

Mary, Martha and God's Priorities

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Date: 21 July 2019

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I'd like us to turn back together to Luke chapter 10 and in particular we're going to look at these verses at the very end of the chapter. Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village and a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. 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. These few verses provide us with what I think is one of the most important lessons in discipleship that we find in the whole of the Bible. We are being taught some very important points in regard to how we live our lives as disciples of Jesus. As Christians, this is helping us to see what God wants our priorities to be. And for every one of us, whether we're a Christian or not, whether we're not sure, this passage will force us to stop and think about what really matters in life. And that's always a good thing to do. But one of the most striking things about this passage is that it's incredibly ordinary. It's not a miracle, it's not a great confrontation, it's not a public spectacle, it's just dinner at someone's house. But that ordinariness is one of the things that makes this passage so wonderful. Because the ordinariness of it all means that you and I can immediately place ourselves in this event. It's a lesson for normal life and that makes it immediately apply to normal people like you and like me.

But in all of that ordinariness, our priorities are being challenged. And that's what I want us to think about today, the lessons that this passage gives us about our priorities.

And I want us to say two very simple things that we can use as our headings. First thing I want to say is that often we don't see how dangerous our priorities are. And secondly, we often don't see how amazing God's priorities are. So first of all, I think we've been reminded here that often we don't see that our own priorities can be dangerous. In this passage we have a very clear example of what I think we could call the dangerous good. Now what I mean by that is the fact that often the best and most useful things in life can also be quite dangerous. So there's a brilliant example in this room. You look up above you and you see that this room is being illuminated beautifully by the power of electricity. We're being kept warm by the power of electricity. We have this marvelous display on the screen because of electricity. Electricity is one of the most useful things we have. It's also lethal. It's very, very dangerous if it's used in the wrong way. Another example is your car. Very, very useful thing. Most of us will have taken our cars to church. But again it can be dangerous. So I googled some interesting statistics. So is anybody here done a bungee jump? You don't need to answer. So chances of death by bungee jumping, one in half a million. Okay. Chances of death in a car accident, one in 20,000. So I think that means that getting in your car is 50 times more dangerous than bungee jumping.

So all of you people who drive cars, no excuse now to not go bungee jumping if the opportunity ever arises. The key point is that good things can also be very dangerous. And that's something I think that we all know and understand. And that's exactly what we have in this passage.

[4 : 42] We see two things that are good. They really are good, but they're also dangerous. And these two things are distraction and duty. Jesus comes to Martha and Mary's house. As we read, Mary sits and listens to Jesus. But Martha, as you can see there in verse 40, was distracted with much serving. And there we see these two things, distraction and duty.

It's important to note and in many ways it goes without saying that Martha's intentions are not bad in all of this. Her intentions are good. She's not selfish. She's not lazy.

She's not unwelcoming. She's the exact opposite. And at one level what she's doing is very commendable. But at the same time, and what we really need to recognise is that the good she was doing is actually harming her. Her priorities seem noble, but they're actually dangerous. Martha is in the grip of distraction and duty. And of course exactly the same thing can happen to us. Now for Martha, these two things were connected. She was distracted through her duty, through her serving. But I want us to just slow down and look at these two things one by one in a little bit more detail. So first there's the danger of distraction.

Now as we know at times distraction can be a good thing. We all at times need the opportunity for our minds to slow down. We need to switch off. We need to rest. And it's a great thing to read a book or to knit a jumper, to watch a programme we like, to have a game of FIFA.

