

Choosing the Right Portion | Luke 10:38-42

This is one of those stories we've heard a lot about over the years. As I've looked at it afresh I've wondered if we made some assumptions. This can often happen when we are familiar with a story, we hear certain things stated so many times we assume they're in the text. For example, do we imagine Mary alone at the Lord's feet? She most likely wasn't. She was most likely sitting with the other disciples, male disciples! There is more going on in this story than we often consider. Is Mary even present on this occasion? She is spoken about for sure, but note that she never speaks a word. Only Martha & Jesus talk in the story. So even though the image we often have when we think of this story is Mary at the feet of Jesus, this is actually a story about an encounter Martha had with Jesus. Luke, Martha & Jesus all have something to tell us about Mary but the story is about a conversation between Jesus & Martha.

Let's go back to my question: Is Mary present on this occasion? You might think like me; are we not told she is at the Lord's feet? Not necessarily. When Luke tells us that Martha **"had a sister called Mary, who [also] sat at the Lord's feet..."** this is not necessarily the same as saying Martha had a sister who was presently sitting at the Lord's feet (even though some translations imply so). The tense in the original Greek can imply that Mary was in the habit of sitting at the Lord's feet... In fact one person who has studied this story in great depth translates it like this; *"And this woman has a sister called Mary, who also (frequently) sat herself at the feet..."* This is why I ask if Mary even there while this conversation is taking place. I don't think she is. She could be with the other disciples. Could it be that she has left home to sit at the feet of Jesus, to be his student - is disciple - & Martha is annoyed because she has been left to serve (whatever that serving may be) alone?

I say *"whatever that serving may be"* because I think we make another assumption here. I think we assume the serving consists of what has been traditionally considered in this part of the world as "women's work". You know house-keeping etc. Note that I did not say that I think such things are "women's work" but that traditionally up until recent years this was so. Therefore many of the sermons & books that have influenced our thinking come from a culture & time when certain things were considered "women's work" & this has filtered into our reading of this story. We are not given such details in this story. What is considered "men's work" or "women's work" changes over time & as we cross cultures. All we know is that Martha is distracted with much serving & feels that she has been left alone to do it. But what the serving consists of we are not told. As a woman of her time she may well have had a business... there are various possibilities.

1. Mary Sat At The Feet of Jesus

What we do know is that Martha has welcomed Jesus. Verse 38 says two things; [1] **"Now as they went on their way, [2] Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house"**. Note

that Martha welcomed Jesus personally... The words **“into her house”** are not in the earliest parchments of this text... Martha’s heart was open to Jesus, she received him, she was open to him! Then we are told **“And she had a sister called Mary, who [also] sat at the Lord’s feet & listened to his teaching.”** The word **“also”** could imply that Martha sat at the Lord’s feet & Mary also did, or it could simply imply she had a sister called Mary who also happened to sit at the Lord’s feet.

Now here is what we need to get: To sit at the feet of a rabbi was to take the position of a disciple. It was very rare for a rabbi to allow a woman to sit at his feet but Jesus did & in this story Mary is commended for doing so. That is powerful. So when Mary **“sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching”** she would have sat with the male disciples – assuming the place of a disciple with them. Mary learned in true rabbinic style. She kept her place; she was listening rather than talking; and by sitting at Jesus’ feet she was choosing to submit to his teaching authority. In other words as Mary sat in the Bible College of Jesus she learned **“quietly with all submissiveness”** just as Paul encouraged the women in Ephesus to do. The ministry of Jesus elevated women to the same level of discipleship as men. Luke is also careful to note that Jesus had other women followers who partnered in his ministry (Luke 8). It is also an interesting fact that no woman is mentioned as speaking against the Lord in his life, or having a part in his death. In contrast he was anointed by a woman for his burial; women were the last at his grave & the first at his resurrection. This is why the early church referred to the women who carried news of his resurrection as the apostles to the apostles – the sent ones to the set ones. There are powerful things being communicated in this story & throughout Luke’s gospel.

Let me highlight something else: The goal of a disciple was to become like their rabbi, to do all the things their rabbi taught & did. Therefore Mary being permitted to sit at Jesus’ feet had implications beyond listening & learning. It’s important we don’t miss that. There is an invitation to full discipleship & ministry for all women here in this story. This is what Mary had chosen. And Jesus is telling Martha that her sister is doing the right thing, & it will not be taken from her, so she must not resent her for it.

