

Mary, Martha and God's Priorities

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Preacher: Thomas Davis

[0 : 00] I'd like us to turn back for a few moments this morning to the passage that we read in Luke chapter 10 and we're going to focus in particular on the very last section of that chapter verses 38 to 42.

Now as they went on their way Jesus entered a village and a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house and she had a sister called Mary who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching.

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. But the Lord answered her, Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things but one thing is necessary.

Mary has chosen the good portion which will not be taken away from her. This short passage, just five verses, form one of the most important passages in the Bible about discipleship.

Here we are learning some crucial lessons about how we live out our lives as followers of Jesus. As Christians it's helping us to see more about what God's priorities for us are.

[1 : 16] And for all of us whether we're a Christian or not yet a Christian or not sure where we stand before God, this passage will force us to stop and to think about what really matters in your life and that's always a good thing to do.

One of the most striking aspects of this passage is that it's incredibly ordinary. So it's not a miracle, it's not a great confrontation, it's not a public spectacle, it's just a dinner at someone's house.

But I think that that ordinariness is brilliant because it means that ordinary people like you and like me can immediately place ourselves in this event.

It's a lesson from very normal life which we can immediately apply to your normal life and mine.

In all of that ordinariness in this simple dinner in a simple house, our priorities are being challenged.

[2 : 23] And that's what I want us to look at together for a week while this morning and I just want to say two very simple things which we can use as our headings. Number one I want to say that we often don't see how dangerous our priorities can be.

And then the second thing I want to say is that we often don't see how amazing God's priorities are.

So first of all let's think a wee bit about the fact that we often don't see how dangerous our priorities can be. This passage I think is a clear example of what we could call the dangerous good.

Now what I mean by that is the fact that very often some of the most useful and helpful things in life can also be very dangerous. So one of the most useful things in this building right here is electricity.

We need it for our light, we need it for our music, we need it for our screens. You use it in your homes all the time. Electricity is one of the most useful things that we have in our daily lives.

[3 : 34] It's a wonderful thing and it's lethal. It's lethally dangerous.

Another example is your car, an incredibly useful thing but also very dangerous. I was trying to find a good comparison to this so I went to the source of all wisdom Google.

And I tried to draw a comparison between driving your car and bungee jumping. So you would think to yourself, well, okay, going for a bungee jump would be very dangerous, getting in your car safe.

Yes? Well, maybe not. According to Google, the chances of death by bungee jumping are 1 in 500,000.

Chances of death in a car accident are 1 in 20,000. So next time you think about getting in your car, you should go bungee jumping instead.

[4 : 35] Good things are good but they can also be very dangerous. And I think that's exactly what we see in this passage.

In fact, we see two things that are very good but which can also be dangerous. They are distraction and duty.

Here we have Jesus coming to Mary and Martha's house. Mary sits and listens to Jesus. But Martha, as you can see in the passage, is distracted by much serving.

Now, it's important to note, and I think I'll say this several times throughout the passage, that Martha's intentions are not bad. In fact, her intentions are good. She's not selfish.

She's not lazy. She's not unwelcoming. She's the very opposite. And at one level, what she's doing is very good. But I think at the same time, one of the points been emphasized in this passage is that the good, the apparent good that Martha is doing is actually harming her.

[5 : 40] Her priorities appear noble but they actually carry danger. Martha is under the grip of distraction and duty.

And of course, exactly the same thing can happen to us. For Martha, these two things are connected. It's her duty as a host that's distracting her. But I want us just to slow down and look at these two things in turn.

First then, we see the danger of distraction. Now, at times, distraction can be a good thing. Sometimes we need to let our minds rest.

Sometimes we need to slow down and switch off. It's great to sit down and read a book, to knit a jumper, to watch a program we like, to have a game of FIFA.

Everybody needs to rest. Everyone needs to be imaginative. And creative distraction can be a great thing. But I think that we have reached the point in our society today where distraction has stopped being the thing that helps us towards our goal.

[6 : 41] It stopped being the thing that just gives us a wee rest while we carry on towards the big goals of our lives. It stopped being the thing that helps us. Instead, it's become the goal itself.

So people today are living for distraction. And the 21st century is becoming an age of distraction.

People long to be distracted by tonight's TV. People long for the next season of sport. My life's been empty because there's been no football every Saturday.

We long for these things. We long for the buzz of social media. We long for the laugh of going out.

These things, these distractions have become the thing that people live for. And I think a consequence of that is that nobody stops to think about what really matters.

