

Martha

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[0 : 00] Luke chapter 10 and at verse 38. Now it came to pass as they went that he entered into a certain village and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house. And here a sister called Mary which also sat at Jesus' feet and heard his word. But Martha was cumbered about much serving and came to him and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone?

Who do therefore that she help me? And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things, but one thing is needful, and Mary hath chosen that good part which shall not be taken away from. The incident that we read here is an incident that is well known to everyone who has any knowledge at all of scripture. Although it's recorded in only one of the Gospels, only here in Luke's Gospel, it's as well known an incident as any of the incidents recorded in all the Gospels. It concentrates our attention on Martha, but Martha along with Mary.

And although it's only Luke who records this particular incident, we do have other information about this house and a particular about these two sisters and in other incidents recorded elsewhere in the Gospels. We've read already tonight that account of part of the account of the death and the rising again or the being raised again of their brother Lazarus. And in a very sensitive and accurate picture, John there in that record gives us a great deal of information about the household and about Martha and her sister. And then in the very next chapter, from the chapter we read in John's Gospel, John records what is recorded also in the other Gospels, the story of Mary anointing Jesus, very shortly before his arrest and crucifixion. But it's Luke alone who records this particular incident. Luke, guided by the Holy Spirit in seeking to fulfil that aim that was given him, of giving a full and accurate picture of Jesus. Luke, guided by the Holy Spirit, was led to record this particular incident. And he was led to record it because it has its own particular contribution to make to our understanding our understanding of Jesus and our understanding of what our own relationship with Jesus should be.

As we look at this story, remind ourselves that Luke alone records it, and remind ourselves that Luke is guided and inspired by the Holy Spirit as he records it. We should come to it as those who are ready to do what really we ought to be ready to do with all Scripture, and that is let the words of Scripture speak to us.

[3 : 26] Sometimes there's a great danger that we come to Scripture and we read into the words of Scripture what we think should be there, rather than taking time to sit and to listen and let the words of Scripture speak to us. Of course there are times when we must compare Scripture with Scripture. In order to get a proper understanding of Scripture there are many times when we have to compare one Scripture with another. But it's one thing to rightly compare Scripture with Scripture.

It's another thing to take one passage of Scripture and take its teaching and read it into some other passage of Scripture that's teaching something else.

We must let each portion of Scripture. We must let each portion of Scripture teach us what it has to say. Let it make its own particular contribution.

And we make this point particularly with regard to the incidents that are before us now. Because I think too often it's too easy for us to come to this particular incident and read into it rather than listen to what it has to say.

Listen to what this particular incident has to teach to us. I think it's too easy for us.

[5 : 51] Full of information. Full of information. Full of information given to us in the words that are used, in the pictures that are painted. Full of information that is designed to get across the particular message that Luke, inspired by the Holy Spirit, wanted to get across here.

Well, how is this particular incident to be understood? What is it really saying to us? Well, sometimes this incident, or perhaps more accurately, sometimes verses from this story, taking it in isolation from the rest of the story, sometimes verses taken in isolation, have been interpreted or expounded in such a way as to suggest that Martha wasn't really a true Christian at all.

I've heard it expounded in this way and it suggested that Martha wasn't a real Christian, that she wasn't a real believer and that she was altogether neglectful of Christ and neglectful of her own salvation, that she didn't in any way share the faith of her sister Mary.

And having been expounded in that way, of course, the passage was then used as a warning against neglect of Christ, a warning against neglecting Christ and his salvation.

Well, it's of course important that we all be warned against the danger of neglecting spiritual things, becoming so bound up and engrossed in material things that we neglect spiritual and eternal realities.

[7 : 59] So, of course, that's so terribly important and that warning is issued again and again in Scripture. But is it really true? Is it really true to what's recorded here to suggest that Martha was not a believer?

Is it really true to what's recorded here to suggest that Martha was being entirely neglectful of spiritual realities? I think if we take that line, we are really missing the true point of the incident. We are missing another important truth that has its application to all of us. Again, it has been suggested and this particular incident has been interpreted in such a way as to suggest that, well, it is teaching that there are two kinds, two types of Christian.

There are two ways in which people can serve Christ. There are two ways in which people can serve Christ. There are two ways in which people can serve Christ. There is the active Christian, the practical Christian.

