

Listening to Jesus

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[0 : 00] All right, let's read Scripture together from Luke chapter 10, verses 38 to 42.! And this is the word of the Lord.

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? 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 is God's holy word. As Corey intimated, we're focusing on the theme of discipleship in our services, in our church life.

[1 : 03] And I think this is our fifth sermon in Luke's gospel, in Luke chapter 9 through 12, under the heading, The Call to Discipleship.

And we're looking at this famous story of Martha and Mary this evening. I want to begin by talking about a German artist called Adolf Menzel.

And he was an artist, second half of the 19th century. He was very famous in Germany, probably not so famous here. But he was famous for historical illustrations of the life of the 18th century Prussian monarch, Frederick the Great and his court.

And he was an artist who was deeply concerned with detail, accuracy. And he was known for researching everything down to the very minutiae, right down to buttons on a uniform, handle on a sword.

He was very, very detailed. And in, I think, in a Berlin art gallery, there was a painting by Menzel. It's only partially finished. And it was intended to show Frederick the Great speaking with some of his generals.

[2 : 21] And he's painted the generals in the background in the most incredible detail. Hats, uniforms, badges, buttons. But the strange thing is this.

The image of the king is missing altogether. There's this outline of Frederick the Great, but that's all. And everything else in the background.

It's a very unusual painting. The most important person is missing. Everything depicted in great detail. But the king, nowhere to be seen.

And I think that's a kind of metaphor for the lives of so many people. Everything in vivid, technicolor and detail. Every aspect of life apparently considered.

Money, family, friends, status, career. All highlighted in meticulous detail. And yet, the most important person is missing altogether.

[3 : 27] The king is nowhere to be seen. And Luke writes his gospel because he wants us to be sure that we do not miss the king of whom he is speaking.

He doesn't want us to miss Jesus Christ. He wants us to see Jesus' identity. And he wants us to have Jesus Christ center stage in our lives.

And this particular section of the gospel is all about what it means to have Christ at the center of our lives. It's about what it really means to follow Jesus.

It's about discipleship. In the New Testament, Christian disciples are those who trust Jesus and who seek to follow Him and learn from Him.

And Christian disciples in whatever age are always looking to and learning from Jesus Christ. When people are learning to drive, I have a brother who's a driving instructor, often tells me many interesting stories.

[4 : 48] They must display L plates to warn other road users that they haven't yet passed their proficiency test. Once the test is passed, the L plates can be discarded.

But for the Christian disciple, our L plates are never discarded. We are never anything more than learners.

And a teachable spirit is a vital aspect of living out the Christian life. One of the things that the church often looks for in those training for ministry is this very thing.

It's this desire to learn, to develop, to grow, to mature. It's absolutely vital. Beware those who think they know it all. I have a vivid recollection of being told by an elder in my first pastoral charge that there was nothing I could teach him that he hadn't heard before.

His was an attitude that simply refused to learn. He thought he knew it all, and so you could teach him nothing. In truth, he had a proud and impoverished soul.

[6 : 08] And in our service tonight, we're looking at this passage that's all about listening and learning from Jesus. It's a passage unique to Luke's gospel.

It centers on a situation of really of domestic conflict. The story of Martha and Mary. And I want to look at it briefly this evening under three headings.

Three things that we see here. And the first is this. I want you to see the situation that Jesus faces here in verses 38, 39, and 40.

As they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. A woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. She had a sister called Mary who sat at the Lord's feet listening to his teaching.

Martha was distracted with much serving. She went up to him and said, Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me. So, the setting is in the house of a woman called Martha, along with her sister Mary.

[7 : 15] She welcomes Jesus into her home. We know from elsewhere in the New Testament that these women, along with their brother Lazarus, were very good friends of Jesus. And that he clearly spent time with them as a family.

They lived in Bethany, near Jerusalem. That's led scholars to think that this event may not be strictly chronological. In other words, Luke's placed the story here to make this particular point about being a disciple of Jesus.

And one of the striking features of the passage is the way that it's focused on the behavior and conduct of these two women. Jesus clearly called and welcomed women as his disciples.

