

One Thing Is Necessary

Introduction

The Text

³⁸ Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. ³⁹ And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. ⁴⁰ 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." ⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, ⁴² but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:38–42)

I'm with Martha

A. There is, perhaps, no text I need more in my life right now than this one.

1. I'm not the kind of person that's prone to laziness, or apathy, or numbing myself with entertainment, or that sort of thing. But O how I'm prone to work—too hard, too long, too much, at the sacrifice of other people and things . . . at the sacrifice sometimes even of the one "necessary" thing we see identified here.
 - a. How many times have I come in the morning thinking I'm ready to engage personally with the Lord in His Word and in prayer, and in a matter of moments, I just end up doing ministry stuff, "work" stuff. Preparing for the next sermon, or the next meeting, or the next whatever.
 - i. And that moment with the Lord, just me and Him, is gone! "I'm a busy man. Sorry Jesus. I'll catch you on the flip."

B. I wonder (here's a little self-inventory for you before we really dive in): Could what is said of Martha here in our text be said of you?

1. Anyone feel distracted with a lot going on this past week?
2. Anyone dealing with anxiety as of late? You know, the kind that catches in the throat?
3. Anyone lying awake these past nights troubled about many things? You usually sleep pretty soundly, but you're up, your mind is reeling, and your soul is burdened. You might as well be lying under a blanket of bricks. That's how heavy you feel.

C. If I were to sit down with you and ask you, "Why? Why the distraction? Why the anxiety? Why the burden?"—I wonder what you would say.

1. Would you point to that new boss who really seems to have it out for you at work?
2. Would you talk about the struggles at home with your marriage lately?
3. Would you tell me how, since losing your job, finances have been really tight and you're just worried. How are you going to make it here?

- a. We could point to so much, right? There's always an abundance of things we could be anxious about, it seems to me.
- D. But do you want to know how Jesus would answer this question for us? I mean, that's essentially what He does right here in our text with Martha. He tells us straight up why we feel this way.
- 1. When Martha is distracted and anxious and troubled, she could point to "many things" as the problem, but Jesus points to one: "⁴¹ Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, ⁴² but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her" (vv. 41-42).
 - a. "One thing is necessary. And here's the problem Martha: you haven't chosen it. You're not here right now, at My feet, listening, engaging, trusting. And so on it goes."

Where Are You in Relation to Him?

- A. This text is about Jesus and where He stands in yours and my life. Not just: "I signed a decision card for Christ when I was eight. Me and Jesus are tight." But where is He in your life, right now, today?
 - 1. Or, perhaps, more to the point: Where are you, in relation to Him? Are you with Martha, running around Him, moving here and there, perhaps even serving Jesus but not truly engaging with Him; or are you with Mary?
- B. So that's what we're going to talk about this morning. We're going to look really at just two things: (1) The Necessity of It—Why do we need this personal connection with Jesus?; and (2) The Neglect of It—what happens to us if we neglect this?

(1) The Necessity of It

Why Is This the One Necessary Thing?

- A. What does Jesus mean by "one thing is necessary" (v. 42)? Why is what Mary has chosen the "good portion"? Martha is hosting, and serving, and feeding. Isn't that good too? No doubt it is, in its place, and with the right heart.
 - 1. But underneath it all, there is one thing that we must have in place: this communion with Christ. Why?
- B. Well, I'm sure I could have done more here, but I'll give you the two reasons that jumped out at me: (1) This relationship with Jesus is the one necessary thing when it comes to our salvation; and (2) This relationship with Jesus is the one necessary thing when it comes to our success.

Our Salvation

- A. With regard to our salvation, I think here of Peter's bold declaration before the Sanhedrin: "[T]here is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we

must be saved" (Acts 4:12)! I think of what Paul wrote in 1 Tim 2:5-6a: "⁵ [T]here is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,⁶ who gave himself as a ransom for all . . ."