And on the other side, there is the contemplative Christian, the one who spends more time in quiet contemplation and devotion and worship.

[9 : 22] And it suggested that this is what this incident is teaching. Well, again, it's perfectly true that there are different kinds of Christians and that Christians have different gifts.

Again and again, Scripture is reminding us that the children of God, although they're all one in their faith in Christ and in their dependence upon him for salvation, they're all different.

There are all sorts of different gifts that Christ gives to different people and all these gifts are to be used in his service. That point is made again and again in Scripture.

But is it really the point that is being made here? Well, let us look together. Let us try to take time and listen carefully to just exactly the way Luke himself, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and listen carefully.

And listen carefully. Listen carefully. Try to see what it is that this incident has to say to us.

[10 : 34] What is it that Christ is saying about himself and what is he saying about right relationships with himself? What is the picture that Luke is giving of Martha here?

Well, it's important to notice everything he records because nothing was recorded by accident.

Nothing was recorded just thoughtlessly. The picture is given accurately by the Holy Spirit and each detail is important.

And the first thing that we want to notice as we seek to have a right understanding of Martha here is this simple fact that she is the head of this home.

That's made clear in the way Luke tells us that a certain woman named Martha received him into her house.

Martha is presented here in such a way as to leave us in no doubt that it was her home. It was her house.

[11 : 44] She was herself the hostess. We know that she had a brother and we know that there was a very close relationship in the family, but it's no more suggested that Nasseris was at this time sharing the home with his sisters, but rather there's this clear picture that at this time in this house Martha was the head of the home.

It was her home. And the picture we have here is consistent with the picture that we have in the chapter we read in John. At the beginning of that story in John of Lazarus' death and resurrection, at the beginning of that story John does begin to speak of Mary first.

But he speaks of Mary first just because by the time John was writing Mary was already a well-known figure, a well-known figure because of the way that she had anointed Jesus.

But as we read on in the story, it's Martha who's mentioned first. The order is Martha and Mary. Sometimes Mary not even mentioned.

Martha and her sister and her brother Lazarus. The picture that we have in John is consistent with the picture here that Martha was the head of the home.

[13:04] And that's important when we want to understand Martha's activity here. Whatever her nature, whatever her disposition, she saw herself as having responsibility.

She saw herself as having duties to perform. But that's not the only thing that's said here. We're not only shown clearly that she was the head of the home, but we're told very clearly that she welcomed Jesus.

In our authorised version it reads, a certain woman named Martha received him into her house. The New International Version translates that, she opened her home to him.

And the New American Standard Version says, she welcomed him. And all these translations are accurate. She received him, but she didn't receive him grudgingly.

She received him in a way that is accurately translated by the word, she opened her home. She welcomed him. It's exactly the same word as Luke uses in Luke chapter 19 when he's talking about the way Zacchaeus came down from the tree at the invitation of Jesus and welcomed Jesus into his home.

[14:26] Exactly the same word is used again by Luke in Acts chapter 17 where the scene is Thessalonica and Paul and his companions are being persecuted by the Jews and Jason opens his home and welcomes Paul and his companions.

And once again, James, in James chapter 2 uses exactly the same word with regard to Rahab. He's recalling the Old Testament incident.

He's recalling Jericho and how Rahab welcomed the spies into her home. Now we have this picture of this woman who was the head of the house.

It was her own home. And she opens it to Jesus. She welcomes Jesus. This isn't the picture of someone who was neglectful of Jesus.

Not a picture of someone who was disinterested in what Jesus was doing in what Jesus was saying. But it's the picture of someone who had a deep appreciation for Jesus and his person and his ministry.

[15:37] Of course it's true that Pharisees had Jesus to meals in their house. But when we record, when it is recorded of these Pharisees that they took Jesus into their homes, this word that's used of Martha is never used.

Rather there's indication that their motives were very different. If Martha wasn't really appreciative of Jesus, if Martha hadn't a real interest in Jesus and his ministry, this particular word would never have been used to her.

She welcomes him. She opens her door. Now we don't know just exactly how long this incident was before the incident we read in John's Gospel.

There was a time gap no doubt. And we allow for that. But the picture that we have here of Martha is consistent with the picture that we have in John 11.

not just on the score that John 11 also shows her as the head of the house but the picture that shows of her interest in Jesus and her regard for Jesus and really her faith in Jesus.

