

To God Alone Be The Glory

Some years ago one of my mom's many cousins telephoned and asked me to look in on his children, my second cousins. It was the first time he and I had ever spoken, so we spent some time getting acquainted by phone that day. He asked how things were going at the church. After I mentioned how very much ministry work needed to be done, he asked, "Do you have a discipline for reading the Bible?" If he had been thinking about today's Gospel, he might have worded his question like this: "Are you a Martha or a Mary?"

This question isn't just for pastors. In fact, everything that a pastor is supposed to do, all Jesus' followers are supposed to do (with the exception of the public teaching and preaching of God's Word). So the same question is for you. "Are you a Martha or a Mary?" Let's find out as we study this portion of God's Word.

"Where were Jesus and his disciples coming from?" Don't know. "Where were they going to afterward?" Don't know. But from the other three Gospels we know that there was a Martha, there was a Mary, and there was a Lazarus—a brother and two sisters who lived together in Bethany, about two miles from Jerusalem.

Luke reports: ³⁸[Jesus] *came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to Him.* "Was this the first time Martha welcomed Jesus into her home?" Don't know. "How many times did Jesus stay with Martha and Mary during his earthly ministry?" Don't know. "Did the disciples

come to Martha's home too, or did they go on ahead?" Don't know. We do know that Martha viewed Jesus as her Lord, true God, the long-promised Messiah, her Savior from sin. So we reckon Martha wanted to show her love for Jesus by taking good care of him.

Are you a Martha? Do you open your home to Jesus and welcome him? I hope so. Although we can't see Jesus today, as true God he is everywhere. So in a sense he's in your home right now, even though you left there and came to be here in his house for an hour or two. How wise you are to remind yourself: "I am a follower of Jesus, and I want my home to reflect my faith." Are you on your best behavior at home like you are when you come to this house of the Lord? So many of our sins are committed in our homes. We do things when we think no one is watching, even though God is always watching—things like worry, gluttony, vanity about our looks, and sneaking things we shouldn't. Some sins, like disrespectful behaviors (roll eyes and "tseh-huhh!"), angry words, or hateful looks, we don't even try hiding from our households when we feel like we have a good reason to be upset. These, however, are not ways to welcome Jesus into our homes. They are like laying a mat outside our front door which says, "Go away, Jesus. Your will is not welcome in my home."

But by God's grace you do welcome Jesus into your home. Whenever you pray, "O my God and Lord, what I just did is wrong. Please forgive me, Savior, and help me not to do that again. Thank you for washing me clean, Jesus"... If you regularly confess

your sins like this and celebrate the purity you have in God's sight through Jesus, you are a Martha. You welcome Jesus into your home.

So we've established that, by God's good grace, you are a Martha. But are you also a Mary? ³⁹[Martha] *had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what He said.* Some people read this account and wonder if Mary had a lazy streak. These two sisters seem to fit the classic personalities for birth order. Martha, apparently the older, was the more responsible sister and more detail oriented. Mary, apparently the younger, was the more social of the two... more relationship oriented. But you know what? We don't have enough information to draw these conclusions for sure. In fact, this is the same point I was trying to make a little earlier when I kept saying, "Don't know." The Holy Spirit caused Luke to write this account in such a way that if we try to focus anywhere other than the main point of the account, we keep running into a brick wall of "Don't know."

"Well, what do we know?" *Mary sat at the Lord's feet listening to what He said.* That's the main point. Are you a Mary? If you're awake and paying attention this morning to the words of the liturgy and the hymns and the Scripture lessons and the sermon, you are, by God's good grace, a Mary. You're doing what Jesus wants you to do. You are giving him your heart, your mind, and the first hours of this new week. You are a Mary. "*Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name be the glory*" (Psalm 115:1).

So we've established that sometimes you are a Martha and sometimes you are a Mary. But whenever there's a decision to be made about whether you're going to be a Mary or a Martha, who wins? Martha was faced with that very issue. So was Mary.

Use your imagination to feel the tension these sisters felt that day. Jesus, the great Teacher, has come to their home. Of course, they welcome him. They fetch a chair or a cushion for him to sit on. They bring some water and wash his dusty feet. They give him something refreshing to drink. They want to make their Savior as comfortable as possible. But, oh my, if all these disciples are going to stay overnight, they're all going to need a place to sleep—and something to eat! If you've ever helped prepare for guests in your own home, your blood pressure may be up a few points right now just thinking about what Martha and Mary have to do. There's so much to be done!

Ah, but the guest today is the Teacher. And as soon as he and everyone else in the room is comfortable, Jesus starts teaching everyone. Is it a large crowd or a small one? Don't know, but I like to imagine that Lazarus is there. Would you want to know what the Savior Jesus has to say? Mary did. So did Martha. The Greek words literally translate, "*And to this one [i.e. Martha] there was a sister called Mary {spelled 'Mariam'}, who also, having sat down beside [her=Martha] at the Lord's feet, kept listening to His Word.*" In other words, they both sat down to listen to Jesus, Martha first, then Mary. Well, what do you know?! Martha

was a Mary, just like her sister!