And from elsewhere in the Gospels, we know that these two women were amongst his most dedicated and devoted followers. So, on this occasion, Jesus is welcomed into the house, along with his disciples, to receive food and hospitality.

And while he's there, he continues to teach and preach to his disciples and those assembled. Of course, this is a key element of Jesus' ministry. He taught others. He explained the Scriptures.

- [8 : 24] He spoke as a man with authority from God. And it's this teaching ministry of Jesus that occasions, I suppose, a certain degree of domestic tension within this household.
- With Jesus and his disciples arriving, it seems that Martha has got to work in preparing for them a meal. She's very anxious to do her best for Jesus and his followers.
- She doesn't want just to kind of throw something in the microwave. You know, she's not interested in putting together some beans on toast. She wants to set him, you know, before him a meal for the disciples. It's a noble aspiration.
- And we can get a sense of the scene. Martha clattering around in the kitchen, bustling about doing this and that, get everything ready, get everything prepared for everyone else to eat.
- So much to be done. And as she works away busily, she can't help but notice her sister Mary is nowhere to be seen.
- [9 : 27] She should have been helping her. She should have been giving her a hand. She should have been serving Jesus and his disciples too. But no, Mary is sitting, enjoying herself, taking it easy, listening to Jesus teaching with the men.
- Actually, quite scandalous behavior. She had a sister called Mary who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. I mean, what on earth is she playing at?
- Doesn't she know her place? Doesn't she know what's expected of her? Doesn't she know what an embarrassment she is?
- Doesn't she know that she's making a fool of herself, sitting there with all the men? And we need to remember that learning like this was effectively the sole preserve of men, not women in Jesus' day.
- The rabbis only taught men. I don't think it's that women were forbidden from learning. It's just that it wasn't the done thing. The prevailing consensus among rabbis of the time that it was a waste of time, effort to teach women.
- [10 : 40] But here Jesus welcomes Mary, a woman, to that place of learning and discipleship.
- I don't think we can underestimate the revolutionary impact of Jesus' teaching and practice in this regard.
- As a result, Martha is working her fingers to the bone. She's running around like a headless chicken. She's trying to get everything ready. And Mary, her sister, is absolutely oblivious.
- She doesn't seem to be the slightest bit aware of what is happening in the kitchen. She's behaving like a man, not a woman.
- And it all seems so unfair to Martha. And I think we can empathize. There's nothing shorter, is there, than to get one's blood boiling and be left to do all the work.
- [11 : 40] And others are, you know, absolutely unconcerned. Often this is what happens in churches. Work is left to the few. The majority can sometimes appear quite disinterested in getting involved, getting their hands dirty.
- And sometimes those who are committed, the most dedicated, eventually get a bit cheesed off. They'll look around and they say, well, why are these people not doing anything?
- Why are they not helping? Why are they not volunteering? Why are they not praying? Why are they not serving? Why, why, why? And it's very easy for seeds of resentment and bitterness, self-pity, to flourish in the human heart.
- A kind of martyr complex. Look at all that I'm doing for you. Why aren't others more like me? Lord, you need to give that lot a good kick in the pants.

And eventually all that boiling resentment spills over. Pride and self-regard manifest themselves in the judging of others.

[12:50] Feelings of moral superiority are inflated. The stature of others diminished. This is kind of what happens here. Martha can't take it any longer.

She just has to say something. She has to get it off her chest. She has to let Jesus know what is actually going on here. Doesn't he see? He needs to set Mary straight.

Tell her to get the finger out. Lend a hand. 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. She was consumed by her work. But that work, good work, becomes an occasion for jealousy and bitterness.

For self-pity and sin. Fuels her sense of self-righteousness. So that as she serves, she is distracted. And good works and service can do that.

[14:06] I think it was all in Redpath, a minister of a bygone age, who said, Beware the barrenness of a busy life. And this word used in the passage, distracted, means to be drawn away.

She's drawn away from Jesus by all her activity. Her eyes are not really on him. They're on her sister. They're on the work that she thinks needs to be done.

And she fails to see that it's not Mary's priorities that are wrong, but hers. And that's the situation that Jesus faces.