[16:57] Remember how Martha sins with her sister for Jesus and then when she hears that he's coming near the village she runs out to meet him.

And when she was saying to Jesus if you had been here my brother wouldn't have died and Jesus says to her your brother shall rise again and the conversation goes on Jesus wins from her that confession I know and I believe that you are the son of God that should come into the world there we have a full-blown expression of her faith but the picture here is not a picture that suggests that at this particular time that faith wasn't there that interest hadn't begun rather the picture here is the picture of that faith already there she welcomed him into her home Miss Martha whom Jesus himself tells us Jesus loved now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus her brother so it's not the picture of one who's neglecting Jesus one who is disinterested one who is so engrossed in material things that she's no time for spiritual things no rather it's the picture of a woman who has a deep appreciation of Jesus who opens her home to him one with duties and responsibilities that she seeks to exercise now it's necessary

I think it's necessary if we're going to be true to scripture if we're going to listen to scripture if we're going to take what scripture says seriously it's necessary to emphasize these positive elements with regard to Martha and not bring false accusations against her or misrepresent her in a way that scripture itself doesn't do but listening to scripture we've got to recognize the faults that scripture does bring out it tells us that Martha welcomed Jesus into her house and she had a sister called Mary which sat at Jesus' feet and heard his word but Martha was cumbered about not serving she was cumbered about much serving now Luke who is always very careful about his choice of language

Luke who's careful description of Martha as one who welcomed Jesus is the man who carefully chooses his words here and he tells us that Martha was cumbered about much serving and the word that's translated here cumbered is a word that can be translated distracted or overburdened or even more literally torn away but Martha was torn away by much serving and that particular translation of Luke's carefully chosen word seems to be very appropriate coming as it does immediately after the picture that he has given of Mary here's Mary and she sat at Jesus' feet and heard his word but Martha was torn away by much serving she was torn away by much serving she was torn away from this position that Mary had taken of sitting at Jesus' feet she was torn away by much serving it wasn't that she despised

Mary for what she was doing it wasn't that she had no interest in doing what Mary was doing it wasn't that she was neglectful of what Mary was paying attention to but she was torn away by much serving there was that in Martha that would have made her love to sit where Mary was sitting there was that in Martha that appreciated what Mary was listening to and she would love to have been sitting with Mary but she was torn away by much serving she was torn away by all the preparations as the new international version puts it or torn away by all that had to be done these are perhaps paraphrases the much serving that we have in the authorised version is more literal but they do remind us of this

[22 : 38] Martha was torn away by much serving all that had to be done but who said that it all had to be done remember that Martha herself is the head of this household Martha herself is the hostess it was Martha herself who set the standard it was Martha herself who had decided what the occasion required she set the standard she prepared the menu she had made up her mind what was necessary and now she found herself in a condition of tension oh this much serving that she was engaged in this more than abundant provision that she was making it was all so well intentioned it was what she thought the occasion called for but it turned out to be so inappropriate and it turned out to have been the occasion of problems and tensions tensions within herself as well as tensions between herself and her sister and indeed tension between herself and her lord she had created a problem because she had made up her mind what the occasion called for she had created a problem because as the hostess she had set the standards it wasn't that she was disinterested in what

Jesus had to say it wasn't that she had no ear for the things that Jesus was teaching and that Martha that her sister Mary was soaking up but there was a tension just because as Luke describes she was torn away she was torn away from that place at Jesus feet and she was torn away by the decisions that she had made by what she had decided about how Jesus and his companions ought to be ministered to at this time there was tension which she had brought upon herself there was inward anxiety there was outward agitation what she had voluntarily undertaken to do as an expression of her love for

Jesus what she had voluntarily undertaken to do as what she thought was the proper exercise of her own responsibility as head of the house had now become impossible to handle Jesus knew when Jesus understood Jesus says to her Martha Martha you are careful and troubled about many things now I don't think it's right to interpret that in a general way I don't think it's right to look at this in a general way and suggest that Jesus was saying to Martha that she was a worldly woman and that she had time and thought for absolutely everything but for Jesus and his ministry and the salvation of her own soul that's not what Jesus was saying here of course Jesus has to address many

