

**Introduction:**

- A. This is the story of two distracted sisters; each of them, as it turns out, distracted by Jesus. Jesus and his disciples entered the little village of Bethany, on the outskirts of Jerusalem, and went to the house of Martha and her sister Mary. They also had a brother, Lazarus, whom Jesus would later raise from the dead. Martha was glad to receive him and his disciples. But she had her work cut out for her.

Most of us have a picture of Martha—drawn from women we know who command kitchens, who say within three minutes, “What can I get you?”; who could feed the 5000 if pushed. “Make yourselves comfortable,” she says. “I’ll get dinner going.” There is one unspoken rule: stay out of her way.

Jesus was the most wonderful of all rabbis and everyone wanted to hear him talk. He made God and his kingdom come to life. I imagine him sitting outside the little house, in some shade perhaps, while his disciples and folks from the town gathered around to listen. Martha wanted to hear him, too. Very much! But it was her responsibility to serve Jesus and his disciples. You can almost hear her: *“Do you think a meal puts itself on the table?? We don’t always get to do what we want to do, do we? I cannot let my guests go hungry—especially not a guest like the Lord Jesus.”*

- B. Fortunately, she had a sister to help her. They’d grown up in the same kitchen and they knew how to work together. *“Mary, go get some cheese from... Mary! Mary!”* And when Martha looked, there was Mary, sitting outside on the ground, right in the middle of all those men, her arms wrapped around her knees, eyes fixed on Jesus. *“Mary!”* hissed Martha, the older sister, the very picture of their mother, *“Come, now! I need some help here!”* But Mary ignored her.

- C. So Martha took matters into her own hands. Wiping her hands on her apron, she went out to Jesus, in the middle of all those disciples, cleared her throat and waited for him to finish his sentence. Then she said, “*Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!*”

You could’ve ladled the silence into soup bowls. A couple guys cleared their throats nervously. Jesus looked at her. Then at Mary. Mary blushed. *Awkward!!*

- D. Luke, our storyteller, uses the same very ordinary word here twice. It gets lost in English but it was a word that eventually took on special meaning among Christians. **V.40** says Martha “*was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.*” Literally: “*distracted by much service*” – *diaconia*. Sometimes translated *ministry*, and the source of our word *deacon*. Same word in **v.40**: “*My sister has left me to do all the **work** [service] by myself.*” Luke is just using the normal word but it does resonate unusually for a lot of us. Martha was distracted by serving Jesus and she resented being left to do the work—the service, the ministry—alone. Sounds familiar! We know that feeling!!
- E. So what do you make of this story? I suspect you think you know where this sermon is going. My friend gave me the sermon you expect in a nutshell: *Don’t just do something. Sit there!*” Some of us squirm at this story. My efficient, hospitable, busy wife thinks Martha gets a bum rap. Maybe so. Turn to **Lk 10:38-42**. Here’s one thing that’s clear:

**I. SERVING JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES CAN GET VERY STRESSFUL (10:38-40)**

- A. I think we can assume that Martha *wanted* to listen to Jesus. Let’s assume that she wasn’t a person who just preferred to be busy with her hands instead of sitting quietly and listening. This was Jesus, after all. She was serving because she had to. She had to because **hospitality**

demanded it. The Middle East, to this day, has an inviolable culture and code of hospitality. **Heb. 13:2**, remember the story of the three strangers who appeared to Abram, tells us, *“Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.”* Martha simply could not let these guests go hungry! After all, this was *Jesus!*

What’s more, she was a **woman**. I assume her brother Lazarus was out listening to Jesus but she doesn’t expect his help. Preparing a meal was a woman’s job. And it was her house. She didn’t have a choice about this! At least, she couldn’t imagine that she did. Martha was serving Jesus and his disciples simply because it was the responsible thing to do. It was clearly her duty.

- B. That’s the problem we share with Martha: our sense of responsibility to do what’s required of us. We’d love to just sit and listen to the Lord (in theory, anyway) but we have work to do. Not just busy-work; real responsibilities. Duties. Work that Jesus himself has brought upon us. We have to study. After all, God brought us to seminary. We have to work late. God gave us this job. When the kids need us, we take care of them even if we can’t just sit quietly with Jesus. We can’t just ignore our responsibilities!
- C. Surely Jesus does not expect us to be irresponsible! And he certainly doesn’t condone other people’s irresponsibility either, does he? *“Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”* After all, think of all the Bible says about serving the Lord.
- We are to “prepare God’s people for works of service.”
  - Galatians says, “Serve one another humbly in love.” And “do not grow weary in doing good.”
  - 1 Pet. 4:10 says, *“Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others.”*

**So which is it? Help Martha serve Jesus or sit and listen?**

**Vv.41-42:** *“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”* Well, that makes one thing obvious:

**II. CHOOSE WHAT IS BETTER (10:41-42)**

- A. Let’s think about Mary a moment. (If you’re new to your Bible, it helps to know that she is one of several Marys in the New Testament.) I admit that I’ve always pictured her as this sort of dreamy-eyed young woman; head in the clouds. Today she’d be the kind who’d hide and read a book when the table needs to be set; whose mother would say something to her three times, and then the girl would look up and say, *“What?”* Contemplative, inward, impractical. But none of that is here. **This wasn’t a personality issue.**

The fact is, she was raised by the same mother as Martha. She knew all about the demands of hospitality and took them as seriously as everyone else in their community. She believed, too, that it was a woman’s place to prepare the meal, and that guests should never go hungry in their house.

