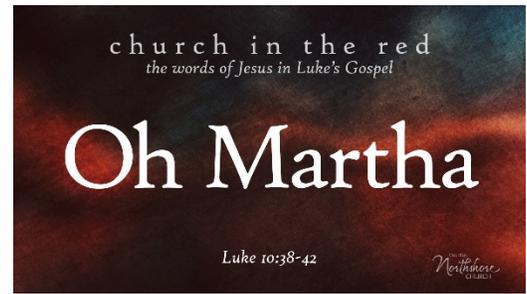


Oh Martha

We have another great passage of Scripture in our hands today as we continue our work through the Words of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke... a series we are calling *Church in the Red* (because lots of Bibles print the Words of Jesus in red letters).



Here's the passage:

³⁸ As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. ³⁹ She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. ⁴⁰ 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!"



⁴¹ "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, ⁴² but few things are needed—or indeed only one. ^c Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her." ¹

Frankly, I would love it if you have never come across this passage of Scripture before because it is pretty well known by old, experienced Christians like me. If you haven't heard it, you might be pretty new to The Faith, or perhaps you don't even believe... yet. We welcome newbies, inquirers, and even skeptics (seriously, if you think you are in such a category, welcome!). But, I suspect that there are a lot of old, experienced Christians like me here today, and I would imagine that you have heard a sermon or two on this passage.

Furthermore, I suspect that you've heard folks praise Mary and put down Martha (oh, that Martha)... and urge us all to be like Martha. I'm not so sure that is fair to Martha. There is nothing inherently wrong with Martha's devotion to her work. In fact, a lot of the teaching of Jesus, and the New Testament holds high serving. Jesus came as a servant; we are called to be servants. This passage is more than "Mary good, Martha bad, be like Mary."

¹ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 10:38–42). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

The passage begins by reading:

he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him.²

Martha welcomed Jesus... and that is a pretty big deal. You might recall that this episode immediately follows the account of the Good Samaritan (or you may have a Bible open and can see it right there for yourself). The Good Samaritan offered hospitality to that beaten, bleeding, and dying one. The Samaritan welcomed that neighbor, even though they had little in common; they would not have otherwise even been friends.

Now we see Martha presented in the same light, as a *welcomer*, a neighbor, one who was offering hospitality. In that culture, it would be unusual for a woman to be in such a prominent position. From other accounts in the Gospels, we know that these sisters had a brother, Lazarus, who presumably was around... yet it was this sister, Martha, who was the host, a position to be regarded.

³⁹ She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said.³

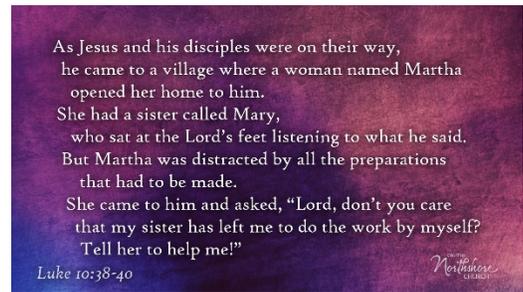
That is a pretty big deal too. While Martha was in the esteemed position of host, Mary was in the exceptional position of disciple. Jesus held (I should say holds) women in high regard. That is worth saying again: Jesus holds women in high regard.

In that culture, women were not held in high regard. They were blocked from education and leadership... often treated like property. Sadly, many religions (including supposed Christian religions) push women down. There are religious systems (again, including supposed Christian systems) that prohibit women from full participation. We don't.

Jesus holds women in high regard; so do we. How could we not? We celebrate women in leadership, as pastors, teachers, deacons and all. Call us to account if you see anything different, and Father forgive us when we sin.

Culturally, the problem presented by this periscope [in our text] is not the portrait of a woman serving (for this is expected), but of a woman assuming (and not only assuming, but even preferring) the role of disciple.⁴

This is an important passage that shakes cultural norms, displaying again that the Kingdom of God isn't like the kingdoms of this world.



² [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 10:38). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

³ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 10:39). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁴ Green, J. B. (1997). [The Gospel of Luke](#) (p. 434). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.