Everybody needs to slow down. Everyone needs to be imaginative and creative. But I think that we have reached a point in our society in the Western world today where distraction has stopped being the thing that helps us towards our goal and it has now become the goal itself. In other words, people today are living for distraction. The 21st century is becoming an age of distraction. People long for the distraction of tonight's TV or for the next season of sports, for the buzz of social media, for the laugh of going out somewhere together. That distraction has become the very thing that people live for. And the consequence of that is that no one stops to think about what really matters. And we possibly live in the first generation of human history that hardly ever thinks about death. We just want to distract ourselves from it and pretend it's not there. For centuries gone by, people were constantly aware of the reality of death. Now we are in probably possibly the first generation that just wants to ignore that and avoid thinking about it. And yet at the same time, it's probably the most important thing to think about. We all need to think about what will happen when we die. And when I say that, when I say you need to think about what happens when you die, if your instinctive thought is, I don't want to think about that,

[8 : 16] I'm going to think about something else, then maybe you're a child of the age of distraction as well. And of course, the whole point of the Gospel is that faith in Jesus Christ doesn't just give you a good life now. In fact, it very well might not give you a good life now.

The whole point is that faith in Jesus Christ gives you eternal life and all fear of death can be taken away. But we live in an age that doesn't want to think about these things and we tend to be drawn towards distraction. Martha was the same. She was distracted from the things that really matter. But we should really ask ourselves the question, when it comes to the most important things in life, is distraction a good thing? So imagine you're a pilot with a plane full of people coming into land on a rough Lewis windy day. Is distraction a good thing then? Imagine you're a neurosurgeon in the middle of an operation, is distraction a good thing then? If you're driving a car, is distraction dangerous? If you're an air traffic controller, is distraction dangerous? When it comes to the eternal destiny of your life, is distraction dangerous? The second thing we have is the danger of duty, distraction and duty. And duty is in many ways the more prominent issue in the passage before us.

Again, that's a good thing in its right place. At one level Martha's a great example. She's hardworking, ready to serve, she's conscientious, she's hospitable. Duty is something that as Christians we must be serious about. We absolutely do not want to be lazy, passive Christians.

But at the same time, we've been reminded of another issue in this passage of the fact that duty can be dangerous. And that danger is clearly seen in Martha. And I want to just highlight two or three things in particular about the danger of duty in Martha's life.

First of all, Martha's serving of Jesus is actually drawing her away from Jesus. Her serving of Jesus is drawing her away from Jesus. So here he is, he's come to her house, she has this amazing opportunity to be with him, to listen to him, to be taught by him.

[11 : 10] But that opportunity is slipping by because she's being pulled away by her duties. So while she feels as though she's serving Jesus, she's actually being drawn away from him.

And exactly the same thing can happen to us very, very easily. Our duties, whether they are at work or at home or in our community or even in church, can pull us away from Jesus.

Just like Martha, we can be anxious about things. We can be full of desire to do things and to do them well. But in reality, we're so caught up with the anxiety of our duties that we'd never stop to think about who it is we're doing these duties for. In another way, we can also be more concerned about cultural expectations than we are about God's expectations.

I'm sure there was a huge cultural pressure on Martha to do all these duties when Jesus arrived. And we can be exactly the same. We can be very concerned about culture expectations.

The example before us here is hospitality. And that's still a hugely relevant example for us today. We can think to ourselves, well, if I'm going to have somebody rent my house for dinner, I need to make my house look perfect. And everything needs to be where it is. And the floor is going to need a good clean. And I have to make sure everything is spotless.

[12 : 37] I'm going to have to produce a really nice meal that's just very fancy and impressive. And I want to make a really good presentation for this person who's coming. The result of that is we set the bar so high for something like hospitality. We either completely exhaust ourselves in the process of meeting all these expectations, or we just don't even bother trying because we think it's too much work and I can't get up to that standard. Sometimes we can be so concerned about what other people think we're consumed by a pressure to live up to their expectations. And all of that means that we spend far more time thinking about the duties we need to perform than we do thinking about what a brilliant thing it is to just spend time together as Christians. Or what a wonderful thing it is to open our home to people who aren't yet Christians and to show them warmth and love in the name of

Jesus. Whatever duty it may be, we might theoretically be doing it for Jesus. But we have to be careful because our approach can actually draw us away from Him to the extent that the things that should be the spiritual highlight of our week can actually become the things that we dread. And it's a trap that we can all fall into. It's bringing before us a very important lesson in discipleship. Sometimes the devil will draw us away from Jesus with things that are bad, things like greed and gossip or too much alcohol or sexual temptation or whatever it may be. The devil can draw us away with bad things. But the devil can also draw us away from Jesus with good things. Good things like serving and fundraising and volunteering and hospitality. These are all brilliant things, but they can be dangerous.

