

## “The One Thing” (Luke 10:38-42)

In the movie *City Slickers*, three disillusioned men decide to participate in a cattle drive from New Mexico to Colorado, in order to “find themselves.” One of the three, Billy Crystal, plays a confused, dissatisfied, thirty-something character with a vague sense that life is passing him by. Jack Palance plays the tough-as-nails trail boss, Curly. Palance—ancient, leathery, wise to the world (“a saddleback with eyes”)—asks Crystal if he would like to know the secret of life.

“It’s this,” Palance says, holding up a single finger. “The secret of life is your finger?” asks Crystal. “It’s one thing,” Palance replies. “The secret of life is pursuing one thing.” Somehow this resonates deeply with Billy Crystal’s character. His life is scattered. He is torn between his obligations to his family and his desire for career advancement—between his need for security and his appetite for excitement. His life is about many things; and so he senses it is about nothing. “So what is the one thing?” asks Crystal. Jack Palance can’t give him the answer. “You have to find it yourself.”

I would like to ask you to contemplate Billy Crystal’s question: “What is the one thing?” Please avoid the temptation to tell God and me what you think we want to hear. Instead examine your own heart and acknowledge what is really important to you. What is your one thing? Is it your children? Your spouse? Your friends? Your job? Your portfolio? Your grades? Your sports? What is it for you?

For most of us, our lives are not focused on what or who they should be. The truth is there is a root problem in the way many of us live our lives. It is a one-word problem: distraction. Distractions can come in all sizes and shapes: email, cell phones, day-timers, radio, and T.V. There are also many other wonderful and significant distractions like our spouse, our children, our friends, our finances, our work, and our ministry. Often, we are simply distracted because we have allowed ourselves to be consumed by our busy schedules. Yet, in all of our pursuits and pleasures we can altogether miss “the one thing.”

In Luke 10:38-42, we find a unique story that is only told in Luke’s account of the life and ministry of Jesus. This story is found in a context of discipleship. Earlier, in chapter 10, Jesus sent out 70 disciples to do His work. These 70 disciples were successful because they did what Jesus asked. In verses 25-42, Jesus then tells the parable of the Good Samaritan and the story of Mary and Martha. In relating these two episodes, Luke weaves together the two commandments that God’s people should observe: loving one’s neighbor and loving Christ. These two commandments are really one, just like one coin has two sides. You can’t fulfill one without fulfilling the other. In this story of two sisters we will answer the question: “What is the one thing?” Let’s look into these five verses for the answer.

Our story begins in Luke 10:38, with these words: **“Now as they were traveling along, He entered a village; and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home.”** This verse tells us a lot about Martha. She was hospitable and wanted to help Jesus and His disciples. We know that a large party often accompanied Jesus. It is fairly certain that the 12 disciples were present, not to mention some or all of the 70 other disciples (10:1), and then, of course, the women who accompanied and attended to Jesus (8:1-3). There are a lot of hungry mouths to feed! In order to host this large of group Martha must have had plenty of food and a large house. Since she apparently had no servants, she must have been a very responsible and industrious person, and she was willing to share what she had to help in the ministry.

What is your home like before guests arrive? If you are like our family, you recognize that having even a few people over requires some preparation. Already, I feel for Martha. She must have been stressed up to her eyebrows! Besides the inevitable stress and anxiety of hosting a large group, notice what follows.

In 10:39, Luke tells us that **“She [Martha] had a sister called Mary, who was seated at the Lord’s feet, listening to His word.”** Mary was probably younger than Martha. After all, the house into which Jesus was received belonged to Martha, and in the three accounts that mention the sisters Martha generally took the lead in action. As the eldest woman in the house, Martha was responsible for feeding her guests. But Mary’s role as the youngest would have been to assist her sister.