But Martha... this is where things go a bit sideways for Martha, a teaching moment that opened for Jesus. Our text says that she was distracted by all the work... but I suspect that she was less distracted, in this moment, by the work she was doing than the larger distraction of what her sister wasn't doing.

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!"

We don't know for sure who was the older sister, at least not from this text, or any text in the New Testament. But... it sure seems like Martha is the older sister. I don't have any sisters, but I've observed sisters... and it sure seems clear to me that Martha is the older sister (anyone want to argue?). The older sister is the host, and the older sister is concerned with the work. Perhaps, most importantly, the older sister is really concerned with the behavior of the younger sister (any sisters here... am I on the right track?). I am an older brother, and I can say, authoritatively, the older brothers can be like this too.

⁴⁰ 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!" ⁵

That seems like an older sibling sort of thing to do as well. I suspect that, earlier on, there were some clearing of throats, or perhaps a piercing glare. There could have even been a plea, or a command, from Martha to Mary to get with the program. When that fails, as older siblings do, we appeal to a higher power.

When young, she may have appealed to a parent; in this case she appealed to the Lord. It is a power move. If someone isn't responding to our power, we see what we can do to borrow and leverage the power of others.

Carefully inspect Martha's plea; there is a lot of me-talk here:

- Mary has left **me**.
- She left me to do the work **me**-self.
- Tell her to help **me**!

She gets it right, at least, acknowledging Jesus as Lord... but she clearly is most worried about **me** rather than **thee**.

Of course it didn't turn out like she hoped.

⁵ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 10:40). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Martha's address to Jesus takes an unexpected, ~~perhaps unconscious~~ turn; while she engages in the irony of self-betrayal, her attempt to win Jesus' support in a struggle against her sister ends in self-indictment⁶

How does the saying go? When I point my finger at someone else, there are three pointing back at me. Sometimes these kinds of accusations backfire; I hate it when that happens.

It has taken me some time to learn this lesson, but with the gray hair comes some wisdom (a small perk). My gray hair was painfully pointed out to me this week. While checking in at the golf course, the clueless one at the desk asked if I qualified for the senior discount. The senior discount! I told him that I did not qualify (thank you very much)... but that he ought to give it to me as payment for the insult. He didn't buy it.

My gray hair does not yet earn me the senior discount on greens fees... but I hope I've gained some wisdom.

I know that sometimes what I find irritating in others really just exposes something that I need to work on in myself. If you haven't learned the lesson, give it a try sometime. When pointing out the failings in others, do a bit of self-inspection; see if you might detect some failing in yourself that can use some attention.

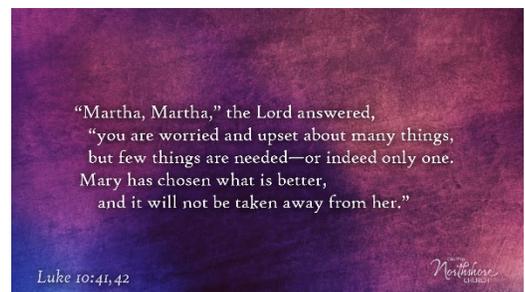
Martha, of course, did not need to rely on self-inspection; Jesus was going to help her out (I'm glad He does that for us too).

⁴¹ "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, ⁴² but few things are needed—or indeed only one. ^c Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her." ⁷

Like I said, I think this is primarily a teaching moment. Not a rebuke or condemnation of Martha or her work... but a moment for discipleship. It appears that Mary saw and seized the opportunity for discipleship right away; for Martha, Jesus needed to be more active, pulling Martha into a moment of discipleship.

Notice where Jesus started with Martha:

"you are worried and upset about many things"⁸



⁶ Green, J. B. (1997). *The Gospel of Luke* (p. 436). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

⁷ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Lk 10:41–42). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁸ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Lk 10:41). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Not a condemnation of the work, nor Martha's willingness to serve in this way, not even correction regarding the notion that perhaps Mary should help. Jesus first put the spotlight on Martha's **attitude**.