What Martha was doing to serve Jesus was actually pulling her away from Him. Another thing we see in Martha is that her obedience made her demanding. This was really interesting about Martha. You see that she initiates her actions with a view to serve.

She wants to be helpful. She wants to do what she should do. But her obedience makes her demanding because she goes up to Jesus and she says, tell her to help me. Martha's gone from doing something for Jesus to telling Jesus to do something for her. And at the heart of that is the mindset that makes her think that her faithfulness gives her the right to set the rules. And we do that all the time. So people might say, well, I've been coming to this church for years. I know how we should do things. Others might say, I give a huge amount to the church. I don't want this to change. Others might say, I've served here for 20 years. This is how I want things to be. We can all use our service as a justification for being demanding. And I've done that myself. I've thought, oh, because

I'm doing this, that gives me the right to say I should do this or I shouldn't do that. At the same time, we can use our good duties as a means of judging others. This is what we see with Martha. She thought that Mary was in the wrong and we can do the same. We might have all these things that we do. We might think, well, I do this. I'm on this committee. I lead this Bible study. I do this fundraising. I have people around at my house regularly. All of these things which are great. But we then think, well, others aren't meeting my standards. And as a result, we judge them and we feel that they are not being fair.

[16 : 43] We can easily slip into the same trap as Martha of setting a high standard for ourselves and then being frustrated with others when they don't conform. Our serving can make us think that we have the right to be demanding. And all of that comes as a result of forgetting that there's only one King in God's kingdom. And he is the one who sets the standards, not us. And his are the expectations that matter, not ours. Only God sets the rules.

And there's a brilliant reminder of that in the second question in the Catechism. What rule have God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him? 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. God sets the standards. Our obedience never gives us the right to be demanding. So Martha's serving of Jesus threw her away from Jesus. Martha's obedience made her demanding. And in 30 we see that Martha's duty of care made her feel uncared for. When Martha finally speaks to Jesus, as you can see, she says, Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? So she's busy attending to her guests' needs. She's fulfilling what she regards as a duty of care. But in all of that, she feels uncared for. And it's really interesting to notice that her first complaint is towards

Jesus, not actually towards Mary. She feels that he doesn't care. And she actually tells him off. And that in a way seems quite surprising, almost shocking. But yet it's something that people often do. We often say, why is God doing this? Why is God not doing that? Why is this happening? Often God is the first person we blame. And that's because we can easily feel like he doesn't care. In all of this, it's clear that Martha has a brilliant gift for hospitality. I think she's a wonderful host. I think that is one of her gifts. But the very thing that Martha thought made her special actually made her feel taken for granted.

And so instead of feeling loved and valued, she felt uncared for. And that's the dangerous thing about duty. Duty can do that. So the duties that you are gifted for, the duties that make you special in this church, they can actually leave you feeling unloved and uncared for. And that will happen if duty is distracting you from Jesus. So sometimes we prioritize distraction. And that's very much what our culture today is doing. Sometimes we prioritize duty. And that's a trap that many of us in church can fall into. I think this passage is powerfully reminding us that both of these things can be dangerous. So what's the answer? How do we avoid these pitfalls? How do we get the balance right? Well, I think we need to remember our first heading that our priorities are often more dangerous than we realize. But at the same time, we must remember that God's priorities are far better.

God's priorities are far more amazing than we often realize. And we see that when we look a little bit more at these two sisters. Because in contrast to Martha, we have Mary.