That brings me to the second thing here. Let's look at the priority Jesus highlights in verse 41. Because what happens is Jesus doesn't respond as perhaps we might think.

Certainly not as Martha was thinking and hoping. You know, most of us might tend to side with Martha. Expect Jesus to sort out her lazy, indolent sister.

[15:10] And certainly Martha was convinced she was in the right. She held the moral high ground. Her sister needed really to be rebuked, put her a place. But surprisingly, it's not Mary's attitude and behavior that are challenged here by Jesus.

It's Martha's. The Lord answered her, verse 41, Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary.

Now, let's be clear. Jesus does not here tear a strip off Martha for her request. He speaks to her tenderly. He repeats her name, Martha, Martha.

I think over the years, Martha has received a bit of bad press, somewhat unwarranted reputation as being a poor disciple of Jesus. Don't think that to be the case.

Jesus speaks to her affectionately, tenderly, lovingly. He wants her to understand what is going on here and what's really important.

[16:16] He sees that she's anxious. He's troubled by all that's going on, all that has to be done. And this word troubled means literally to be thrown into a kind of uproar, almost like a storm.

It suggests a kind of an emotional storm. And so, Jesus seeks to calm that storm. Jesus sees that Martha has been investing all her effort and energy into something that wasn't really of first importance.

She'd forgotten the most important thing. Her actions and attitudes had obscured the most important thing. And revealed a misunderstanding about discipleship.

What it meant really to follow Jesus. She thought it was all about her service. Her activity. All about what she could do for the Lord. All about her. And she failed to grasp that fundamentally, being a disciple is first of all about what we receive from Jesus.

In other words, first and foremost, Christian discipleship is not about what we can do for Jesus, but rather what Jesus does for us.

[17:44] In all her activity, Martha was blind to her need of Jesus and His teaching. She didn't see herself as one who was in need. The only real necessity here was that she let Jesus serve her.

Jesus wanted her attention and her company and her fellowship before He wanted her food. And the difference between the sisters was that while Martha saw Jesus in need of help, Mary saw her need of Jesus' help.

Martha was not doing the important thing because she wasn't listening to His Word. Her eyes and ears, her mind and heart were elsewhere. And friends, this is a key principle of Christian discipleship.

We are not converted by presenting Jesus with our good deeds and our good life. We don't earn our way into God's good books by our hard work and service.

We are converted only when we receive from Him His forgiveness, His salvation, His gospel, His Word as a gift.

[18:57] I think it's Dale Raal Davis who tells the story of the Baturo people of western Uganda who had a custom in the tribe whereby accepting a gift required the recipient to use both hands.

To take a gift with just one hand was a sign of disrespect and ingratitude. And so, when missionaries had gone to that tribe, they used this custom to try and explain the nature of the gospel.

They asked someone to pick up some books labeled good works and religious duties. And once they did that, they offered them a new book as a gift. And this gift was entitled Eternal Life.

And the person was immediately placed in a quandary. By holding on to the other books, they couldn't receive the other gift properly or acceptably. They had to put the other books down to one side before they could receive the gift of eternal life.

And friends, to become a Christian, we all have to lay down our good works, our religious duties, whatever they might be. And we have to receive Jesus with both hands.

[20:15] It's not always well understood. Christianity doesn't begin with us. It begins with Him. It doesn't begin with us giving to Him.

It begins with Him giving to us. Because our God is a giving God. He's a God of grace and mercy and love. And we must never lose sight of that. Remember Paul speaking to the Athenians, Acts 17, The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man.

Nor is He served by human hands as though He needed anything. God doesn't need us. We need Him. And how easy it is to forget that.

Jesus tells Martha that only one thing is necessary here. And the one thing that Jesus refers to is not about physical food, but rather about spiritual food.

It's about giving time and attention to the Word of Christ. And it's in making sure that we are receiving from Him. This is the good portion.

[21:23] The good meal that Mary has chosen. Her focus has been upon Jesus and feeding on His Word. And this is what Jesus commends her for.

This passage is not about the superiority of the contemplative life over against some life of active Christian service.

