**Martha and Mary**
**Luke 10:38-42**

I was talking to someone recently, they're not in the church by the way, who was apologizing to me about a family member of theirs who I was just about to meet. And they were embarrassed about what I might think of their relation. And I said, look, don't worry, you want to meet my extended family. If you think yours is a bit screwy, well I could tell you a few stories!

Now believe it or not some liberal theologians doubt the historical accuracy of this story of Martha and Mary. They argue that this never really happened, that Luke made it up. Which makes me think those theologians must have been only children. Only an only child could think this didn't happen! Because anyone who has siblings, especially anyone who has a sister, just knows this is true, because this little sisterly spat, is just so normal in our screwy families.

But why does Luke include it, and why here, at this point in the gospel? You see, Jesus has been ministering in Galilee, which is to the north of Israel, and we know he's started to head south towards Jerusalem. And Luke tells us in v38, 'Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house.' Nothing odd about that you might think, except we know from John's gospel that Mary and Martha's village was Bethany, which is only a few miles outside of Jerusalem, and yet in Luke 17, Jesus is still further north than that. So either we have to imagine Jesus moving up and down like a yoyo, or Luke has deliberately taken an event that happened later on and wants to tell us about it now.

And here's why I think that's exactly what Luke's doing. You've heard Mark and I tell you that beginning at the end of chapter 9, Luke begins to spell out for us what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. And as Jesus sent out the 72, we saw that to be a disciple means to be on mission with a message; then through the parable of the Good Samaritan, we've seen that to be a disciple of Jesus means to be a radical neighbour to others. But you could hear all that and think, 'ok, to be a disciple of Jesus, I've got to do, I've got to stop being a couch potato, and get up and do something'. And for people like us who, by and large, love to do, and are very successful at doing, that could be music to our ears.

And in one sense that's right. In his letter, James is really clear that faith without works is useless. If you want to know that your faith is genuine saving faith, James says, it will show itself by how you live, by what you do.

But just in case anyone gets the emphasis round the wrong way, and thinks that doing, and serving, and working are at the root of being Jesus' disciple, rather than the fruit, Luke throws in this little cameo appearance by the two sisters. And his message is, that being a disciple of Jesus is fundamentally about being in relationship with Jesus. That duty flows out of devotion, that work flows out of worship and not the other way around.

Let's look at Martha first.

**Martha**

Now, if you know this story, you know that Martha gets a bad press. But before we all dwell on what she gets wrong, let's consider what Martha gets right, because she's a great girl.

She loves Jesus. She uses what God has given her, her home, to serve Jesus. She opens her home to Jesus when other people where shutting both their homes and their hearts to him. And she wants to bless Jesus. I don't think we have to imagine that the reason she wants everything right in the home for Jesus' visit is because she's excessively house-proud or wants people to praise her. She simply wants to do right by Jesus. She wants to put on a nice meal for Him. And the table needs laying, and the ribbons round the candles need to be just right, and the crystal needs polishing, and she wants the cutlery in all the right places, so you work from outside to in.

And there's nothing wrong with that. By nature, Martha's a doer, and Mary's more contemplative, and there's nothing wrong with our inherent differences, God doesn't make us all the same. I mean just imagine if your home or this church was only full of contemplative types, all we'd ever do is sit on the floor with a guitar and flowers in our hair, singing worship songs and we'd never *do* anything; and if it was only full of doers, we'd die of nervous exhaustion.

And yet, in all Martha's doing for Jesus, the *stuff* of her doing, her *service*, her *working* becomes the most important thing, it becomes the dominating thing in her life, even to the point of displacing that which should have been most important. She was doing all this stuff *for* Jesus, but in the process lost sight *of* Jesus.

Now, many of you, I suspect, know that can be true on a human level, within your families, and your marriages. I knew a man worked two jobs, and worked hours into the night to provide those extras for his family, but in the process he lost connection with his family, and his children simply didn't know him. If you had asked him he would have said he was doing it for them, whereas they just wanted their dad.