1. There is one "Name", one "Mediator", one way of salvation. If you miss Jesus, there's no other boat. You can't just hop on with Gandhi, or Buddha, or Muhammed. And you certainly can't carve out your own way.
 - a. To put it as forcefully as I can: It is Jesus—His righteousness, His sacrifice for sins, His saving grace—or hell. Those are your two options. If He doesn't pay for your sins, you have to.
- B. Do you remember what happened with the curtain of the temple on the day Jesus was crucified? God gives us a beautiful illustration of how much we need Jesus with this.
 1. For years and years, there was a thick wall of a curtain hanging in the temple that would separate the Most Holy Place where God was said to dwell from the rest of the holy space. Behind that curtain only the High Priest could go, and then only once a year (on the Day of Atonement), and then only if he had done all the proper washings and sacrifices and whatever else.
 - a. And even still he came trembling because if something was off here or there he could be struck dead.
 - i. So, in one sense, the curtain is this threatening, fearful, ominous thing. It's a reminder that even as God draws us near, He is still holy and must keep us at a distance from Himself because of our sin.
- C. But then on the day of Christ's death, something astounding happens. Matthew tells us that in the last moments, as He hung there with the sins of the world on His back: "⁵⁰ Jesus cried out . . . with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. ⁵¹ And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom" (Matt 27:50–51).
 1. The idea is that, because of Jesus' death, that which separated man from God has been removed and we have access to the Father through Him!
- D. But it's the detail about the direction of the tear that I want you to make note of. It wasn't from bottom to top. The idea there would be that man had torn his way back to God—that we had climbed up by our own righteousness or effort in one way or another.
 1. But instead, the curtain tears from top to bottom. The implication is that Jesus, the Son of God, has done what no man could ever do. The tear begins at God's initiative, because of God's grace, because of Jesus's work on our behalf at the cross. We couldn't get up to Him, so He came down to us!
 - a. And that's one of the reasons why coming, listening to, and trusting in Him is the one necessary thing.

- E. If we look at what Jesus says to Martha, it might at first seem a bit troubling: “Why is He not grateful? Give her a break, man. She’s cooking you dinner.” (I wouldn’t dare try this sort of thing with Megan at home.)
1. But, when we really stop to consider these things, this is truly the most comforting thing He could ever say. He is saying, in essence: “More important than you serving Me is Me serving you.” And there you have the essence of the gospel, do you not?
- F. When I was the college pastor at my church in SLO we did a designated driver ministry on Friday nights around our little college town. And we had these bright blue shirts with this awesomely cheesy Jesus fish on wheels logo front and center. And then on the back we put this verse [these are Jesus’ words to His disciples]: “[T]he Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). That is the starting point of everything. If you don’t get this, you can’t even begin.
1. No doubt, God saves us and brings us into His service, and we go off and do all manner of work for Him. But it is not a servile fear sort of exchange, it is one of gratitude and joy. And that’s what He’s inviting Martha and us into.

Our Success

- A. But connecting in heartfelt relationship with Jesus is not just the one necessary thing when it comes to our salvation, it is also the one necessary thing when it comes to our success.
1. Though we wouldn’t say it, often we live as if Jesus is really only relevant for our entrance into heaven, for the day when we leave this world. We don’t realize how essential, how necessary relationship with Him is for everyday life here and now.
- B. With this idea of “success” here I need to be careful. Let me explain what I mean.
1. I’m not talking about Jesus becoming your Sugar Daddy. If you say a few prayers to Him, He’ll give you that house you always wanted, the spouse you’ve been waiting for, everything will just flow for you. You’re life feels like you’re living in a Thomas Kinkade painting, where everything has this happy little glow and you and your friends just kind skip around town singing Christmas carols even in July. I am not saying that.
 2. But I am saying that Jesus is essential for everyday life. Talking with Him, stopping and engaging with Him. Even if things don’t go the way we planned, or hoped, or prayed, we will find we can go through whatever comes our way with greater peace, patience, love.
 - a. Life falls into place in that way. We engage it rightly. We walk with God in it and that changes everything even if things on the outside don’t always change. Do you get that?
- C. Throughout the Scriptures, God is always calling His people to put Him before everyday stuff, not because everyday stuff doesn’t matter, but because He’s the One who will take care of it for us. He doesn’t just care about your salvation He cares about your day to day.