Jesus is not here encouraging us all to become monastics. You know, shut ourselves away from the world and spend our lives in prayer, study, and meditation. Jesus is not saying that we should abandon good works or Christian service.

This is a passage about relative priorities. And there's this one priority that stands out. And that is the priority of listening to Jesus, receiving from Jesus.

And this is what Mary's commended for. She sat at the Lord's feet and listened to His teaching, verse 39. Her posture illustrative of submission to Jesus.

- [22 : 22] She lays hold of that great privilege of listening to the teaching of Jesus. She treasured His words. So, what does it mean for us today to embrace that great kingdom priority of listening to Jesus?

How do we make sure that we too are listening to Him? What is the contemporary equivalent of sitting at the Lord's feet and listening to His teaching? Now, of course, Jesus is no longer physically present with us, as He was with Martha and Mary.

We can't listen to Him as they once did. But nonetheless, the risen and ascended Christ is present with us here in the power of the Holy Spirit.

He commissioned His apostles as heralds of good news. Remember how He commanded them to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you.

The apostles were entrusted with the teaching of Jesus. They were witnesses of His life, His death, His resurrection. They were commanded to pass that teaching on with the help of the Holy Spirit.

- [23 : 37] And that's why we have the Gospels. That's why we have the other writings of the New Testament. The church of Jesus Christ is built, Paul says in Ephesians 2, on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus, the cornerstone.

That's why we read the early church, very first Christian community. What did they do? Acts 2.42. They devoted themselves to prayer and the apostles' teaching.

Paul writing to the church in Colossae, Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom. And that means that the teaching and preaching of the Scriptures is vital to the health and well-being of the church, because this is where we hear the voice of Christ Himself.

Sometimes theologians talk about the threefold office of Christ as prophet, priest, and king. And it's this office of prophet that is mainly in view here.

And this office of prophet is one that continues to this day. Christ's prophetic ministry is continued in the preaching and teaching of the Gospel.

- [24 : 52] First of all by the apostles, and then by all those who have been subsequently called and set apart as Gospel preachers, and given as gifts of the ascended Christ to His church.

Calvin says this of Jesus, He received anointing not only for Himself, that He might carry out the office of teaching, but for His whole body, that the power of the Spirit might be present in the continuing preaching of the Gospel.

Just as Mary submitted herself to the teaching of Jesus, listen to it with attention and devotion, so we must attend to the Scriptures and the preaching of the Gospel.

We need to be listening to His Word. We need to be making room in our lives for Jesus' teaching. I wonder, is this a priority?

If you're a Christian tonight, is this a priority in your life? Are the worship services where we listen for Christ's voice and the preaching of the Word a priority? Or is this something in our busy, distracted lives that we can just take or leave?

[26 : 06] Are we spending time in the Word of the Gospel? Not, of course, to earn kind of brownie points, but because we love to be where Jesus is. Love to hear His voice.

We love Him and delight in Him. And like Mary, we enjoy receiving from Him. We want Him to be center stage.

And it's love for Jesus that must fuel our service in His name. Because if it doesn't, all we're really doing is serving ourselves. All we're doing is allowing the roots of pride and self-righteousness to flourish.

And that's a strong temptation, to think that we're better than others, morally superior, to spend our time comparing ourselves with others. Busyness and lots of activity may indeed inflate our egos, but it can also empty our souls.

We need to join Mary at the feet of Jesus if we're going to be equipped for service in His name. Not saved and accepted by Jesus because we're deserving, or gifted, or attractive, or because we're good people, because we're religious.

[27 : 21] We are saved by grace alone through Christ alone. And yes, of course, we need to be put... We were thinking about this this morning. We need to be putting the teaching of Jesus into practice. Yes, we need to build our lives on a solid foundation, and we should all be serving and loving and giving far more than we are at present.

But that activity always needs to be fueled and empowered by Jesus Himself. We must attend and listen to the great prophet of God, Jesus Christ.

We must make that a priority in our own lives and in the life of our congregation, because it's our relationship with Jesus that will continue after everything else has faded and crumbled away.

Situation Jesus faces. The priority Jesus highlights. Thirdly here, and finally and quickly, the assurance that Jesus gives.