God calls us to work joyfully. We are called to work (real, hard, work)... but to do so as worship, with joy. I like the video portrayal of the text, with Martha and Mary in close proximity; it could have been like that. Could Martha have multi-tasked? Could she have worked and listened? Could she have shared the work? I even wonder if she could have put Jesus to work? Don't you think Jesus would have willingly lent a hand? (Perhaps miraculously, but likely just practically)

While she might have been physically close enough to multi-task, she couldn't... she couldn't because she was so distracted, worried, upset, and focused on what Mary wasn't doing.

Isn't this a great lesson? Am I the only one that falls into similar traps? Worried, upset, too concerned about what others are or aren't doing... I can easily get the life sapped out of me.

Jesus called Martha to set worry and upset aside; He calls us to the same.

He went on to say:

few things are needed—or indeed only one⁹

Here Jesus moves the spotlight from Martha's attitude to her **priorities**.

Martha is concerned with many things, Mary with only one.¹⁰

What was that one thing? The question should really be, who is that One? That One is Jesus.

Martha was holding the position of host, but she did so by placing her focus on the tasks, the work, the food, and herself. It turns out that Mary was the better host, because she placed her focus on the guest. The guest of honor, of course, is Jesus.

That's a lesson for us, right? We are not in the music business, or the coffee business, or the entertainment business, or the kid business, or the

We are in the Jesus business. Of course we care about all the details and all the people and groups and sub-groups and all... but our first priority is Jesus and His mission working in and through us.

⁹ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 10:42). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁰ Green, J. B. (1997). [The Gospel of Luke](#) (p. 437). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

The spotlight went from attitude to priorities and then turns to example. Jesus held Mary up as an (the) example to Martha.

Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”¹¹

God saves each of us, and then calls us to be part of a People, a People of God, citizens of His Kingdom, heirs in His family. As a People, we learn from one another, sometimes formally, more often by example.

Mary, this one who was formerly the target of Sister Martha’s critical concern, is held up as the example for Martha to follow.

If it indeed were the case that Martha was the older sister, and Mary the younger, this would be an instance of what some call reverse-mentorship. We expect the young to learn from the old and experienced, but the young have a lot to teach the old. The young know things that we who are older may not know, and they definitely see things we don’t see. We need the fresh eyes, fresh perspectives, fresh thinking that the young brings.

When Jesus said “it will not be taken away from her,” I think that implies that Jesus was purposefully breaking cultural barriers, specifically in the case of gender. It appears that Martha may have been stuck in the constraints wrapped around her by the culture; Jesus breaks these bonds. Jesus gives gifts that are irrevocable, brings freedom that is for all eternity.

While I still maintain that there is no condemnation of work expressed in our text, there is clearly a call to prioritize matters of focus on, and relationship to, Jesus.

I often think of things in terms of heart, head, and hand. This text prioritizes heart, a call to devotion to Jesus. While it may prioritize heart (and perhaps a bit of head), it does not diminish the other.

The Christian life is not only a matter of sitting at the feet of Jesus, to be so spiritually minded that we are of no earthly good. It isn’t all heart and head, it is hand too. Don’t believe me? Read the Book of James.

The Christian life isn’t all head either, lest we be like that expert in the law that Jesus condemned as He told about the Good Samaritan.

And, of course, it is not all about hand either, not merely about tasks... not even merely about ceremony... not even merely about charity.

¹¹ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 10:42). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Today's text calls us to alignment. We're called to consider our attitudes, priorities, and examples.

Are we working with joy? Is our attitude an attitude of worship? Or are we easily consumed with worry and upset?

Do we have first things first? Is Jesus at the center, or do we put ourselves, our power and priorities and such in the center?

Are we learning well from the good examples around us, even if they come from the younger, or the novice, or the less experienced, or other classes and categories.

This text leads us to consider and align ourselves, again, with the Jesus Way. Will you join me in prayer?

Our Father, thank You for Your Word, and the power it has in our lives to lead us in the Jesus Way. Forgive us our upsets and worries and help us to work joyfully. Give us gifts of clarity and courage to keep our priorities on You, Your calling, and Your work in us and through us. Thank You for the examples you provide, around us, in Your Word, and of course in the person of the Son of God Jesus. We believe. We pray in the great name of our Savior, Jesus. Amen.