Jesus often perhaps had to address us in these terms perhaps Jesus has to address some of us tonight in these terms and say to us you're anxious and you're troubled about all sorts of things and you're so bound up in other things that you've no time to listen to what I'm saying you've no time to take interest in the salvation of your own souls of course Jesus has had to speak to folks like that he

had to speak perhaps to us like that and perhaps he's speaking to some of us like that tonight but let us listen to what Jesus is saying to Martha here and let us listen to him speaking to Martha in the situation that is portrayed here he's saying to Martha Martha you've taken upon yourself so many things you've taken upon yourself so many things you're now anxious and troubled about all sorts of things and they're now impossible for you to handle because there's a tension you're resentful of your sister not because she's interested in me and you're not but because there's some good thing that she's enjoying and that you're not giving yourself the opportunity to enjoy you see Martha has become terribly sorry for herself that's what lies behind the way she speaks to Jesus she comes to Jesus and she says to him Lord do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone bitter therefore that she helped me Martha is sorry for herself not just sorry for herself because she's got so much to do but because she sees herself being torn away from what Mary was enjoying and in this state of mind she sees everybody else wrong but herself she wasn't enjoying what she was doing there's another picture and we'll come back to it in a moment another picture in John chapter 12 and Martha is serving and oh she's enjoying what she's doing but she can't enjoy what she's doing now because there's this tension a tension that she's created herself and she's blaming everybody she's blaming everybody but herself she comes and she stands before

[29 : 41] Jesus and she calls him Lord but really she thinks that it's Jesus who needs to be taught a lesson now is it no concern of yours that my sister has left me alone to serve tell her to get up and help me she thinks that Jesus is uncaring she thinks that her sister is selfish no one has time to see that she needs help her and the whole tragedy of this scene is not that here is an unbeliever speaking to Christ nor is it even a tragedy that we have a particularly worldly Christian speaking to Christ in this way the tragedy is that here is one who really does love Jesus one who really does appreciate his message and one who would have loved to be sitting and listening to him as her sister was but one who has created problems for herself one has created problems for herself and she's ruining what she is doing and she's depriving herself of blessing that she could have received and she's a danger she's a danger to herself she's a danger to others and she's disrupting relationships left right and centre she had decided herself how her responsibility as head of the home ought to be exercised and she had got it wrong and Jesus has to tell her very firmly although very graciously

Martha get your priorities right he wasn't lacking in appreciation of her love but oh he saw the danger that she had put herself in and the danger that she was to others and there's a lesson here perhaps we've taken a long time to get it but it's an important lesson and it's a lesson particularly for Christian people because we're looking upon Martha as a really Christian woman as a woman who has conscientious about her duty and there's this lesson and it's this that it's not only when we're neglecting our Christian duties that we're in danger oh we're in terrible danger if we're neglecting our Christian duties if we're not doing what we ought to be doing if we're not recognising and living up to the responsibilities that our place in life or our place in the home or our place in the church or wherever it may be if we're not living up to the responsibilities that these places call us to fulfil we're in danger then but we're also in danger when we think that we're doing our duty when we think that we are fulfilling our responsibility and that was the danger that

Martha was in that was the source of this great problem here that's what disrupted her relationship with her sister and her relationship with her lord because she thought she was doing a duty and she thought everyone else should have seen things the way she was seeing it and she hadn't taken time to listen to Christ and to have his direction as to what was really necessary at this time or we mustn't depend on our own ideas we mustn't depend on our own wisdom to dictate how our duty and responsibility is to be fulfilled at any time we mustn't allow our own disposition to carry us along but we must take time to listen to

Christ to listen to his word we must take time prayerfully because as you were saying it's not just when we're neglecting our duty but so often it's when we think we're taking up our duty that we can get everything wrong and we can disrupt our relationship with other Christians and disrupt our relationship with the Lord himself Jesus didn't fail to appreciate what Martha was doing in that he didn't need food Jesus needed food that's made so clear to us elsewhere in scripture he he needed food he he loved the hospitality of this home it was such a blessing to him and that's what makes this disruption this disharmony all the more tragic and so

Jesus corrects very patiently with great understanding and yet very firmly he he he doesn't reject her although he rebukes her Martha Martha you are careful and troubled about many things you see as we suggested already this isn't Jesus speaking to a woman who is in danger because she's no interest in Christ it's not to a worldly worldly person who is all bound up with the things of the world Jesus is speaking to her very gently and very understanding and he says Martha Martha you're careful and troubled you've worked yourself into an awful state and the only way you're going to get out of this state the only way in which there's going to be peace in your own soul and the only way in which there's going to be a restoration of a right relationship with your sister and with myself is when you get things in proper perspective when you get priorities right again