Yet, as our story unfolds, Martha is alone in the kitchen, working furiously to put the meal together . . . and no Mary. I am sure at first Martha thought, “Well, Mary will come any minute.” Yet, minutes pass and still no Mary! After a while Martha begins to bang the pots a little harder. Now instead of cutting the carrots she whacks at them real hard. Finally, she even resorts to talking to herself—at first quietly, then louder so she will be overheard.

Does any of this sound at all familiar? I can recall one time in the first year of my marriage when I behaved similarly. Your wife or mom asks you to take out the garbage or wash the dishes. Being the humble servant that you are, you perform the task but your heart is not in it. You are thinking to yourself, “Why do I have to do this. I’m busy.” Or you go through the motions slowly with great pain on your face. Maybe you even huff and puff just to make sure that everyone knows the effort you are expending. I know. I speak from experience. Can you envision the scene in Martha’s house? I can. Now we need to get into Martha’s head. We need to really know what she was thinking and feeling. Let’s look together at how the story unfolds.

**“But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up to Him and said, ‘Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me’”** (10:40). Martha was distracted with all her preparations. Apparently, it had turned out to be a bigger job than she had anticipated. And instead of helping her, her little sister was just sitting down. Perhaps Mary had been this way as a child—a little on the lazy side, always trying to think of ways to get out of work. Perhaps this was what Martha was thinking, “There is my lazy sister not willing to help just like when she was younger.” Martha became so upset that she actually interrupted Jesus’ teaching to vent her frustrations. This is serious stuff! I do not think I have ever considered the magnitude of this before.

In the midst of all those people while Jesus was teaching His followers, Martha explodes into the room and rebukes her sister. . . and the Son of God. Martha is an example of a distracted believer. She had lost her perspective of why she was serving in the first place. She wanted to do something nice to help out—to be an encouragement and help to Jesus and His followers. But she lost sight of her mission. Her mission was not to appear as a wonderful, competent hostess. Rather, it should have been and probably was at first, to facilitate Jesus—to give Him a place to teach others and to be able to minister to His needs. However, Jesus is a gracious and tender Savior. He speaks to Martha beginning in 10:41. In all the stress-filled moments of hustle and bustle, let’s slow down for just a moment and listen to the words of Jesus.

**“But the Lord answered and said to her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things’”** (10:41). The first feature in this verse that we must notice is the way Jesus responded to Martha. In the most endearing way, Jesus speaks the words, “Martha, Martha.” Jesus’ love and affection for Martha is evident. He cares for her; He loves her.

Jesus then says, “You are worried and bothered about so many things.” Notice that Jesus does not condemn Martha for trying to be a good hostess. Rather, He tells her that the problem is that she has become “worried and bothered about so many things.” The word translated “worried” paints a vivid

picture of what happens when we are ruled by anxiety. It originally meant “to be pulled in two.” At first, Martha was distracted. There were so many things vying for her attention that had to get done.

All Martha could think about was Jesus and His followers, a big meal to prepare, the table to set, and the entire cleanup. The problem was this: she was worried and troubled about it all. Rather than resting in the Lord while she served, she trusted in herself to get it all together. Once she began to pay more attention to “so many things,” they sank their hooks into her and began to pull her away from Christ. This resulted in anxiety and distress.

I think it is important that we understand it is not Martha’s service which was wrong, but her attitude in that service. Remember, service is important. Jesus did not berate Martha and tell her to get out of the kitchen. He simply showed Martha that her service was ill-timed and out-of-focus. We are called to serve; but service must flow from a full heart. It must flow from time spent in His presence or it is just the work of the flesh. We should imitate both Mary and Martha. I do not think our text suggests that both Mary and Martha should have been sitting at Jesus’ feet, and that no meal should have been prepared. Martha was not wrong in serving, but her attitude in serving was clearly wrong. Martha allowed herself to become distracted from Jesus by her attempt to serve Him without first listening to Him. As a result, she was filled with worry and trouble.

