ONE THING IS NECESSARY

Luke 10:38–42

Key Verse: 10:42

“...but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.”

What’s your priority? We all have priorities, big and small. Some of us are ambitious for our studies and sacrifice everything for them. Some of us put priority on our kids–everything else can wait. Sometimes our real priority is to eat! These priorities seem good at the time. But are they? Today’s passage is interesting. At first it looks like sibling rivalry. Who’s better? But really this passage is about priorities. What priority does Jesus want us to have? What does it mean to practice this? And why should we? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word.

Jesus is still traveling. And in this long travel section in Luke, Jesus is focused on training his disciples. Today we come to a brief event at the end of chapter 10. It’s an event only Luke records. Jesus goes to someone’s home for a meal. Luke loves to tell us how Jesus had meals with people (5:29; 7:36; 11:37; 14:1; 19:5–7; 22:8–20; 24:30,40–43).

And Luke highlights Jesus’ ministry with women. Earlier, at a Pharisee’s house, Jesus had allowed a sinful woman to weep at his feet, wipe them with her hair and put ointment on them (7:37–38). He defended that nameless woman as an example of love, and he gave her his forgiveness and his peace (7:44–50). Only Luke tells us that, after healing women of evil spirits and infirmities, Jesus has them join him and his twelve disciples (8:1–3). Now Jesus allows a woman to sit at his feet to learn, along with the men. At that time it was unheard of. It may seem today’s passage is just for women. But actually it’s for all of us, without exception.

How do things begin? Look at verse 38. “Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house.” What stands out here is Martha’s willingness to welcome. Though they’re not mentioned, the twelve hungry disciples are there, too. So Martha isn’t just inviting one person. The author Luke loves to use this word “welcome” (8:40; 10:38; cf. Ac15:4; 18:27; 28:30). Jesus himself “welcomed” the crowds (9:11). Luke uses this same Greek root word to describe “receiving” people as our guests (9:53; 10:8,10; 15:2; 16:4,9; 19:6; Ac2:46; 17:7; 21:17). In Acts, the Lord opened Lydia’s heart to the gospel message through Paul, and she urged Paul and his followers to come and stay at her house (Ac16:13–15). The whole New Testament teaches all of us, as followers of Jesus, to learn to practice hospitality in our own homes (Ro12:13; 1Ti3:2; 5:10; Tit1:8; Heb13:2; 1Pe4:9). Martha is a great example of such welcoming hospitality. Both Christian men and women need to learn it.

But there’s another aspect here. Look at verse 39. “And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching.” As soon as he goes in, while Martha is preparing the meal, Jesus begins teaching. Jesus was always ministering to people with God’s gracious words, like he was sowing seed (cf. 4:22; 5:1; 8:11). His teaching focused on the good news of the kingdom of God (4:43; 8:1), the secrets of the kingdom of God (8:10). He was teaching the lifestyle and values of his kingdom (6:17,20–26), to love, even our enemies (6:27–36), and not to judge (6:37–42). In his teaching he’s revealing the majesty of our Father God (9:43; 10:22). He’s also revealing himself. He’s the one anointed by God to bring people God’s salvation (4:18–19), the one who heals all kinds of diseases (4:40; 6:18; 7:21), the one who has authority on earth to forgive sins (5:20,24). His teaching reveals he’s the Christ of God (9:20), who was transfigured in glory (9:29–32), who will ascend in glory (24:51; Ac1:9; 1Ti3:16), and who’s going to come in that same glory someday (9:26; Ac1:11). Seeing this Jesus and getting to be with him is the greatest privilege there is (10:23–24).

And who’s sitting there? Look at verse 39 again. It’s Martha’s sister, Mary. It seems like a good thing to do, to seize the chance to sit down, be with Jesus and listen to him. But Martha doesn’t think so. Read verse 40. “But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.’” Wow! Martha can’t bear it that, while she’s working so hard, her sister is just sitting there enjoying being with Jesus. There’s a time and place for everything, right? There’s a time to sit and listen, and a time to get up and serve. It seems Martha is right. But she’s a bit scary. She kind of rebukes Jesus. She even tells him what to do. She orders Jesus to tell Mary to come and help her. All the serving she’s doing has made her frustrated and angry, angry at Mary, and even a bit angry with Jesus.

What’s going on? Verse 40a says she’s “distracted with much serving.” Distracted from what? Distracted from being with Jesus and listening to him. In other words, Martha is missing the point. The point is not the meal itself, but the chance to listen to Jesus, the chance to be with him. If Jesus were really coming over to our place, what would be important to him: How clean the place is, or how fancy the meal is? Or is it the chance for us to have deeper fellowship with him?

