or running yellow and red lights in order to get somewhere on time. By the way, do you know what the annual cost of running red lights is (i.e. in medical bills, care repairs, etc.)? Seven billion dollars! Do you know what the average amount of time saved by running a red light is? Fifty seconds!

Several years ago, newspapers told how a Navy fighter jet shot itself down. Flying at supersonic speed, it ran into the missiles it had fired only seconds before. The jet was traveling too fast. Some of us are traveling through our lives like that. And we're going to self-destruct. Did you know that 60-90% of all medical office visits are for stress related symptoms. You see, “The problem with living life in the fast lane is that you get to the toll booth a lot quicker.”ⁱ

The passage before us has an awful lot to say about all of this. The story very appropriately follows the account of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:30-37. There, Jesus underscores the two greatest commandments: (1) love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind and (2) love your neighbor as yourself. The story of the Good Samaritan (10:30-37) illustrates the command to “love your neighbor as yourself” and now this account of Mary and Martha illustrates what it looks like to love the Lord with all of your heart, soul and mind. The story picks up in verse 38.

Serving Martha: A Picture of Duty (Luke 10: 38, 40)

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him (verse 38).

It's about four months before Jesus' death. Jesus and his disciples are most likely on their way to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. As they enter Bethany, the village where Mary, Martha and Lazarus lived, Jesus' disciples may have continued on to Jerusalem while Jesus spends the evening with this family that he knows so well.

Bethany is a quiet village to the south of the Mount of Olives beside the Jericho road. It was located only about 2 ½ miles from Jerusalem (map).

Given the fact that Mary (John 12) uses her own costly oil to anoint the feet of Jesus, these two sisters may have been women of some financial means. Martha is the older of the two and the epitome of a homemaker. If I were to guess her spiritual gift, it would certainly be hospitality. We can almost picture the house where Mary and Martha lived. I imagine that the house and its gardens were inviting and well-cared for.

While all this is very commendable, verse 40 gives us another take on Martha's situation:

But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

Notice that Martha was "distracted by *all* the preparations." More literally she was "drawn about in many different directions."

You can almost hear the clanging of pots and pans and smell the aroma of lamb cooking on the fire. Beyond that, you can almost hear the discontented sighs of Martha as she complains under her breath that her sister has left her alone to do all the work. Apparently, Martha was making, not just a one or two course meal, but a five or six course meal and the pressure was mounting.

How often do you feel that way? Only a couple of generations ago, families referred to one day in their weekly schedule as "wash day." There were no automatic washing machines and doing the family's laundry often took an entire day. But then, technology produced the washing machine. Just throw the clothes in and go and do something else! How efficient!

So what happened? Did we get more time to simply be with family or as believers to spend in quietness and prayer? No, we simply do more work.

I've noticed this with our computer technology. E-mail and our global network have made us far more efficient...and also stressed out! My father was a pastor and I remember him coming home one day and being so thankful for all the work he had gotten done at the office that afternoon. He had written three letters and made a couple of phone calls. That was in the days before computers. Today, I might answer 10 voice messages and 30 emails in an afternoon. We are certainly more efficient, but are we more effective?

Stephen Covey, in his excellent book (that I would recommend by the way) entitled *First Things First* says this:

"People expect us to be busy, overworked. It's become a status symbol in our society – if we're busy, we're important; if we're not busy, we're embarrassed to admit it. Busyness is where we get our security. It's validating, popular and pleasing. It's also a good excuse for not dealing with the first things in our lives."ⁱⁱ

I don't think the problem lies in the work that Martha was doing, but in the *amount* of work and in the *attitude* with which she was doing the work. As an old song puts it: "she's workin' like the Devil servin' the Lord." Martha is focused on the urgent rather than the essential. Her ministry *for* the Lord became more important than her ministry *to* the Lord. And because of this, she doesn't "burn out" but she does "burn up!"

"Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself. Tell her to help me!" Martha is angry. I believe her anger is best understood in the context of the cultural setting. In that day (as is still often the case in many cultures – even on the farm where my wife grew up), the men would sit around and talk while the women took care of the domestic duties. We can

picture Lazarus, Jesus and other invited men are in the living room talking, while Martha is left to prepare the meal by herself. But where is Mary? She's in the living room with the men ... sitting! And the tension, frustration and anger mount. In her complaint to Jesus, Martha doesn't even refer to her sister by name. She's angry at Mary for leaving her with all the work to do and she's angry with Jesus for allowing this to go on!