[7 : 40] And I think it's possibly fair to say that we may very well be living in the first generation of human history that hardly ever thinks about dying.

I think death was an immensely real and prominent part of life throughout all of human history up to this point.

If you could step back a hundred years and walk through the streets of Edinburgh, walk down behind this building, I think death would have been right in front of you.

But it's not like that now. And not only do we no longer have it in front of us, it's something that we no longer even want to think about, and yet surely there is nothing more important for us to consider.

And if when I say that, if when I say we need to think about dying, if your instinctive thought is, I don't want to think about that, I want to think about something else, then maybe you're a child of the age of distraction as well.

[8 : 57] And of course, the whole point of the gospel, the whole point of the fact that Jesus is risen from the dead, the whole point of the fact that we're meeting together here on the first day of the week is that through faith in Jesus, you can have life, you can have eternal life, and all the fear of death can be taken away.

But we don't want to think about that kind of thing in our society today. We tend to get distracted. Martha was distracted from the things that really matter, and boy, that is true today.

But we need to ask ourselves the question, and the thing we really need to think about is the fact that when it comes to the areas of life that are most important, when it comes to the things that really matter, is distraction a good thing?

So for a pilot coming into land on a windy day, is distraction a good thing?

For a neurosurgeon in an operating theater, is distraction dangerous? For you when you're driving a car, is distraction dangerous?

[10 : 15] For the eternal destiny of your life, is distraction dangerous?

The second thing we see is the danger of duty, and in many ways this is the more prominent issue in the passage before us. Then again, duty is a good thing. Martha is a brilliant example.

She's hard working, she's ready to serve, she's conscientious, she's hospitable. And duty is something that as Christians we must all be serious about. We must absolutely never be lazy or selfish Christians.

That's something that's brought home to us in the parable of the Good Samaritan that we read just before this. We can't be selfish just passing by on the other side and not thinking about the needs of others.

So, duty is important and it's a good thing. There's one extreme where we think, well, duty doesn't matter and I just need to look after myself. That's an extreme in Christian conduct that's dishonoring to God.

[11 : 20] But here in this passage we're dealing with the other extreme, the extreme of duty consuming us and distracting us from a relationship with the Lord.

It's so easy to fall into that danger. Duty is something that poses a risk to us. And that's clearly evident in Martha. And I wanted to say two or three things about Martha.

Number one, Martha's serving of Jesus is actually drawing her away from Jesus. That's a really interesting, almost ironic balance.

Jesus has come to her house. She has this amazing opportunity to be with Him, to be taught by Him, to hear what He has to say. But that opportunity is slipping through her fingers because she's been pulled away by her duties.

So while she feels as though she's serving Him, she's actually being drawn away from Him. And exactly the same thing can happen to us. Our duties, whether it's at work or at home in your community or even in church, these duties can pull us away from Jesus.

[12 : 37] Like Martha, we can be anxious about the things that we need to do, and our desire to do them and to get things done can push us to the point where we never stop to think about the person that we're doing them for.

Sometimes we can be more concerned about culture's expectations than we are about God's expectations. There's lots of ways in which that can manifest itself.

Hospitality is a great example. We can sometimes feel that if we're going to have someone come to our house, we need to make our home look stunning, and we need to present an elaborate and impressive meal. We need to make a really good impression.

We can set the bar so high that we either exhaust ourselves in the process or we just don't even bother trying because we think, I'm never going to be able to do that. We can be so concerned about what other people will think of us and by a pressure to reach other people's expectations that we can miss the point altogether.

We can spend far more time thinking about what we need to do rather than stopping to think about what a brilliant thing it is to spend time together as Christians or what a wonderful thing it is to open our home to people who aren't yet believers and to show them warmth and love in the name of our Savior.

[14 : 00] Whatever the duty may be, whilst we are maybe intending to do it for Jesus, we have to be careful because our approach to it can actually draw us away from Him with the result that the things that should be the spiritual highlight of our week can actually become the things that we dread.

And for all of us, that's something we have to be careful about. It's a very important lesson in discipleship to recognize that sometimes the devil draws us away from Jesus with bad things.

So we can be drawn away from Jesus by greed or gossip or sexual temptation or by excessive alcohol or many other things.

And equally, sometimes the devil can draw us away from Jesus with good things, good things like serving and volunteering and giving and fundraising and hospitality.