D. I came across one of my old journal entries, written ten years ago almost to the day. And in it I was reflecting on [Exodus 34:23-24](#), a text dealing with this very idea. Let me read these verses to you and then just read what I wrote. [God is giving direction to Israel, outlining what life is going to be like in the Promised Land, as He's taking them from Egypt towards Canaan. And He says this:] “²³ [Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the Lord God, the God of Israel.](#) ²⁴ [For I will cast out nations before you and enlarge your borders; no one shall covet your land, when you go up to appear before the Lord your God three times in the year.](#)”

1. It is here such an amazing testament to the sovereignty of God. For three times a year (the Feast of Passover, the Feast of Weeks, the Feast of Booths) the Jewish men were all to appear before God in Jerusalem (where the temple would be as later determined). This would leave all of the Israelites' land (expressly, the land of Canaan given to them by God) vulnerable to attack from any enemy. With only women and children left behind, anyone could come and conquer as they like. But God, with sovereign control even over the minds and affections of men, promises that “no one shall covet your land” when you are gone!!! No one will come, though they would undoubtedly conquer if they did.

What amazing sovereignty we can rest in. Be obedient to God! Give Him all of yourself, even if natural wisdom would say you are being foolish and leaving yourself vulnerable to terrible possibilities. The Lord is a warrior. He will keep us safe. He will help students during finals week (don't neglect appearing before Him to study). He will help the poor put food in their pantry (don't neglect appearing before Him to work). He will help me with my preaching (don't neglect appearing before Him to prepare). Natural wisdom may say, “If I do not do such things I will in no ways . . . ace my test, feed my children, be ready [to preach a] sermon”... but it is quite like the Israelites in this situation. For while they may be tempted to say, “If we do not stay here and protect we will lose everything,” God promises clearly: “No one shall covet your land, when you go up to appear before the LORD your God three times in the year!” He controls the hearts of men. He controls the happenings of earth. O how much higher, then, is the priority to appear before Him!

- a. Isn't that text amazing?! God says: “Leave it all and come spend time with Me. I'll take care of your families, your land, your stuff. Trust Me.”

E. It's no coincidence, I think, that this instruction concerning three times in the year, comes within the broader context of instructions concerning the Sabbath that was, indeed, to be observed each and every week: “[Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest. In plowing time and in harvest you shall rest](#)” (v. 21).

1. He specifies “[In plowing and in harvest](#)” times here because those would be the two times of the year when you would be tempted to think God should probably make an exception to this whole rest with Him idea. “After planting, well, we can sabbath then, while we wait for things to grow. After harvest, okay, we've already got our barns full.”
 - a. But God singles out the two seasons when you're thinking: “I just can't stop. We've got limited time to get that seed in the ground or it's not going to have long enough to fully mature. We've got limited time to get the fruit off the vine or branch or whatever, before it rots and just goes to waste. I can't stop.”

- i. But God is commanding that they do . . . that we do. He knows that we often feel under the gun, like it's all going to fall apart if we slow down and let go. But He knows that, actually, it's all going to fall apart if we don't.