Charles Hummel in his well-known book *Freedom from the Tyranny of the Urgent*ⁱⁱⁱ puts it this way:

“Tension and frustration mount when we are performing the wrong tasks or trying to cram too many of the right activities into a given period...A critical spirit develops and we begin to judge and condemn others for what they do or don't do. Anytime you feel a wave of criticism gaining momentum in your spirit remember that it's completely out of line as far as God is concerned.”

I've seen that time and again in my own life. I am the most critical when I am the most stressed-out! A critical spirit is often the flashing light on our emotional dashboard that our priorities are screwed up!

Martha is not only angry at his sister Mary, but she questions God's care: “Lord, don't you care?” Do you ever accuse God of not caring for you because you have already decided what that care should look like? That's what Martha does.

While Martha has a serving ministry, she lacks a servant's heart. But let's turn now to her sister, Mary. If serving Martha is a picture of duty, sitting Mary is a picture of devotion. If serving Martha is a picture of being occupied *for* Jesus, sitting Mary is a picture of being occupied *with* Jesus.

Sitting Mary: A Picture of Devotion (Luke 10:39)

She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said.
(Verse 39)

Who is this Mary? She's mentioned several times in the Gospels: in John 11 when Jesus comes to raise her brother Lazarus from the dead and in the three parallel passages (Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; John 12:1-8) where she anoints the feet of Jesus with a costly perfume. Some also believe that the immoral woman of Luke 7:36-50 who also anoints Jesus feet and wipes them with her hair is the same Mary as mentioned here in Luke 10 and the other passages. But what is certain is that in every text which speaks of Mary, *she is always at Jesus' feet.*

Oriental houses often had a type of divan, raised about two feet from the floor and covered with soft cushions. Jesus was probably sitting on this while Mary sat on the floor. She was in the normal posture of an attentive disciple. She was right at the feet of Jesus, with an eager attitude of a learner.

But the question in this passage is: How did she get there? It seems clear that she had previously been with Martha, helping to prepare the meal (cf. verse 40 “my sister has left me”).

Mary probably left Martha to do what every good host would have done, i.e. wash the feet of the guest (cf. Luke 7:44-46). But while Mary is washing Jesus' feet, Jesus begins to speak. Mary is captivated by his words, fascinated with His character and beauty, and she never gets up. She just sits there in the wonder of His presence.

Not only was Mary sitting, and in sitting, worshipping; she was also listening. Not only is sitting at Jesus' feet the mark of a true disciple; but so is listening to Jesus' words. One of the most often repeated statements in Jesus' ministry was "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." And the Apostle James reminds us, "My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger." (James 1:19).

Not only are you and I prone to be *doing something*, we are also prone to be *saying something*. This is true even in our relationship with the God. How often do you come to Him with your grocery list of things you want Him to do for you, rather than cultivate the intimacy found in simply listening?

How can we listen? The Psalmist puts it this way, "Be still and know that I am God." And where can we hear God's words to us and know better who he is? Obviously, in the revelation that he has left us.

And here we have the two essential elements of authentic worship: revelation and response. Mary exemplifies both. She is listening to the revelation spoken by the living Word and she responds as a worshipping disciple at the feet of Jesus.

So here we have serving Martha, a picture of duty. And sitting Mary, a picture of devotion. What is Jesus' evaluation of what is taking place?

Jesus' Evaluation (Luke 10:41-42)

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

"Martha, Martha..." The fact that Jesus repeated her name twice signifies a tender rebuke, though I believe Jesus was smiling as he gave this rebuke to Martha. He wants to underscore the seriousness of what he is about to tell her – like when you say both the first and last name of your child to get their attention.

Jesus describes Martha as "worried," referring to her inner anxiety, and as "upset," referring to her outward agitation. Apparently, Martha was busy but not blessed. She had taken on responsibility for many things, things for which she was not obligated to assume the entire responsibility. As a result, she felt that she not only needed to dictate Mary's responsibilities, but even tell the Lord what he should do. She began to assume responsibility for others, all the while ignoring what should have been her own priorities. You see, true discipleship should never be burdensome duty but joyful devotion. Unfortunately, for Martha that was not the case.