2. Martha Was Distracted With Many Things

Verse 40 says; **“But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him & said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.”** Martha is not happy. She thinks Mary should be helping her. She feels alone & in need of help. So much so she commands Jesus; **“Tell her then to help me.”** You know you’re stressed when you start bossing Jesus around. However the real problem is not that she is alone or in need of Mary’s help. The real problem is she has taken on more than she can handle. She has said yes to too much & it is this that is making her anxious & troubled... Martha is mad at Mary for not helping her do all the things that she has committed to herself. Do you ever do that? Say yes to too much & then get mad at others for not helping you do all the things you have

committed to doing yourself? Martha also seems to be angry at Jesus for not addressing this with Mary. I can imagine Martha saying; *“I mean there my sister is, listening to nice little stories about the Good Samaritan. Why doesn’t she put that into practice & help me, I need a Good Samaritan to help me get all this done, come on Jesus challenge her.”*

Martha thought Mary should be serving her; **“my sister had left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.”** Note the my, me, me language. Like Martha we need to learn that life does not revolve around what we’re doing but what Jesus is doing! While we are certainly called to serve one another we must not view one another as existing to serve us – our ministry, our vision, our **“many thing”** that we have said yes to.

3. Jesus Get’s To The Heart Of The Problem

Jesus doesn’t challenge Mary. Instead Jesus challenges Martha by gently getting to the heart of the problem. Verse 41 says; **“But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious & troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken from her.”**

I wonder if Martha maybe felt called to pursue “sitting at the Lord’s feet” but the **“many things”** were keeping her away from this **“one thing”** & she was growing resentful because Mary was already doing what she also felt called to... That is one possibility. Sometimes we need to say no to the **“many things”** in order to pursue the **“one thing”**, or few things, Jesus is calling us to. We cannot do many things, never mind do them well. Another possibility is that Martha & Mary were simply called to different types of service/ministry. When we see Martha in the gospel’s she is serving (here & in John 12:2). We also see this truth highlighted in Acts 6:1-7 when seven men were chosen to serve widows so the apostles could continue to focus on prayer & preaching. Both ministries were vitally important & both were equally spiritual. Both needed men full of the Spirit, wisdom & good character – their service just looked different.

Maybe you are frustrated because you know you’re not doing what Jesus is calling you to do. You are doing many things but not the one thing. Or maybe you are frustrated with others because you expect them to help you in your ministry when Jesus has called them to a different ministry. It’s at this point that we have to remember Jesus is Lord, not us or others who make demands on us. Martha needed to understand that Mary’s life was not meant to revolve around Martha but Jesus & his purpose. We will not fulfil the Lord’s purpose for our lives by being anxious & troubled about many things, but by focusing on the one (or few things) God has called us to.

Jesus has a plan for Mary’s life, but Martha also had a plan for Mary’s life. Likewise Jesus has a plan for your life, but do you know others also have plans for your life. Jesus’ plan alone is the good portion... So do not let the plans, demands & expectations of others distract you from the Lord’s will for your life. Only his

good portion can enable us to serve him & all to our fullest potential. This is a realisation we all need to come to. Jesus is our Lord & Jesus is one another's Lord. We are not in charge of the lives of others; we're not even in charge of our own lives. We have one Lord but different measures of gifting. We are bound together but we have different callings, strengths & areas of service. We are to view each other as serving the Lord – his ministry, his vision, his purpose – not as serving us. Here comes the freedom... to be & let others be under the Lordship of Christ. Let's your yeses & no's be directed by the Lord's calling on your life not by the expectations & demands of others & give your brothers & sisters in Christ the same freedom!

Conclusion:

This story is not about inactivity it is about not taking on too much activity. It's about taking on the right activates – the good portion. God has not created us to be concerned with many things, but with a few things, perhaps just one. It is also significant that this story follows directly after the Parable of the Good Samaritan. This context help underline that whatever this story is teaching us we are not to turn a blind eye to people in genuine desperate need. We cannot reason *"it's not my gifting to help a person dying by the road..."* However at the same time let's not miss that the Good Samaritan was not running about helping & fixing everyone. He helped one person. He was out for a walk & he seen a desperate need, was moved by it & did what he could to help. He was a good neighbour not superman. He was not running about trying to be everything to everyone, he was not running about looking for a beat up guys to rescue every day. No he was simply going about his daily business when he saw a man in great need & it would have been a sin to ignore him. If we are truly sitting at the Lord's feet we'd do the same, we'll be good neighbours but we'll never be everyone's Saviour. Only Jesus can be so because Jesus is the ultimate Good Samaritan. There is great balance & freedom when we put these to stories together within the greater gospel story. There is freedom in knowing what God has called us to. It's not that we never do anything else; it's that we never let anything else distract us from the Lord's good portion.