Now if that's true for human relationships, what Jesus is showing us here is that is also profoundly true of your most important relationship, with God himself.

Like Martha, you can be consumed by busyness, at work or at home, or at college. And you can be working hard for good motives – you want to provide for your family, you want to honour God with your work. And yet, just like Martha, you can be so busy, even with those good motives, that it draws you away from Jesus, and the work, all the doing takes his place in your order of priorities.

And Luke tells us in v40, that 'Martha was *distracted* with much serving'. And don't you know just what that feels like? You sit down to pray, and an email pings in on the iphone, and you look at it, and that's it, you're gone. The day hasn't even started and it's already crowding in on you. Or you sit down to try and read your Bible, and your head is just spinning with all this stuff you need to do and you just can't settle your mind on the page. Or you feel the pressure of

work, and you feel this drive to stay ahead, so you need more time, so you skip church or you skip homegroup, and what space you did have to sit at his feet is slowly, stealthily being filled by all this other stuff; and there's no space to sit down.

And Martha exemplifies what can happen as your relationship with Jesus is starved of the oxygen of time. She becomes resentful and tetchy. She is resentful of both Mary and Jesus, because neither of them will do what she wants. Just look at what she says about Jesus.

V40, And she went up to him and said, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone?' I'm doing this for you, Jesus, and it's not working and you don't seem to care.' And Martha is burning herself out doing something for Jesus, that he hasn't asked her to do, and then she blames Him for it! And the danger is that when you are so frazzled and taken up by work and busyness, and things aren't working out, and you want things to be different, that you think God's the one at fault. You see, I suspect that Martha really wanted to be doing what Mary was doing, she wanted time with Jesus as well, and her conscience is pricking her, but instead of downing tools, her stress levels rise and she becomes discontented. Instead of making the lifestyle changes she needs to make, instead of repenting and saying, 'you know, I've got this all wrong, I'm going in there', instead of turning to Jesus, she turns on Jesus. So, by robbing you of time and by breeding resentment against God, busyness can suffocate your relationship with Christ.

But it can also damage our relationships with others. Martha turns on Jesus because she's resentful of her sister. Her stress boils up, and over it spills, onto her family members, and how often is that the case within our marriages and with our kids. If you guys are anything like me, you know that when you're stressed and things seem out of control and you're not in a good place with God, your spouse and your kids or your colleagues bear the brunt of it. My girls could tell you of times when dad has been so stressed they have to tiptoe round the house, or the bear will bite.

But all this doing and activity, if it's not done in dependence on God, can also breed a kind of self-righteous pride, which just puffs up. We begin to think we're something, when we're nothing and, like Martha, we can begin to think and speak of God and others in ways that are just wrong. You see, all that Martha sees is Mary doing nothing, 'she's just sat on her backside Jesus, while I'm working'. And that kind of self-righteous pride can destroy relationships.

But funnily enough Jesus doesn't quite see it the same way as Martha, and because he rebukes and disciplines and corrects those he loves he says to her in v41-2, 'Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary.'

Martha, he says, all this frantic doing, all this stuff that is consuming your life, is just increasing your anxiety and troubling your soul. It's not what you need. This will never satisfy you, never give you peace. You only need one thing. And that

one thing is Him. You see, Jesus says in Matthew 20:28, 'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.' Martha was taken up by serving, but in the process she lost sight of the fact that it wasn't Jesus who needed her, but that she needed Jesus. And however much stuff you and I have on our to do lists – none of it is as important as Christ and cultivating our relationship with him. It's as we get the order of priorities right that all these other things fall into place. So a question for you to ponder this morning: what is your top priority? All these other things or this one thing?

Now, you may either be 100% Martha or just have Martha moments, whichever it is, let's take a look at Mary and see what we need to learn from her.