So Jesus reminds Martha: “Only one thing is needed.” Does that mean that preparing a one or two course meal rather than a five course meal would be sufficient, leaving Martha time for sitting at Jesus’ feet also? I think so. Does that also mean that you and I can trim our lifestyle so that we also have time to “sit at Jesus’ feet” as Mary did? Yes, I believe so.

I want you to notice this: In Jesus’ response, he lightens Martha’s load, not by having Mary help her, but by giving her a new perspective on her work. Just what is that new perspective?

The difference between Mary and Martha is not that one served and the other didn’t. Both Mary and Martha *served* the Lord. The difference is that one served out of duty and compulsion. The other served out of devotion and commitment.

Why was Martha serving out of duty and compulsion? At the risk of reading into Martha’s motivations, I suspect that she was measuring her significance in terms of service. Her service was too important and she couldn’t lay it aside even to focus on Jesus the one she should be serving. Put in other terms, her ministry became her master, rather than her Master being her ministry. Martha was serving without sitting, and that is compulsion.

But what about Mary? Jesus says, “Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

Mary’s first step in true devotion was to *discern* her priorities. She made a choice, and a difficult one at that. Our hardest choices in life are not between the good and the bad, but between the good and the best. That is probably why Paul prays for the Philippians that “they may be able to discern the things that are the best.” Mary is characterized by *focus*; Martha is characterized by *distraction*. And it paralyzed her.

Have you ever wondered why animal trainers carry a stool when they go into a cage of lions? They have their whips, of course, and their pistol at their side. But they also carry a stool and they hold it by the back and thrust the legs toward the face of the lion. Those who know maintain that the animal tries to focus on all four legs at once. In doing so, a kind of paralysis overwhelms the animal and it becomes tame and disabled. Why? It’s attention is fragmented.

I fear that many of us are just like that. We, like serving Martha, are trying to do many things, but are neglecting the essential. We lack focus. We are occupied *for* Jesus without this being the simple overflow of being occupied *with* Jesus. You and I should never be too occupied to sit at Jesus’ feet, in worship, prayer and devotion.

Before moving on, however, we need to ask: What is it that led Mary to make such a discerning choice? When we compare this passage with John 12 and the parallel passages, it becomes clear. Mary was captivated by the object of her worship. She was so captivated that she takes an expensive oil or perfume in an alabaster jar and pours it on Jesus’ feet. It is estimated that the cost of this perfume would be the equivalent to sixty dollars, an important sum in Jesus’ day. In contrast, Judas, who criticized Mary on this occasion of such waste, betrayed Jesus for about a third of the price.

But the point is this: when we are more preoccupied with ministry *for* Jesus rather than ministry *to* Jesus, it is often because we fail to see the incomprehensible worth of the One we worship and serve.

But not only is Mary characterized by discernment, she is also motivated by *desire*. I see fleshed out in Mary the words of the psalmist:

*Oh God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you;
My soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you,
In a dry and weary land where there is no water.*

Psalm 63:1

Desire, not duty is what brought Mary to the feet of Jesus in worship. Mary was not sitting there and staying there because she was complacent...though Martha may have thought that! It was because she was committed. There is a great difference between *compulsion*, *complacency* and *commitment*. The compulsive person is highly, but wrongly motivated. The complacent person is simply unmotivated. But the committed person is rightly motivated. And that right motivation is an intense *desire* to be with Jesus.

Next Steps

1. Evaluate your priorities. Are some good things taking the place of the best? What are some of the “many things” that are distracting you from time alone with God?
2. Choose some time that you can be alone with Christ this week. The frequency and amount of time is a personal matter. Be sure your choice is realistic and tailored to your situation. List below some of the specific times you expect to be alone with Christ this week.

ⁱ Robert Orben, *Current Comedy. Leadership*, Vol. 17, no. 4.

ⁱⁱ Stephen R. Covey, *First Things First*

ⁱⁱⁱ InterVarsity Press, 1994