

Finding the Right Balance

Luke 10:38-42

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I have to admit that when I saw the Scripture lesson for today, I was tempted to go find another text that I would feel more comfortable with. Every time I come across this lesson, I feel so inadequate, because I know that there is little in my life that resembles Mary. As I was preparing for this sermon, I even had a little conversation with God. I mentioned that there were many other people much better qualified to talk to us about the virtues of Mary.

But in the midst of that little struggle, I heard God's answer loud and clear: "Steve, you can preach this passage. You can share why you agree that Mary has chosen the better way, because you are highly educated in the way of Martha."

How many of you suffer from the Martha Syndrome? You probably recognize the symptoms – a non-stop schedule of events, a frazzled look on your face, a desktop or hall table full of mail that you still have to respond to, two or more back-to-back appointments at opposite ends of town, a book that you started to read a year ago and you still haven't finished it, two church committee meetings a week (plus Sunday school and worship)... What else? You fill in the blanks.

If you have the urge to cry out, "Calgon, take me away!", at least once each day, you're probably afflicted with the Martha Syndrome.

It's way too common today, my friends. We're too busy. We get spread too thin. We do too much. Have you ever wondered why that's so? Have you ever wondered why the Martha Syndrome is so common?

I suspect that part of it is because, in modern American society, we have become a people of doers. We want action. We expect results. If we want acceptance and approval, we have to get it the old-fashioned way – we have to earn it. We are judged, not so much by who we are, as by what we do.

We are busy, busy, busy. Everything has to be bigger and better than the others. We have to invest more and more of ourselves into doing things that in the scheme of life really don't mean a thing. More and more of our time is consumed by putting little, unnecessary added touches to our lives, squeezing out time for the important things in life.

We over-commit, and we suffer because of it.

Our work life suffers because we over-commit.

Our discipleship suffers because we over-commit.

Our home life suffers because we over-commit.

Our children suffer because we over-commit.

One of my pet peeves is to say we give our children quality time. All that means is that we don't have enough time for them, so we try to assuage our guilt by justifying ourselves. Quality time is a nice way of saying our children get the leftovers.

The irony of our busy-ness is, we spend so much time doing things, that we have no time to get anything of real meaning done.

“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things...”

It's the *many things* that create the Martha Syndrome. The Greek words for worried and distracted literally mean to be drawn in many directions, confusion, noisy uproar, disturbance. It's the *many things* that create confusion in our lives. It's the *many things* that pull us in different directions, so that in reality we have no direction. It's the *many things*....

“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

Mary has chosen what is better. What is it that makes Mary's the better option? In a world filled with doers, how is it that an act that by all appearances does nothing is the superior option? Let me suggest three reasons.

First, Mary was focused. She was single-minded in the attention she gave to Jesus. Remember last month when Bill preached on the last few verses of the 9th chapter of Luke – Jesus said that nobody who puts their hand to the plow and looks backward is fit for the kingdom. It was a call to turn your eyes upon Jesus, and Jesus only.

And isn't that what we see Mary doing here? She is single-minded in her focus. Whereas Martha is distracted by many things, Mary is focused on the one thing of importance – Jesus Christ. One of the most critical things we can do as disciples of Jesus Christ is to have focus; to set our minds and our hearts upon Jesus, and to tune out anything that would threaten to take our minds and our hearts away from Jesus.

Keep your eyes on Jesus. Focus on Jesus.

“It was a fog-shrouded morning, July 4, 1952, when a young woman named Florence Chadwick waded into the water off Catalina Island off the coast of California. She intended to swim the channel from the island to the mainland, a distance of about 25 miles. Long-distance swimming was not new to her – she had been the first woman to swim the English Channel in both directions.

“The water that day was numbing cold. The fog was so thick she could hardly see the boats in her party. Several times sharks had to be driven away with gunfire. She swam more than fifteen hours before she asked to be taken out of the water. Her trainer tried to encourage her to swim on since they were so close to land, but when Florence looked, all she could see was fog. So she quit ... only one-half mile from her goal.