It seems Martha got engrossed in trying to impress with her serving. This desire derailed her good intention. All the serving she thought she had to do might not have even been necessary. She could have drastically simplified the menu and joined her sister at the feet of Jesus. Since time is so precious, what’s most important? Of course, all these people had to eat. But it would have been better for Martha, while serving, to focus on making an environment where everybody could really listen to Jesus. In that way she could have co-worked with him. So, what’s better? Having an amazing meal, or a great Bible study with Jesus?

How does Jesus respond? Look at verse 41. “But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things.’” He’s “the Lord.” He helps Martha calm down. His words are so profound. Repeating someone’s name wasn’t dismissive; it was his way of showing tender affection. Martha is kind of prickly, but Jesus embraces her anyway. And he tells her there’s no need to be anxious and troubled about the many things on her mind. She thought she had to serve her guests properly. But to Jesus, all these things were not as important as she thought. Earlier, he used this same word for “anxious” to describe the things in our lives that choke out the word of God (8:14).

We all have to live in this real world. We have so many things to do. We face so many problems and challenges and upsetting people that make us anxious and troubled. But we’ve got to guard our hearts. How? It’s by focusing on Jesus himself. Not on people, not on myself, but on Jesus. While working and serving throughout the day, in our inner person we need to consider Jesus, be looking to Jesus, at how he endured (Heb3:1; 12:2). When we’re focused on him, depending on him, we can do everything in his name, with a thankful heart (Col3:17).

And Jesus says more to Martha. Read verse 42. “...but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.” It must have been so hard for Martha to hear that her sister Mary, just sitting there, in her mind doing nothing to help, was better than her. But Jesus took a risk to intervene between these two sisters and say these words to Martha. He’s using this as an unforgettable teachable moment.

What is Jesus teaching? He says only “one thing is necessary.” And he calls it “the good portion.” This word “portion” seems to be about a piece of meat, the most tasty, nutritious part. But he’s not talking about literal food; he’s describing a spiritual meal. “The good portion” means it’s so deeply satisfying. As Jesus once said, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Mt4:4; cf. Dt8:2). By choosing to sit at Jesus’ feet and listen, Mary chose to feed on Jesus (Jn6:57–58). Only in learning to feed on Jesus will we have no more spiritual hunger or thirst (Jn6:35). Only Jesus can truly satisfy us. Though her sister didn't understand and was judging her for being lazy or selfish, Mary chose what is best–to listen to Jesus.

Jesus concludes by saying that it “will not be taken away from her” (42b). He’s saying what Mary has received is leaving a lasting result in her soul. Through being with him and listening, Mary’s growing in an intimate, personal relationship with him. She’s gaining “the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him” (Eph1:17). She’s coming to know “the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Php3:8). She’s experiencing “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2Co4:6). She must have been so bright!

What’s the main point here? It’s Mary’s example. Mary delights in being with Jesus, in learning from him. As Jesus’ disciples we have many things to do. But Mary shows us the one thing necessary: to seek Jesus himself. She shows us how to delight in being with him, to delight in his words. Nobody was forcing her; she really wanted to be with him and made it her priority. In sitting at his feet, listening, she shows us how to learn from him. It’s how to learn his heart, what he came to do for us, what he came to give us. Mary shows us how to have fellowship with Jesus first, before trying to serve people. It’s how to get to know Jesus better and deeper. To do it, we’ve got to drop everything else that may seem important. We’ve got to focus and really put in the time. When we focus on Jesus, giving our heart to develop a personal relationship with him, we find real satisfaction, real peace, strength and wisdom.

Today’s passage is telling us that having a personal devotional life needs to be our top priority. But that’s easier said than done. We’ve got to discipline ourselves to come to Jesus personally every day. Put aside other things for a little while. We’ve got to learn how to listen carefully to God’s words, which always point us to Jesus (Jn5:39). We’ve got to give our hearts to our personal devotions and guard them from distractions. Without personal time with Jesus, our connection with him evaporates. And in our devotions, we’ve got to focus not just on the mechanics of the words, or the outward activity, but on being with Christ himself. Being at his feet to listen to him, to love him, to worship him. As we spend quality time with him, love for him grows in our heart. We come to confess with the psalmist, “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you” (Ps73:25).

Read verse 42 again. In light of Mary’s example, may God help us repent of our distractions, anxieties and troubles that choke out our walk with Christ. May God bless us to choose the good portion, being with Jesus and learning from him, so that we may find real satisfaction for our souls.