These are brilliant things. I'm not for a moment saying that we shouldn't do them, but I'm saying we need to be careful. Sometimes our serving of Jesus can draw us away from Jesus.

[15 : 18] Another thing we see in Martha in relation to this is that Martha's obedience makes her demanding. Martha initiates her actions with a view to serve.

She wants to be helpful. She wants to do what she feels she should do. But the rather astonishing thing is that her obedience makes her demanding.

She goes to Jesus and she says, tell her to help me. So Martha has gone from doing something for Jesus to telling Jesus to do something for her.

And at the heart of that is the mindset that her faithfulness to her duty gives her the right to set the rules.

And we do that all the time, don't we? So we can say, I've been coming to this church all my life. I know how we should do things.

[16 : 16] You could say, I give a huge amount of money to this congregation. This is how I want it to be. I've served in this way for years.

I don't want this to change. We can use our service as a justification for being demanding. We can also use our good duties as a means of judging others. Martha's view was that Mary was in the wrong and we can do the same.

So we could say, well, I'm doing this. I'm on this committee. I'm raising this money. I'm leading this Bible study. I'm doing all these things which are great. But we can think to ourselves, well, this other person's not doing the same.

And they're not meeting the expectations that I have. And we can feel frustrated when people don't conform to the standards that we set.

[17 : 16] Our serving can make us think that we have the right to be demanding. But we must never forget that there's only one king in God's kingdom.

And it's God that sets the standards, not us. And it's his expectations that matter, not ours.

It's so important to remember that only God sets the rules. There's a great reminder of that in the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

We read from the New City Catechism, which is a modern version, which is a brilliant version. But of course, the old, 500-year-old version is also brilliant. And here is question two.

What rule has God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy Him? So who sets the rules? What's the rules? The answer is the word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy Him.

[18 : 24] Martha's obedience made her demanding. We have to take care of that. And then the third thing that we see in Martha in regard to how her duty is affecting her is that her duty of care made her feel uncared for.

And again, that's a very interesting balance to see. When Martha finally speaks to Jesus, she comes up to him and says, don't you care that my sister isn't helping me? She's attending to her guests.

She's fulfilling what she regards as a duty of care. But in all of that, she's left feeling uncared for. And it's interesting that her first complaint is actually directed towards Jesus, not towards Mary.

She feels that He doesn't care and she rebukes Him. And that can seem shocking to us, but we tend to do the same because very often we can find ourselves saying, why has God done this?

Why doesn't God do that? Why doesn't God care? Often God is the first person that we blame. And that is because we feel that He doesn't care.

[19 : 26] Now, it's important to notice, as we've hinted and said, that Martha clearly has a gift for hospitality. I think she's a brilliant host. I think that's one of the things that made her special.

But the very thing that Martha thought made her special actually made her feel taken for granted. And so instead of feeling valued, she felt unloved.

And duty can do that. The duties that you're gifted for, the things that you're really good at, the things that make you special in this church or whatever your church is, can actually leave you feeling unloved and uncared for.

And that will happen if your duty is distracting you from Jesus. So sometimes we can prioritize distraction.

And that's very much what our culture is doing today. Sometimes we can prioritize duty. That's a trap that many of us in church can fall into. We're being reminded in this passage that both of these are dangerous.