**Mary**

Luke tells us in v39 that Martha 'had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching.' Now, does that phrase 'sat at the Lord's feet' mean anything to you? Because you could think, sure, it means she's sat listening to Jesus. But Luke uses that deliberately, because it's almost a technical term for being someone's disciple. When the apostle Paul shares how he became a disciple of Jesus he says that he was formally, 'educated at the feet of Gamaliel' (Acts 22:3). Paul used to be Gamaliel's disciple, but now he's Jesus' disciple.

And Rabbis never had female disciples, you just didn't do that. But here is Mary, sitting at Jesus' feet as his disciple. And that was revolutionary. But what's so interesting about this is that Martha wants Mary back in the kitchen, and Jesus says 'no'! Isn't that great, ladies? Martha is saying to Jesus, 'her place is in the kitchen Jesus' and Jesus is saying 'no, her place and your place, Martha, is listening to me.' And that's why you young ladies, guys, the rest of us, you should never buy into this line that the Bible some how has it in for women, or is demeaning of women. There's Deborah and Ruth and Huldah and Esther and Proverbs 31 wife, and Song of Songs Bride, and Priscilla and Phoebe and Mary sat, as a disciple, listening to the master.

And Jesus isn't going to send her back into the kitchen because, he says in v43 'Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.'

You see Martha wants to give Jesus something, and we want to give God something, by our serving, but Jesus says something comes before all that, and that is receiving. Martha wants to give her portion to Jesus, but Jesus is saying, Martha, Mary has it right, and that is to receive, to choose the good portion, which I give to her. At the heart of discipleship, what it means to be a disciple is not what we do for God, but what we receive from God.

Now, when Jesus talks about the good portion, he's not talking about the biggest slice of cake, because Martha's still got that in the oven. And he's not even talking about *time* with him, as if down time was the answer, though that's good. He's talking about himself. You see, repeatedly, the Psalmists use this word 'portion' and refers it to God. Ps 16:5, 'The Lord is my chosen portion'; Ps 73:26, 'My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.'

And Jesus is saying Martha, Mary has chosen the one thing she needs and that's me, and I'm not going to send her away.

Now the danger, if you're a Martha or given to Martha moments, is that you hear that and think, 'ok I've got to add 'quiet time' to my to do list, I've got to read my Bible and pray' and it's just another thing to get stressed out about.

But what Jesus is talking about here is a radical re-ordering of our priorities, so that rather than all these other things – work, home, holidays, family, pension, marriage, being your treasure, that he's your treasure, he's the most important, he's your good portion. And then everything else falls into its right and proper place. But note, Mary had to make that choice for herself, she chooses it, Jesus says – there's nothing automatic about this. It's up to us, which we will choose, the good portion or all this other stuff vying for our attention.

Now, lest we get the wrong idea, Mary was no slouch, she's no slacker. She's not someone sitting on the couch, watching God channel all day, eating Lindt chocolate balls, and thinking she's some kind of mother in Israel! No, when Martha complains to Jesus she says 'don't you care that my sister has left me to serve alone?' Which means she was working, but when Jesus walked through the door, she left the kitchen because she knew what came first. She knows there's a time for doing and working, but she has her priorities ordered right. And in those priorities being with Jesus and listening to Jesus comes first. He is her portion forever.

And your relationship with Christ is the crucial inner heart of what it means to be a disciple. That's the root, which you feed and water through prayer and bible reading and worship and fellowship. That's the root from which all the fruit of your work and service and doing can flow. Get those round the wrong way – make work your root, your ultimate, your portion, and you get stressed and distracted and you and others suffer. Get them round the right way and have Christ as your treasure, and your acts of duty will flow out of your devotion and your works will be energized by your worship.

And then you'll serve and work and bless your family and friends and church, not because you think God needs anything from you, but because you know that you have been served by the One who didn't come to be served, but to serve, and gave his life a ransom for many.