**But where Martha was distracted by serving Jesus Mary was distracted by listening to him.**

**While Martha was attending to Jesus Mary gave him her attention.**

- B. Why doesn’t Luke tell us what Jesus was talking about? If it was so interesting that Mary couldn’t pull herself away, why doesn’t Luke tell us? Well, he does, in a way, a few verses before. At the beginning of this chapter Jesus sends out 72 of his disciples to go into all the villages around and prepare people for Jesus’ coming. **V.17** says, *“The seventy-two returned with joy and said, ‘Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.’”* Now look at **vv.21-24...**

*At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and **revealed them to little children**. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.*

*"All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and **those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.**"*

*Then he turned to his disciples and said privately, "**Blessed are the eyes that see what you see**. For I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it."*

No matter what Jesus taught he was always revealing the heavenly Father to those who followed him. And when they grasped that Jesus was filled with joy through the Holy Spirit. So, generally, what was Mary listening to? What was Jesus talking about?

**Jesus' greatest joy is revealing the heavenly Father and the wonders of his kingdom to his disciples.** Satan's demons submit to Jesus' name and, better yet, disciples' names are written in heaven, guaranteeing that they will be there with Jesus forever. That was what drew Mary.

- C. The thing Martha never imagined was that Jesus wasn't her guest. She was his! She wasn't there to serve Jesus. He was there to serve her. **She was the guest of God in her own home.** Jesus would prefer to go hungry if he had the joyous privilege of revealing his Father and his kingdom to Martha and Mary. In **Lk 22:27**, at the Last Supper, Jesus said, "*For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I **am among you as one who serves.***" Jesus turned the tables on us.

Martha's real duty, and ours, was the duty of a diner to a waiter—to allow herself to be served. When Jesus said, *"Mary has chosen what is better,"* he actually uses an expression the might suggest food. She *"has chosen the better portion."* Mary is our example. **Choose what is better. Choose to let Jesus serve you. Choose to let Jesus reveal the Father and his kingdom to you.**

- D. In **v.42** Jesus says that what Mary had chosen, "will not be taken away from her." **Meaning, for one thing, that Jesus would never ask anything of you that would keep you from listening to him.** He will never tell you to get busy and come back with the job is done. He will never put your service of him above his service of you.

**It also means that when Jesus reveals the Father to us we are changed for good.** Listening to Jesus changes us in ways that cannot be reversed.

- E. So what should Martha have done? In hindsight, she could have said, *"Lord Jesus, I feel I must prepare this meal for you but I so want to hear all that you have to say. What should I do?"* *"Lord, I have to take care of these children, so how can I listen?"* *"I have to meet this deadline but I don't want to miss out on being with you."*
- F. It is not easy to choose what is better. It is not easy to figure out how to manage duty and responsibility in order to listen to Jesus. But the real issue isn't our schedule; it is humility. **It may be hard to serve Jesus sometimes but it can be very much harder to let Jesus serve us.** Remember how unwilling Peter was to let Jesus wash his feet?

Illus.: I was sitting at my desk a couple days ago working on this sermon. It was a busy day and a sermon doesn't just fall out of the sky, you know. It was 5 p.m. and I needed to get a little further. *"Why don't you just come and sit with me a little while before you go home,"* Jesus whispered.

*“You know, I’d love to, Jesus, but I have to get this done. Sunday’s coming, you know.”*

*“No, really,”* Jesus said, *“just move over to the other chair and sit with me.”* I don’t know how else to put it except that he nagged me. In a nice way.

It wasn’t that I didn’t want to be with Jesus. It’s just that I had so much to do... to serve him. *“OK, OK,”* I said finally, *“But I have to get home pretty soon for dinner.”*

So I moved to the chair in the corner, by the basin and towel I keep as a reminder, in front of the framed verse that says, *“Be silent, and know that I am God.”* And I sat there with my Bible open to this story. I turned off the music that was playing. I closed my eyes, and tried to quiet on the inside. I tried to shake out all the worry and upset that was clogging my heart, and just be with Jesus. To let him serve me.

Illus.: A friend encouraged me recently to have a “breath prayer”—a short prayer I could breathe out to God over and over. My personal challenge with God is that he and I work together, so I have trouble sometimes being with the Lord as a friend. I don’t know how to be with him and laugh or relax; it seems like we always talk business. So my “breath prayer” has become, *“Lord, I want to enjoy you.”*

I don’t know how that’s going to work or what Jesus is going to do. But this passage spoke directly to me. *Let Jesus serve you. Let Jesus reveal the Father to you. Leave your do-list on the desk. Choose what is better.* Even when I’m busy, I’m trying to remember to listen, to watch for Jesus’ answers to my Breath Prayer. I suppose I could just as easily call it a Mary Prayer.

## **Conclusion**

So what does this story have to do with Village Church being our home? Here at church is where we often face the tension

between serving Jesus and letting Jesus serve us, between responsibility and receiving. But what this tells me is that in our church, as in our personal lives, the priority is always to listen, and that Jesus always rejoices to reveal the Father and his kingdom to us. Ours is the responsibility of a diner to the waiter.

We do serve Jesus as we should. It is a great privilege. But we need never serve Jesus at the expense of listening to him. There is always time to listen to Jesus; always time to let Jesus show us the Father. In this home, we are the guests of God.

Illus.: In a couple of weeks we begin a two-month experience of reading the New Testament in synch with one another. This is a perfect opportunity to practice what we've just learned. Let's just listen to Jesus. Let's "choose what is better." Let us be the guests of God as we listen to his Word together. Jesus said, "*I am among you as one who serves,*" so let us welcome his service as Mary did.