- [20 : 29] But all of that raises the question, well, what's the answer to it? How do we avoid these pitfalls? Well I think as we've been trying to say, we need to recognize two things.
- We need to recognize that our priorities are often more dangerous than we realize. And at the same time, we need to be reminded that God's priorities are far more wonderful and far more amazing than we often remember.
- And that's brought before us in the contrast that we have between Martha and Mary. And in looking at the two of them together, we see what God's priorities really are.
- And I think there's three things being brought before us in this passage in terms of the nature of God's priorities.
- Priority number one, Jesus wants your company. If you look at this passage and ask yourself, what does Jesus want? Does he want dinner?
- [21 : 34] I don't think so. What he wants is togetherness. So rather than prioritizing duties that might pull you away from him, Jesus just wants you to be near him.
- And the great goal that Jesus has, that Jesus always has, is togetherness. Throughout the whole Bible, you have this beautiful doctrine of togetherness running through the whole of God's redemptive plan.
- That's grounded in the doctrine of the Trinity, where you have Father, Son and Holy Spirit always towards one another. Togetherness was at the heart of the paradise of the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve and God there together.
- Sin has broken that, but God's plan of restoration has always had togetherness as its goal. That was shattered in the Old Testament through the family nation of Israel.
- The healing and reconciliation required for it was achieved at the cross. The togetherness of God's people is inaugurated now in the church, and the ultimate fulfillment will come when Jesus returns, when God and his people will be together forever.
- [22 : 46] And this doctrine of togetherness and that desire that Jesus has for your company is absolutely not for the select few in God's kingdom.
- It's very easy to look at this passage and think, well, Jesus wants Mary at his feet because she's clearly the better disciple.
- And it's easy to think that Jesus only wants Christians like Mary at his feet, but I don't think that that's what this passage is saying at all. And I think that Jesus is saying to Martha, I just want you at my feet as well.
- It's very easy to be elitist in our understanding of discipleship. It's very easy to think that closeness to Jesus is for the select few, but that is theologically false.
- Mary and Martha and you all belong at Jesus' feet because his priority is your company.
- [23 : 57] And that is powerfully confirmed for us in the words that Jesus spoke in John chapter 17, verse 24. He said, Father, I desire that they also whom you have given me may be with me where I am.
- I want you to notice in particular the word they. That they is referring to all those who are going to believe in the apostolic gospel. In other words, it's referring to every Christian.
- And when we think of the they being referred to here, we can think of the people who are abounding in godliness, full of knowledge, people who are holy and who are all together in terms of their Christian faith.
- We think of people like Mary who seem to have it all right. But within that they is every Mary and every Martha.

So that means every Christian who feels like a total failure, every Christian who has been distracted, every Christian who's let their duties get in the way of their relationship with Jesus, every Christian who's forgotten to pray, every Christian who struggled to read their Bible, every Christian who's doubted, every Christian who has mucked up.

[25 : 06] Jesus says, my desire is that they would be with me where I am. And a key point is that Jesus is not saying to Martha, you've got your priorities wrong, so stay away.

It's the opposite, he's saying you've got things wrong, just come here and be with me. So if you've been distracted in your faith, if you've made too much of your duties, Jesus does not want you to keep your distance.

He wants you to sit at his feet because his priority is togetherness. Jesus wants your company.

One priority being said before us is the fact that Jesus wants your attention. Verse 39 tells us that Mary sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. So Martha, as we saw, she got so disheartened by her duties that she came to Jesus in exasperation and demanded that he listen to her and sort things out in the way that she wanted.

But Jesus' priority is that Martha would stop and listen to him. He wanted her attention and he wants ours too.

[26 : 24] Now, you'll remember a moment ago that we were saying that Martha was doing all this stuff, all this service, all this work, and yet while she was doing it, she felt uncared for and she felt unvalued.

And we face that same problem. The whole culture around us faces that problem of feeling uncared for and of struggling to find value and worth in ourselves.

And very often to combat that, we try to address that feeling of a lack of self-worth. We try to address it by doing stuff.

We do stuff in order to feel better about ourselves. So we take on more at work. We try to achieve more. We commit to volunteering in more activities. We try to get fit.

We try to better ourselves. We even try to present a perfect life on our Facebook page. We try to do more and more in order to feel special.

[27 : 25] And that's because we long to feel special. And all around us, we have a society of people desperate to feel special, but one that's looking for affirmation in the wrong place.

Because if you go to the gym, your body will never be good enough. There's always more that you could do. Your profile on Facebook or Instagram is always going to be calling you to put more onto it.

Your achievements at work are always going to leave you with the feeling that there's more that you could do. And even your dedication in volunteering will heighten the awareness that there's still so much work to be done.

We do stuff to feel special, but it's never enough. And that raises the question, where is the place that you will feel the very best about yourself?

Where is it that you will feel at your most valued? And the answer is at the feet of Jesus.

[28 : 48] Because it is there that you will discover how incredibly special you are.

Even we are attracted to people who have achieved a huge amount for themselves. So I would love to have dinner with someone like Andy Murray or Chris Froome. I'd love to ask them all about what they have achieved for themselves in their lives.

But if you were to have dinner with Jesus, and if you were to sit at His feet and listen, He will not be telling you about how much He has achieved for Himself.

He will be telling you about everything He has achieved for you. And so you have this remarkable contrast.

Martha's mindset is, I will work for Jesus. I must attend to Jesus' needs. I must put myself out for Jesus. I must give my life for Him. That's her mindset, that she must do stuff for Jesus in that way.

[29 : 51] That the heart of Christianity is Jesus saying, I will work for you. I will attend to your needs.