[20 : 49] And in looking at the two of them together, we see what God's priorities for us really are. And there's three things that I want to say very briefly. Priority number one, Jesus wants your company. Jesus' priority is your company. If you look at this passage and you ask the question, what does Jesus want? Dinner? Not really. What Jesus wants is togetherness. And so rather than prioritizing duties that are going to pull you away from Jesus, first and foremost, Jesus just wants you to be near Him. The great goal that Jesus always has is togetherness. And throughout the Bible, there's this beautiful doctrine of togetherness running right through God's redemptive plan. It's grounded and rooted in the Trinity itself, where you have Father, Son and Holy Spirit together, eternally towards one another. Togetherness is at the heart of the paradise of Eden, where Adam and Eve and God were there in beautiful fellowship together. Sin broke that. But God's plan of restoration is to restore that togetherness. It was foreshadowed in the Old Testament with the family nation of Israel. The healing and reconciliation that was needed was achieved at the cross. And now the togetherness of God's family is inaugurated in the church, which is pointing towards its ultimate fulfillment when Jesus returns. And God's family will never, ever, ever again be separated from one another or from whom. And that doctrine of togetherness, that desire in Jesus for your company is absolutely not for the select few in God's kingdom. It's very easy to look at a passage like that and think, well, Mary's the good one. She's the better one. And she's getting closer to Jesus because she's obviously kind of a better Christian than the rest of them. It's easy to think that Jesus only wants Christians like Mary at his feet. But I don't think that's what this passage is saying at all. I think Jesus is saying to Martha, I just want you at my feet too. It's incredibly easy to be elitist in our understanding of the Christian church. It's very easy to think that closeness to Jesus is just for the good ones, for the select few. But that is not true. Martha and Mary and you all belong at Jesus' feet because his priority is your company. And that truth is powerfully reinforced in Jesus' words in John chapter 17 verse 24. Jesus prays to his father and says, Father, I desire that they also whom you have given me may be with me where I am. And I want you to notice in particular the word they. That they is referring to all those who will believe in the apostolic gospel. In other words, every person who puts their faith in Jesus. And it's easy to look at that and think, well, that they includes people who are full of knowledge and godliness and holiness and people who seem to be doing incredibly well in their faith. But the truth is within that they is every Mary and every Martha. 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 has doubted, every Christian who has mucked up. Jesus says my desire is that they will be with me. And the key point is that Jesus doesn't say to Martha, you've got your priorities wrong, stay away. Jesus says, Martha, you've got your priorities wrong, come close. Come here with me. And for any of you who have been distracted or any of you who'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. The second priority that we see of Jesus is that he wants your attention. We see that in verse 39. It tells us that Mary sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. As we saw, Martha got distracted and disheartened by her duties. So much so that she comes to Jesus in exasperation and she demanded that Jesus would listen to her and sort things out in the way that she wanted. But Jesus' priority is that Martha would be the one who would do the listening, that she would stop and hear what he has to say.

Jesus wanted her attention and he wants ours too. Now, you remember a moment ago that we said Martha was doing all this stuff and yet as a result she felt uncared for and unvalued.

She didn't feel particularly good about herself or about how things were. Very often in life we do stuff in order to feel good about ourselves. So we maybe take on more at work because we think, well, that'll look better. 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 more perfect life to the world through our Facebook page. We try and do more and more and more in order to feel better about ourselves. And the reason we do that is because we long to feel special. And all around us, all around us in Britain today, there is a society full of people desperate to feel special. But it's looking for affirmation in the wrong places.

[27 : 36] Because if you go to the gym, you might work and work and work, but your body will never be good enough. Your profile on Facebook or Instagram is always going to be calling you to put more onto it. Your achievements at work will always leave you feeling like you could do that wee bit more. And even your dedication in volunteering will leave you aware that there's still so much more to do. We do all these things to feel special and yet it's never enough. And all of that raises the question, where is the place that you will feel the very best about yourself? The answer is at the feet of Jesus. Because it is there that you will discover how incredibly special you actually are. Often we are attracted to people who have achieved a huge amount for themselves. So I would love to have dinner with Andy Murray and I'd love to hear about all that he has achieved in his tennis career.