(2) The Neglect of It

Unraveling in Every Direction

- A. That's what we see here with Martha isn't it? We see what comes of a person who neglects this one necessary thing.
- B. We're not told why she's been neglecting it. Maybe it's because of some breakdown in the things we've just been discussing.
 1. Maybe she's too busy serving in an attempt to build up her own righteousness resume. Maybe religion for her has always been about what she does for God and not the other way around. And so there's this anxiety. "I have to do something, prove my worth, justify myself before God."
 2. Maybe she's too busy serving because she's after some sort of success. She's not so worried about salvation, but she's worried about throwing a good party, making a good impression on her guests, she had her idea of how the night would go, when the meal would come out, how the table would be set. And things aren't quite lining up.
 - a. There's not a surrender here to the heart and will of God. "I don't have time to pray. I'm too busy pushing and pulling for my own agenda. I don't know what God has planned for me, but I know what I have planned for me. And I'm going to make it happen."
- C. Whatever the case may be—for Martha, for us—when a person wanders from this one necessary thing, stuff starts to go awry. And we just watch things starting to unravel for her here right? Did you notice this? Things start to break down in her own heart, in her relationship with her sister, even in her relationship with Jesus.
- D. With regard to her own heart, we've made note of it plenty enough, but she is "distracted with much serving" (v. 40) and she is "anxious and troubled about many things" (v. 41). So stuff's just heavy in here. And it's always this way when we leave Jesus.
 1. If you're trying to build your own righteousness before God, it's exhausting.
 2. Or if you're laboring to get your own plans your own success, it's strangely dissatisfying. You labor and labor to put your money in pockets with holes: "You have sown much, and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes" (Hag 1:6).

- a. You might get it all. You might run down that list. My barns are full, but your heart is still empty. You've gained the whole world but lost your soul. You thought you'd feel peace, you thought you'd finally get to rest, but instead you feel nothing, or worse you feel more anxious and troubled than before.

- E. But this stuff doesn't just stop at your own heart. It starts to spill out into your relationships with other people. You notice this with Martha, right? You see this in [v. 40](#) there: "[\[M\]y sister has left me to serve alone . . . Tell her then to help me.](#)" When you are not surrendered and satisfied in Christ, you become critical and antagonistic towards others.
 - 1. If you're trying to build your own righteousness, well you need to put down others to feel better about yourself.
 - 2. If you're trying to build your own kingdom, fulfill your own dreams and plans, well other people become objects of manipulation—either they can help you get what you want or they need to get out of the way.

- F. Perhaps the most startling thing is what this sort of neglect does to our relationship with God. Notice her accusations of Jesus here. Again, in [v. 40](#): "[\[S\]he 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.'](#)" In other words: "This is happening to me, because you're failing to act."
 - 1. The tragic irony is that, even in the midst of her serving Him, because her heart has wandered from Him in one way or another, she ends up turning on Him in the end. "It's Your fault that I'm all anxious and troubled. You're not doing anything about it."

"Martha, Martha"

- A. Maybe you feel this way. Maybe it's actually kind of frightening how much this aligns with what you've been experiencing lately.
 - 1. Well, let's just look once more at how Jesus responds, and let me bring out something I haven't up to this point: "[41 But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, 42 but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her'](#)" (vv. 41-42).
 - a. Many commentators say we should read a tenderness into the double name here: "['Martha, Martha.'](#)" This isn't scolding, this is loving concern and care.

- B. Do you remember, this is the same sort of thing He does with Peter in [Luke 22:31](#). He knows Peter's heart is swollen with pride and self-reliance. Peter is sure He will never fall away, never deny His Lord.
 - 1. But Jesus knows otherwise so He comes to Him tenderly: "['Simon, Simon.'](#)" It's going to get rough. You will deny me not just once, but three times brother. But I will pray for you. I will restore you. Stop looking to your own strength Peter, and look to Me."

- a. There's not frustration or condemnation in those words but tenderness and an invitation back to the place of trust.
- C. And it's that same sort of thing here: "Martha, Martha. I appreciate your service, don't get me wrong. But your heart is chasing lesser things. I love you. I have you. Let me show you the way of relationship and rest. And then we can talk about work."
- 1. And you know, He's saying the same sort of thing to us.