I will put myself out for you. I will give my life for you. That is the core truth of the Gospel.

Not what we do for Jesus, but what He does for us. And it's from that point that we can learn and grow and go out and serve.

So looking at Jesus' priorities here, we see that He wants your company. We see that He wants your attention. And thirdly, and I think most importantly, He wants you.

In this passage, Martha has got her priorities muddled up. But Jesus doesn't hammer her for that, and neither does He indulge her. Instead, He teaches her a very important truth.

[31 : 07] Because duty of care left her feeling uncared for, left her feeling uncared for. But Jesus makes it clear that His priority is simply to love her.

And I think that He does that simply in the way He says her name. There's a beautiful tenderness in verse 41, when Jesus repeats her name, Martha, Martha.

And that tenderness is showing that Jesus wants her to come close to listen to Him, because He loves her. And the crucial lesson for us is that Jesus wants your company more than your achievements.

Jesus wants your attention more than your activity. What Jesus really wants is just you, because that's what real love is.

It's loving the person, not the servant. Often we love people because of what they do. Do love loves the person because of who they are.

[32 : 30] And the foundational truth of biblical, reformed, Calvinistic, covenant theology is that Jesus loves His people with an utterly unconditional love.

And that means that in your relationship with Jesus, His number one priority is to love you. So just think about that. Think about tomorrow morning.

You wake up tomorrow morning as a follower of Jesus. I hope that you all will, even if that's the very first morning that you do so. You wake up tomorrow morning as a follower of Jesus.

Jesus is watching you get out of bed. He sees you enter a new day. And imagine that you could go to Jesus and ask Him, what do you want, Martha or Mary or whatever your own name is? Jesus, what do you want for them today?

And Jesus' answer would be, well, my number one priority is to love them with every ounce of love that I've got.

[33 : 34] And that love comes with no conditions, no prerequisites, no caveats. And that is why thinking, thinking that our duties, that the stuff that we do is going to earn Jesus' favor or His smile or His nearness, thinking in that way that we kind of do stuff to make God love us is a blasphemy against the truth and reality of God's love.

And you see that so beautifully portrayed for us in these verses because looking at that passage, what does Mary say and what does Mary do?

The answer is nothing. She doesn't speak and all she's doing is sitting still.

And yet in that silence and in that sitting, we see what Jesus first and foremost wants from us in our lives.

He wants to love us. And I think the key difference between Mary and Martha is this.

[35 : 05] Martha is being drained. She is being filled.

And at the heart of the Gospel, at the heart of Christianity is the fact that first and foremost God's priority is to fill you, to fill you with joy, to fill you with peace, to fill you with true knowledge, and above all to fill you with His incredible, immeasurable, never-ending love for you.

And that was what we read at the very beginning of our service, where Paul writes, for this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of His glory, He may grant you to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

That is the good portion that is more necessary than anything else in your life. That is the portion that can never, ever be taken away from you.

And that word, portion, that you see in the second-last line there in verse 42, is important because a portion is a part of life. It's not all of life. It's not saying that you should spend your whole life sitting in silence and never doing anything and never speaking and never serving and never acting and never doing any duties.

[36 : 52] It's not saying that. And please don't go away from thinking, from this sermon thinking, Thomas said, I must just sit and do nothing for the rest of my life. I am not saying that, but what I'm saying is that all of that activity, all of those duties come second to the great priority that God has for your life, which is to love you and to have you with him and to teach you all the amazing truths of who he is and what he's done.

And that is the most important thing in your life. That's the part of your life that nothing can ever take away because eventually all your duties are going to be forgotten and soon all our distractions will vanish like a vapor.

But the fact that God wants you near, the fact that God wants to teach you how special you are and the fact that God loves you unconditionally, that will never be taken away.

That is what the gospel gives us. That is what Mary chose. It's what Martha chose as well. She had just lost sight of that for a moment.

I really hope that you choose it too. Amen. Let's pray.

[38 : 22] Father, we thank you for all that your word is teaching us.

And we confess that at times we are prone to be lazy and inactive and selfish.

But at other times we're also prone to be so caught up in our duties and the things that we're doing that we don't stop to sit at your feet and listen to you.

We pray, oh God, that you'd help us to always have the priorities in our lives shaped according to what you want.

And we pray that every day we would just, above all else, love you, love being with you, love listening to you, love knowing you, and then from there to love serving you.

[39 : 28] May that be true of us all, in Jesus' name. Amen.