This should remind us that (1) the cares of this life can be dangerous. Nothing could have been more proper than to provide for the Lord Jesus and supply His wants. Yet even for this, because it too much engrossed her mind, the Lord Jesus gently reproved her. (2) It is of more importance to attend to the instructions of the Lord Jesus than to be engaged in the affairs of the world. The one will abide forever; the other will be but for a little time. Have we lost sight of what is important? Are we busy doing many things, but we do not have time for God? Is our work for the Lord causing us to be worried and bothered? If so, then we have forgotten the reason we are serving Him in the first place. Lord, help us to put things in the proper perspective. This is what Jesus does for Martha in our final verse.

In 10:42, Jesus tells Martha, “**but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her.**” The point of the story is NOT that a life of contemplation is better than a life of service. Rather, Jesus gently chides Martha because her preparations were too elaborate; she was distracted “by all her preparations” (10:40, lit. “too much service”), and she was “worried and bothered about so many things” (10:41). Jesus says, “Only one thing is necessary,” meaning that only one dish is needed, rather than the elaborate preparations that Martha had made. But the one thing also stands for the better part, which Mary has chosen, namely sitting at Jesus’ feet.

What was that “good part” which was “necessary,” that Mary chose? In brief, I think the “good part” was abiding in Christ, drawing strength and instruction from Him. It was being taught at the feet of the Master. If there is any one element of discipleship it is being a learner and this is what Mary had chosen to do. Martha was preoccupied with ministering to Jesus; Mary with the ministry of Jesus. In the final analysis, He is not dependent upon our ministry to Him, but our life in Him is totally dependent upon His ministry to us. In seeking to serve Jesus, Martha was hindering the work of Jesus in her life, and she even demanded that it be kept from her sister as well. It is easy to become so busy serving Jesus that we spend no time with Jesus. It is more important to be occupied *with* Christ than to be occupied *for* Christ.

Many of us are trying desperately to live for the Lord (at home, at work, in our neighborhoods) but we lack power. The reason? We are not first spending time at His feet! Before we go out, we must first come in.

Before we rise up, we must first sit down. If you find yourself stressed, depressed, or anxious and you don’t know which way to turn, sit down. Sit at Jesus’ feet. Look in His Word and see what He has to say.

It will help you with your housework. It will make you a better husband or wife. It will help you at the office. You will be a better parent. You will be a better friend. You will become a better student. Just take time to sit at the feet of Jesus.

All that Martha was doing was important, but it was not the most important thing in God's kingdom. Our work in the church or with our family or on the job may be important, but it is not the most important thing in God's kingdom. If we are so busy with other things that we do not have time to pray or time to read the Bible or time to share our faith with others, then we are too busy. When we neglect time alone with God and when we neglect time learning from His Word, we may become worried and bothered about many things. Many things troubled Martha when she should have been centered on one thing. Mary chose that one thing and that was to put Jesus first. Let's not neglect the one thing. What is the one thing? In all that we do to be occupied with Christ.

I end with this verse: John 11:5: "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus." It would be easy for us to think that Jesus showed favor to Mary and disfavor to Martha. But this verse tells us that He loved both Martha and Mary. He wanted what was the very best for both of them. There may be times when we become frustrated and troubled like Martha. We may be so upset as to say or do foolish things. Then we may feel that God does not love us anymore. But notice that Jesus loved Martha and Mary. He loves you. No matter how often we fail Him, no matter what messes we may get ourselves into, He still loves us. He is willing to help us. There may be times when He gently rebukes us as He did to Martha, but He always does it out of love.

No matter how much you may think that you have failed God, remember that Jesus loves you just as much as He loved these two sisters. He cares for you, and He will take care of you.

On this Mother's Day, you may be a mother who does not have a relationship with her eternal Father. If so, please trust in Jesus Christ. In John 11:25-26, Jesus said to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?" Martha replied that she did. She believed that Jesus was who He claimed to be. Whether you are a mother, father, young married spouse, single, or student, if you believe in Jesus Christ your sins will be forgiven and you will spend eternity in the presence of God. The greatest Mother's Day gift is the free gift from God. Would you trust in Jesus Christ alone?

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