⁴⁰*But* there was food to be made and maybe beds to be made up. Luke tells us *Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made*. Literally the original Greek says she kept getting distracted, kept getting ‘pulled away,’ or even ‘dragged away’ by much service. Maybe she didn’t think of what she was doing as a decision—she just saw the need and she got up to address the need—but it was a decision nonetheless. She decided that serving Jesus was more important than listening to Jesus. And she kept making this wrong decision that day.

It was not wrong for Martha to serve the Lord. The Lord needs lots of Marthas in every church or else eighty percent of the ministry will be done by only twenty percent of the people. Churches who fail to work hard at overcoming this typical 80/20 situation tend to move forward very slowly. The ironic thing is that serving the Lord is wonderful and enjoyable, but only those who make time for serving the Lord get to experience this joy. The more Marthas a church has, the more enjoyable it is to be a part of that church because there are so many working together to honor God and lay His Word on more and more hearts. Are you a Martha? Are you a part of the solution?

But this day Martha’s timing was off for being a Martha. There’s a time for serving the Lord, and there’s a time for the Lord to serve us. Look how far Martha took her wrong decision. *She came to [Jesus] and asked, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”* Whoa. Martha is

forgetting who she is and who she’s talking to. Do you sometimes do this same thing when you’re talking to God? “God, you have to help me! Can’t you make so-n-so stop doing such-n-such?” Watch Martha walk the tightrope between respect and need. “Jesus, Lord of all, doesn’t it matter to you?... and by the way, I think it should matter to you, Jesus, sir... that my sister has forsaken me. Tell her to help me!” {Sound of something falling.} Ooop. Martha just fell off the tightrope through disrespect. She forgot that humans don’t get to order God around. Are you ever a Martha like this? Catch yourself midstream: “What am I doing, talking to Almighty God like this? Who is the servant, and who is the Lord? I’m so glad He’s also my Savior.” With your attitude reset, try presenting your request to your God again. He loves to hear your prayers.

This story reminds me how blessed God’s people are that neither you nor I am God. If you were God and someone tried ordering you around like Martha ordered Jesus, wouldn’t you be tempted to zing them a little, or, if you were having a bad day, turn them into burnt cookies? But not Jesus. Not gracious, loving, merciful, patient Jesus. On Judgment Day, yes—he will judge the living and the dead, and it will not turn out well for anyone who refused to be a Mary. But not yet, not today. See how gently Jesus deals with his erring little lamb? ⁴¹ “*Martha, Martha, ...you are worried and upset about many things,* ⁴²*but only one thing is needed.*

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

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, when it comes to deciding between ‘serving the Lord’ and ‘listening to his Word,’ **CHOOSE WHAT IS BETTER, LIKE MARY.** Serving the Lord is good—in fact it’s great! The Lord did not chide Martha for serving him. But when it was time to listen to what the Lord had to say, Martha’s sister Mary must have figured ‘dinner could be late’ because now was the time to listen to Jesus. Martha forgot that Jesus came, not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28), including for Marthas like you and me.

How can we show in our lives that we know what is better? How can we choose what is better? How about turning off all electronic devices after breakfast or after dinner or just before bed for five, ten, even 30 minutes of “Jesus time.” There are hundreds of theologically sound books available for devotions, whether your household has one person or nine, children or teenagers or just adults. In the last five years many books have been added to our church library, and improvements were made to display the books better. Next week there will be a new batch of Meditations devotion booklets available for you to pick up. And there’s always the Good Book itself to read from with the green daily Bible reading guides always available on the information counter by the church office. And there are issues of Forward in Christ magazine to share. Are you daily a Mary? If so, you take time to

sit at Jesus’ feet, maybe at home, maybe during a break at work—maybe you listen during your commute. Maybe you have to miss our one in-person worship service some weeks, but then later you watch our worship video on our YouTube channel or on the local cable channel Wednesday at 7:00 P.M. Yes, making a living is important. Yes, fixing meals and maintaining a home is important. Yes, volunteering for charities is important. And yes, there is so very much work to do here for our St. John’s ministry that we need all of us to be Martha’s. What a blessing it would be to Christ’s kingdom if we all found a way to serve Jesus for several hours each month! But even more important than all that is this: Jesus wants to serve us with his Word. It is wise to stop being a Martha for a few minutes each day and be a Mary. **CHOOSE WHAT IS BETTER, LIKE MARY.**

The Lord really does want us to carve out time for gathering with fellow believers around his Word week after week. Letting this go repeatedly is sinful. It’s an especially dangerous sin because we’re withholding from ourselves the very thing that feeds our faith and leads us to repent of all sin, and we are depriving our fellow believers of an encouraging example. On the other hand, when we make time to sit at Jesus’ feet, our faith gets fed the life-giving and soul-strengthening message of full forgiveness for all sinners through faith in Jesus. **CHOOSE WHAT IS BETTER, LIKE MARY.**

One more example. Nothing in the Bible

requires us to worship on Thanksgiving Eve or on Christmas Day, but what great opportunities to gather for an hour and be a Mary with all the other Marys in our church! It won't hurt anyone to wait an extra hour for you to arrive for dinner or for gift opening. Will you be a Mary this Thanksgiving and Christmas? CHOOSE WHAT IS BETTER, LIKE MARY.