[36 : 41] Martha Martha you're anxious and troubled about many things but one thing is needful some commentators suggest that Jesus was saying here to Martha Martha Martha you're preparing far too many courses just one dish is all that we need I don't think that's what Jesus was really saying here he was rather saying to Martha Martha get your priorities right there's one thing that is of supreme importance and Mary is paying attention to that she's chosen that good part it'll not be taken away from her you see Martha was angry with Jesus and she was angry with her sister and she was wanting Jesus to rebuke her sister she was saying to Jesus is it no concern of yours that she's left me alone you use your authority and tell her to get up and help me and Jesus is saying

Martha you need help but what you need just now is not the help that Mary could give you by getting up and getting involved in your much serving Martha you need help but the help you need is to get your priorities right and come and sit with Mary you're asking me to rebuke Mary but I'm not going to take away from Mary what she's chosen you think that you need to be teaching Mary and you think that Mary needs to be taught a lesson but Martha it's you who need to be taught the lesson and you want to watch your sister and she's chosen the good part and I'm not going to take it away from her but I'm really asking you to come with her and take time to enjoy it and don't let your own ideas don't let your own ideas of what the occasion requires any longer tear you away from that good part

Jesus I think is using a plain language here he's saying to Mary he's saying to Martha look at Mary she's chosen the good part the good part remember how we read elsewhere in scripture about a good portion being preserved reserved at meals for special guests remember how a way back in the book of Genesis we read about Joseph entertaining the brothers before he made himself known to them and he had set aside a special portion a good part for the favourite Benjamin now it's that sort of plain language that I believe we have here of course Mary wouldn't have been sitting at the table with the rest of the guests the custom was then that when guests were invited into a home the men sat by themselves or rather reclined at the table they would be reclining on couches and their feet away from the table and there was Mary and she was sitting at the feet of

Jesus she wasn't a guest at the table but Jesus said no she's not a guest at the table but she's chosen a good portion she's being fed and I'm not going to take it away she's recognising the opportunity that there is here and she's using it she's being fed and I'm not going to stop feeding her Martha you're so anxious to feed me but what the occasion requires is that you should be fed come and sit with Mary and enjoy her good portion get your priorities right and you see it's a forceful lesson that we all need of course this particular incident can be used to make a special appeal to those who have never learned to sit at the feet of

Jesus so if you've never learned up to now to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen seriously to what he has to show about yourself and your need of him and how richly and fully he can meet your need and that without him you're poor poor desperately poor why you've never sat at the feet of Jesus oh this incident is certainly calling you to come and sit at the feet of Jesus but you see the incident is very powerfully addressed to believers to Christians and a warning to us that even in our Christian duty even when we think we're doing what we ought to be doing we can get our priorities right and we can come all sorts of all sort of resentful against others because they're not understanding us and they're not helping us and we resent them and the only way to get rid of that resentment is to come again and sit at the feet of

[42 : 38] Jesus and learn from him what each situation requires because we can't feed others until we're being fed ourselves well did Martha really learn well we do see her again as we mentioned already in the incident in John chapter 12 it's in the home of Simon the leper and we don't know exactly what the connection was between Martha's home and the home of Simon the leper but we see the sisters there and Mary is giving Mary is active it's the occasion when Mary announced

Jesus she's giving you see the one who had learned to sit and received knew very well and very appropriately when the time for service had come and when it was time to give but Martha is serving too and there's no grumbling the picture there is of Martha serving and enjoying what she was doing there were no complaints there was no criticism others were criticizing Mary because of what she was doing they were criticizing Mary because she was wasting this precious ointment there's no hint that

Martha is now criticizing her sister rather it's a picture of a family in fellowship Martha is serving Mary is pouring out the ointment Lazarus is sitting with the other guests at Jesus table in Simon's house a picture of beautiful harmony united in fellowship united in the service and experience of Christ oh may we all know what it is to be members of that family may we all learn so to sit at the feet of Jesus that we'll always be learning from him what our own duty and responsibility is and be able to carry it out not with resentment against others but in a way that contributes to harmony and to fellowship and to the glory of our Lord and Saviour Amen