“Later she said, ‘I'm not excusing myself, but if I could have seen the land, I might have made it.’ It wasn't the cold or the fear or the exhaustion that caused Florence Chadwick to miss her goal – it was the fog.”¹

Isn't that the way it can be in our lives? How often have we missed our goal, not because of fear or peer pressure or anything else other than the fact that we lose sight of the goal.

Focus. You've got to have focus in your life. The quality of your discipleship depends on how well you focus.

Two months after her failure, Florence Chadwick walked off the same beach into the same channel and swam the distance. This time, she succeeded, even setting a new speed record. She succeeded, because she could see her goal.²

Focus. You've got to have focus in your life.

Mary had focus, and she had chosen the better portion.

The second reason that Mary's choice was the better one was that she listened.

By all appearances, when you read the text in Luke, it does appear as if Mary is doing nothing. She's just sitting at the feet of Jesus. But if you were to get a glimpse of her mind and her heart, I do believe you would see both hard at work.

Mary was listening to Jesus.

She was well aware that dinner was to be served. But she was also aware that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.³ Mary knew that food was to be served. But she also knew that the greatest nourishment would not come from the kitchen, but from the One at whose feet she sat.

So she listened. Listening is so important. It's not that doing is not important, because it is. Just last week we dealt with the story of the Good Samaritan, the conclusion of which is to "go and do likewise..."⁴ You can't be a disciple without doing.

But you also have to listen. Listening has to be a priority. That's why Mary had chosen the better thing, because she chose to listen to her Lord. Doing is not effective if it does not arise out of listening. If we jump right into action, without first listening, it is *our* agenda, and not Christ's that is being put forward.

Before we do, we have to listen.

Let's get practical for a second here. The best way to listen to God is through the Bible. We call it the Word of God for a reason, you know. Sure, you might hear little voices during your prayer time – and you should listen. But all inclinations, all suggestions, all advice ought to be judged against what we find in God's word, the Bible.

Study God's Word. Study it alone. Study it in groups. Study it in Sunday School. Study God's Word, and listen to what God says.

You have to listen.

Mary listened, and in doing so, she chose the better portion.

The third reason that Mary's choice was the better one is that through her focus and through her listening, she was growing into a living relationship with Jesus. She was abiding in Christ.

There's an image Jesus uses in the 15th chapter of the gospel of John. Jesus says, "I am the vine, and you are the branches. If anyone abides in me and I in them, they will bear much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing."⁵

You see, if we're going to be fruitful in ministry, if we're going to be productive in our discipleship, we have to remain in touch with Jesus, because without Jesus we will not bear fruit. Abiding in Christ is something that takes intentional effort and discipline. It means checking in with Jesus throughout the day, just to make sure you're still with him. It means clinging to Jesus because he is our help and our guide.

I remember when our youngest son Ben was in preschool, he attended the preschool at the church I was serving. As a staff member, I always used the parking lot across the street from the church, to let guests and visitors use the limited spaces we had right in front of the church. Every day when I took Ben to school, I would get out of the car and walk around to Ben's door to let him out. As we would start to walk to the corner and cross at the light, something would happen quite naturally – Ben would reach up and hold my hand. I didn't have to remind him. I didn't have to chide him into doing it. He just did it automatically.

Is that the way you relate to Christ? Do you reach out your hand at the beginning of each day? Do you, without even thinking, reach out and seek the hand that provides for you, the hand that will guide you, the hand that will give you security and direction?

That's what it means to abide in Christ. It means to take hold of Jesus as an act of trust, an act of devotion, an act of love.

Mary was abiding in Christ, and she had chosen the better portion.

"Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Elsewhere, Jesus said, "Don't worry about the things of this world. Seek first the kingdom of God, and all these other things will fall into place."⁶

I think Mary had a good understanding of that concept.

I suspect Martha began to understand something of that concept.

And I hope you do, too. Choose the better portion. Find the right balance. Amen.

¹ Craig Brian Larson, ed. *Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching: From Leadership Journal*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), p. 96

² *ibid*

³ Deuteronomy 8:3

⁴ Luke 10:37

⁵ John 15:5

⁶ Luke 12:22-31, paraphrased and summarized