

“This Martha Is Upset, Too”

Luke 10:38-42

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Earlier in the year, I saw Martha Stewart on a television show demonstrating her culinary skills. She was trying to prepare a meal but the interviewer kept asking her questions about her upcoming trial. Martha became visibly upset and said she did not want to discuss it. “Lettuce is what I want to talk about now,” she said as she proceeded to teach her audience how to prepare a new salad.

This incident reminded me of another person by the name of Martha that became upset while preparing a meal for her guests. She could not conceal her frustration, either, and verbalized her strong feelings.

Jesus and his disciples were traveling near Bethany when they stopped at Martha and Mary’s home. Evidently, Martha was a conscientious host and immediately began preparing a meal for them. Perhaps she expected Mary to help her and was surprised when Mary sat at Jesus’ feet listening to him teach.

I wonder how long Martha waited before she demanded that Jesus reprimand her sister. Did she stew long? Did she try indirectly to get Mary’s attention by banging pots and pans together? Did she talk out loud to herself hoping Mary would hear her and come help?

Perhaps she did but to no avail. Mary remained at Jesus’ feet listening to him talk, so this left Martha with only one option. She had to be direct and bold.

“As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary that sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. But, Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She stood over them and said, ‘Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!’” Luke 10:38-40.

I wonder why Martha did not speak directly to Mary. Why didn’t she ask Mary to help her and not involve Jesus?

Perhaps she did and Mary ignored her. Maybe she felt that Mary would not argue or complain if Jesus told her to do it. Certainly, she felt that Jesus would take her side. Whatever the reason, she chose to involve Jesus and had to be shocked by his response.

“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her” Luke 10:41-42.

Why did Luke include this story in his gospel? It does not flatter Martha or Jesus. Martha appears to be rolling in pity and at first glance, Jesus comes across as insensitive. Luke doesn’t even tell us how Martha responded to Jesus, whether she walked away in a huff or relaxed and adjusted her attitude and activities. So, why did he tell it? And why did he insert it immediately after the story of the Good Samaritan? What was his purpose for doing this? Let me share some ideas with you.

Let’s begin with its placement. **Why did Luke follow the story of the Good Samaritan with this one?** As Luke often does, he wanted to achieve balance. Repeatedly, when Luke told a story with a man as the main character, he followed that with another that had a woman as the main character. I see the same strategy being employed in the latter half of chapter ten.

The story of the Good Samaritan focused upon a believer’s duty to help others in their time of need. We all know that Christians need to be benevolent. However, the Christian life does not consist in doing good deeds alone. Believers also need to take time to meditate, study and learn from Jesus. It is important to maintain a healthy balance between learning God’s will and doing it.

When I read this story, I don't hear Luke telling us that we need to be either Martha or Mary. We need to be both and we need to let others' needs or our own determine who we need to be.

This is why we try at Smoke Rise to emphasize equally education and missions. We need both to be a healthy church. We must never highlight one at the exclusion of the other.

This is also why each mission trip includes times for corporate worship and personal devotion. This balance is crucial as Luke is trying to tell us.

Now, what lessons did Luke want us to draw from this incident at Martha's home? I want to share three.

When you are going to help someone, find out what they need. Evidently, Martha failed to do this. Knowing how important hospitality was in that culture, Martha assumed that Jesus and his disciples needed a meal and immediately began preparing one. Feeding several people without prior notice is always a challenge. No doubt she needed help and lots of it. Therefore, I can understand Martha's frustration with Mary as she listened to Jesus talk and ignored her kitchen duties.

What Martha failed to realize, though, was that an elaborate meal was not the most important thing that Jesus needed on this particular visit to Bethany. What he needed was a place where he could find some peace and quiet. He needed to be surrounded by people that he loved and those that loved him. He needed encouragement and a reason to continue his ministry which was growing increasingly difficult.

Jesus was confronted daily by religious authorities that challenged everything he taught and wanted to discredit him. He knew that his life was in danger and that his death was on the horizon.

Even those that embraced him drained him because their needs were overwhelming. He could find no peace and quiet in the public arena. He had to seek it in the safety and comfort of friends' homes.

This was why he stopped at Martha and Mary's home. These sisters and their brother, Lazarus, were family to him. Their home was a haven of rest and a place to replenish.

The last thing Jesus needed was more stress or someone trying to satisfy their needs at his expense. And so he said, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is necessary."

Sometimes good things are the wrong things to do. How do you know whether to do them or not? *Determine what those around you need and let that guide you.* Martha's mistake was that she was preparing a big meal to satisfy her expectations, not theirs. She misread the situation and instead of asking what those around her needed, she assumed she knew and let her assumptions guide her.

Sometimes good things are the wrong things to do. When in doubt, ask.

Secondly, don't try to manipulate Jesus with guilt or pity. Martha did both. "Lord, don't you care that that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

Martha's guilt-laden demand would have worked on me. I would have jumped up and told her that Mary and I would be glad to help her and then I would have been in the kitchen cutting up carrots and washing lettuce.

Jesus did not do this, though. Instead, he tenderly but firmly rebuked Martha and used this opportunity to teach her some things about life, too.

Perhaps Luke wanted to remind us that we cannot control or manipulate Jesus with guilt or pity. He will respond to our requests based upon what is best for everyone, not just us.

Sometimes what we want is not best for those around us. This was true in Martha's case. To give in to her demand would not have been in Mary's best interest, so Jesus refused to do it.

He may turn us down, too, when we make demands upon him. This is the time our faith needs to rise to the surface so we can trust his judgment. He always has a good reason for declining our requests and it usually has to do with the needs of those around us.

When you pray, conclude your requests with “Thy will be done,” as Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane. Trust God to do what is in everyone’s best interest, including your own.

Thirdly, let Jesus help you manage your stress. “Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her.”

Don’t you wish life could be reduced to a single responsibility? I suspect there are times when we need to be this focused. It’s not easy, though. Separating the essential from the important is hard to do, so difficult that we must have help.

Who can help us? The same Jesus that reduced Martha’s stress that day will help us, too. He knows much of what we worry about is not that important and he will help us realize it and do something about it.

Have you ever talked to anyone that had a near death experience? I have talked to several and each has told me that he or she looks at life from a different perspective after that ordeal. Every one of them is better able to separate the essential even from the important and refuses to get upset over non-essential matters.

Wouldn’t it be nice if we could learn this valuable lesson without having to experience a traumatic emergency? I think we can if we will spend more time listening to Jesus, following his example and asking for his help. I am confident Luke felt this way, too. This was why he told this story.

Again, I wonder how Martha reacted to Jesus’ words. Did she turn in disgust and go back to preparing a large meal? Did she smile, relax and thank Jesus for helping her to see more clearly what needed to be done or better yet, what did not need to be done? Did she adjust her attitude and schedule to satisfy his needs?

I don’t know. Luke doesn’t tell us. I don’t guess that is important, though, to accomplish Luke’s purpose in telling the story. What he wants us to do is write our own ending. That’s what is important. As a matter of fact, it is the only thing that needs to be done now!