

One Thing is Needed

³⁸ **As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him.** ³⁹ **She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said.** ⁴⁰ **But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"**

⁴¹ **"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things,** ⁴² **but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."**^a

You emerge from the water after a shipwreck or a plane crash and find yourself on a large but uninhabited island. Circumstances tell you that you and the others with you will not be found. Before you even begin to assess what life will be like from this moment forward: medical help, shelter, water, food, survival, and later on, crops, storage, education, construction, and on and on until you and your group even begin to thirst for entertainment—what is the **one thing needed** above all other things?

It would be a clearer picture if a stranger were dying: "Believe in the Lord Jesus who forgave your sins!" If a loved one were dying: "Keep believing in the Lord Jesus who forgave your sins!" If you yourself were dying: "Lord Jesus remember me and bring me home to heaven."

So whether your life is drawing to a close, or whether an emergency has restarted your life, or whether you continue on in the private palace you call home, isn't the **one thing needed**, the same one thing? Isn't it always to listen to the word of Christ?

Let's bring this out of an invented scene and get into our lives today. Luke tells us that it was Martha who opened her home to Jesus. We don't know precisely when this took place, probably in the final months before Palm Sunday and Holy Week. We aren't told that any of Jesus' disciples were with him, and so maybe Jesus was by himself when he traveled to Bethany to visit this family who were his friends and who so generously showed him their hospitality.

With her very first word, Martha shows that she believed in Jesus as the Lord, as her Savior. She wanted to serve him and welcome him into her home, and an untranslated "and" in the Greek text of verse 39 hints that before Jesus arrived, Mary was getting everything ready for Jesus' visit, too, but that once the Lord arrived, Mary stopped and sat at Jesus' feet and listened to him.

^a I have chosen to use the NIV's footnote for verse 42 based on a study of the Greek witnesses and in accord with Metzger's textual comment. I fail to see why the NIV editor(s) chose the disastrous reading in the 2011 main text, but I will pass over it in order to preach about Martha and not about the NIV.

I think that most of us understand Martha. How would you feel if God came to lunch at your house? Jesus didn't waste his time there: He started talking, which for Jesus was preaching. Martha had a couple of things to 'finish up,' because for her, the point was that she was preparing things—probably a meal and some cleaning. We only infer from the story that there was a meal involved and from the word “preparations.” But it might have been that she was changing the sheets on a bed or washing the towels or some other piece of business that a hostess would want to get done for a guest.

But then there's Martha's question: “Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!” Martha was not faulting Jesus for occupying her sister's attention. In fact, Martha shows a deep understanding of who Jesus is by wanting to serve him in whatever way was possible while he was under her roof.

She knew that “the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (Luke 9:58). She knew the story of Abraham, who had a meal prepared when God came to his camp along with two angels before they went down to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. What a privilege to have been Abraham's wife, Sarah, to bake the very bread God would eat! To roast the calf that would sustain these travelers (Genesis 18:7-9)!

What Martha didn't understand was that Mary also believed all this, too, and Mary remembered that the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

We might simplify the actions of the two sisters with worship on the one hand, and service on the other. It's good to serve God and to show our faith with our actions. In another context, James warns that faith without deeds is dead (Jac. 2:28). But since both of these women were in fact doing something: one serving, the other listening, we can set the warning of James aside in this case. It might be easier to look at the difference between the sisters by seeing Mary as receiving a gift, and Martha as giving thanks to God.

The question is, which one should come first, receiving a gift, or saying thank you for the gift?

When Jesus answered Martha, notice that he said her name twice. The doubling of name in this way indicates either tender love or a very strong feeling. Remember how David grieved, “My son, my son Absalom!” And how Jesus, on the way to the cross, said, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem!” And when he appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus, Jesus said, “Saul! Saul!” So here, Jesus is gentle, as gentle as gentle can be, with Martha. She hasn't chosen a sinful thing by serving him, by opening her home to him. This was a good thing she had done.

But when it comes down to a choice of listening to the word of God or performing some work of service to God, the better choice is listening.

Or if it helps, instead of comparing the two sisters, compare Martha and Jesus. They both wanted to serve something. Martha wanted to give Jesus something, but Jesus wanted to give Martha something.

This is where we run into all sorts of dangerous ground, when we think that what we want to give to God is more important and should take precedence over what God wants to give to me.

What if I am wrestling with a sin, or the sin of a loved one? Is that the time to start serving God, to start doing this or doing that, until perhaps I “feel” as if I have done enough? What could ever be enough? Surely it isn’t my exhaustion that wins a seat at the table in heaven. Surely it isn’t working and working to exclusion of all else that gets me a suite of rooms in the heavenly hotel with its gold roof and whirlpool tub.

This is where there are three mistakes, three errors in particular, which are becoming more and more commonly believed by certain Christians. These beliefs are dangerous because they blow up the bridge between God and man, between the sinner and Christ.

- 1, They refuse to believe in the complete reconciliation of man’s sins before God.
- 2, They consider the gospel as an instruction book for man, teaching him what he has to do to secure the grace of God.
- 3, They think of faith as a quality in us which needs to be improved.^a

Each one of these beliefs is a pathway full of thorns and tangles that might seem to be guiding a person toward the cross but in fact will lead away from the cross.

The sinner who is terrified by his sins needs to know that through Christ we have complete reconciliation to God. Our sins are completely forgiven in Jesus, by the blood of Jesus on his cross. This is the message we hear at the feet of Jesus, not by serving him.

The sinner who is wracked by guilt over his sins needs to be assured that it isn’t his service, his good works, his good deeds, which make him right with God. The grace of God comes to us because of God’s love, not our deeds or efforts. This is the message we hear at the feet of Jesus.

The sinner who thinks that somehow his faith isn’t strong enough or pure enough or resolute enough, had dressed up God like a scarecrow, they have drawn a frown on God’s face that does

^a To learn more about this, see Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, p. 135-138.

nothing but scowl and disapprove of everything you will ever do. That's a sinner who needs hear that our faith is not something that fails to please God. Our faith, the Scriptures tell us, is a gift from God. This is the message we hear at the feet of Jesus.

One more thing. To serve and serve will always end up making us think that either we're not doing enough, or that someone else that Jesus loves isn't doing enough. If that thought ever crosses your mind, throw down whatever you are doing and sit at the feet of Jesus, and listen to the Gospel of what he did in our place. That is the one thing that is needed. Amen.