Verse 42, Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her. Jesus says that this privilege of learning and being fed by Him will not be taken from her.

[28 : 32] What she receives from Jesus will continue to nourish her and sustain her. Establishing this priority means she's never going to lose out.

Jesus' word has a lasting and enduring quality to it. Here is the bread that does not and cannot perish. Here is bread that will not go... will not rot or go moldy.

Here is a bread, the bread of life that lasts. The Word of Christ is the good portion that will nourish us. It's substantial.

It's real. It's lasting. It's good in sickness and in health. Good in adversity and good in prosperity. Good in life, good in death, good in time, good in eternity.

There's no circumstance in which this portion is not good for your soul. And it's good for us because it comes from Christ Himself. Because it blesses and enriches us.

[29 : 38] It conveys the very grace and mercy of God to our souls. It's the Word of life. J.C. Ryle writes this, The true Christian's possession shall never be taken from Him.

He alone of all mankind shall never be stripped of its inheritance. Kings must one day leave their palaces. Rich men must one day leave their money and lands.

They only hold them until they die. But the poorest saint on earth has a treasure of which he will never be deprived. The grace of God and the favor of Christ are riches which no man can take from Him.

They will go with Him to the grave when He dies. They will rise with Him in the resurrection morning and be His to all eternity.

Friends, we stand in need of Jesus Christ. We cannot do without Him. It doesn't matter how strong and well-resourced we think we are, we are nothing without Jesus.

[30 : 43] That's true as individuals. It's true as a church. We always have to be looking and leaning upon Him. Never forget that the Christian life begins with need.

Our need of Christ, our need of His love, our need of His Word, of His forgiveness, of His cross. And here is the good Word of Christ, the Word of the Gospel, the Word of His love that will keep you and sustain you to the very end of your life.

Jesus' Word sustains His people with grace upon grace. What assurance He brings us. All the Father gives to me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out, He says.

Whatever we are facing in this life, we can rest our heads in peace upon this pillow. On the great canvas of your life, let me ask you, where is the King?

Where is Jesus? Is He at the center? Has He been pushed out to the background? Is He missing altogether? We live in a deeply narcissistic age.

[32 : 01] Constantly, we are tempted to focus in upon our own hearts. Our culture extols the virtue of considering ourselves to be the kings and rulers of our own lives.

Look within. You are all that you need. You're all that really matters. Self-fulfillment is everything. Yet the weight and the burden that the human self now has to carry is absolutely intolerable.

People worn down by its crushing load, the weight of expectation, too much, guilt, fear, loneliness, anxiety, paralyze the lives of so many. Because we're not made for ourselves.

We're made for a relationship with God. We're made so that Christ is our King.

It's therefore a huge mistake to be always looking within. As I say, in the long term, it's an unbearable reality. We need to look out and away from ourselves.

[33 : 08] We need to look to Jesus. He is the King that we need to rule over us in mercy and grace. We need His peace, and we need His presence. Robert Murray McShane was a Scottish minister back in the 19th century.

His short life, he died at the age of just 29. His short life and his preaching ministry were marked by a profound Christ-centeredness. He once commented with these words, Learn much of the Lord Jesus.

Wherever you look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ. He is altogether lovely. Let your soul be filled with a heart-ravishing sense of the sweetness and excellency of Christ and all that is in Him.

Let the Holy Spirit fill every chamber of your heart, and so there will be no room for folly or the world or Satan or flesh. And friends, that's still our great need, to have our minds and hearts filled with a sense of the greatness and glory of Jesus Christ.

McShane's advice still holds good. And I think this is what this passage of Scripture presses upon us tonight. Look to Jesus. Listen to Jesus.

[34 : 25] Learn from Jesus. Live for Jesus. For He is our great prophet, priest, and king. Let's pray.

Lord, as we seek to live for You, as we seek to trust You, as we seek to have the Lord Jesus at the very center of our lives, Lord, we pray that You would help us in every way by Your Holy Spirit.

Lord, help us to be those who listen to Jesus, who learn from Jesus, and who live for Jesus. And may it all be for Your glory and for the honor of Your great name, as we ask this, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.