I'd love to hear about all that he's done and all that he's achieved for himself. But if you had dinner with Jesus and if you sat at his feet and listened, he's not going to tell you about all the stuff that he's achieved for himself. He's going to tell you about all the things he's done for you. Martha's mindset is I'll work for Jesus. I'll attend to Jesus' needs. I'll put myself out for Jesus. I'll give my life for Jesus. But at the heart of Christianity is Jesus saying, I'll work for you. I'll meet your needs.

I'll put myself out for you. I will give my life for you. That is the truth that lies at the heart of the Gospel. And it's from that point that we can learn more and more that will equip us and prepare us to go out and serve.

So looking at Jesus' priorities, he wants your company. He wants your attention. Last of all, he wants you. Full stop. In this passage, Martha's but her priorities mixed up. But Jesus doesn't hammer her, but neither does he indulge her. Instead, he teaches her a very important truth. Martha's duty of care left her feeling uncared for. But Jesus makes it clear that his priority, first and foremost, is simply to love her. And I think he does that simply in the way in which he says her name. There's an amazing tenderness in the repetition that we see in verse 41 where Jesus says, Martha, Martha. And in that tenderness, Jesus is showing that he wants her to come close and to listen to him because he loves her. And the crucial lesson is this. Jesus loves 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. Loving the person, not the servant. Often we love people because of what they do, but through love, loves a person because of who they are.

[31 : 55] It has no conditions attached. And the foundational truth of biblical, reformed, 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. Now just think about that. You will wake up tomorrow morning, I hope, as a follower of Jesus. And even if that's the very first morning you wake up as a follower of Jesus, I hope every one of us wakes up tomorrow morning as a follower of Jesus. And I want you to think about that and think about the fact that Jesus is watching you get out of bed.

He sees you enter a new day. And imagine you could ask Jesus, what do you want, Mary or Martha or whatever your name is, what do you want them to do today? Jesus, what do you want this person to do? What do you want for them today? Jesus's answer I think would be, well my number one priority is to love them with every ounce of love that I've got. And that love has no prerequisites, no requirements, no conditions, no caveats. And this is where we see that thinking, thinking that our duties or our achievements are going to earn Jesus's favour or his smile or his nearness, thinking that we kind of earn it in that way is actually a blasphemy against the reality of God's love. And you see that in these verses because looking at this passage, what does Mary say and what does Mary do? The answer is nothing. She doesn't speak. 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 the key difference I think between Mary and Martha is this. Mary, Martha is being drained.

She is being filled. And at the heart of the Gospel is the fact that God does not want to drain you. God wants to fill you. He wants to fill you with joy. He wants to fill you with peace. He wants to fill you with true knowledge. And above all, he wants to fill you with his incredible, immeasurable, never-ending love for you. And we read about that at the start of the service. When Paul writes, For this reason I bow my knee 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 what God wants for you. And that is the good portion that is more necessary and more important than any other part of your life. That we word portion on the bottom line there is an important word. It's saying that this is part of life. It's the most important part of life. It's not all of life. We're not being taught here that you should just sit in silence forever doing nothing. But we are being told that all of the serving and duties and responsibilities that you have come second to the great priority which God has, which is to love you and to fill you and to have you with him forever. That is the one thing that's necessary. That is the thing that's more important than anything else in your life. That is the portion that nothing can ever take away from you. Because ultimately all our duties are going to be forgotten and all our distractions will vanish like a vapor. But the fact that God wants you near him and the fact that God wants to teach you how special you are and the fact that God loves you unconditionally that will never ever be taken away from you. That is what the Gospel of Jesus Christ gives us. That's what Mary chose. It's what Martha chose as well. She just lost sight of that for a while. I really hope you will choose it too.

Amen. Let's pray. Dear God our Father, we acknowledge that we have often got our priorities wrong. And even in our work for you and in our serving of you, often we've been so caught up with all the stuff that we've been doing and we've wandered away from you. But we thank you that your word is always calling us back. And we thank you that there's room for all of us at your feet. And so we just pray that in all of these things we will keep our eyes on you, that we'll keep listening to you and that you would hold us close to you. And we thank you for all the fullness of life and of hope and of joy that we have through your

[38 : 48] Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. And we pray in his name. Amen.