

Mary or Martha
[Luke 10:38-42](#)
Rev. Curtis Bablitz
July 20, 2025

You have to feel a little bad for Martha. Put yourself in her shoes here. This famous teacher and miracle worker has been travelling through the countryside, and he shows up at your town, and so you invite him and his closest followers to come and stay with you – because there's no hotels or restaurants to take care of him, and the rules of good neighbourliness insist you provide for a weary traveller in need. And so you're cooking and cleaning and fetching water and trying to organize this great big event all on your own, you've got your arms full of pots and brooms and buckets and you look over, and there's your sister, Mary, and she's just sitting there, sitting with the teacher and his followers, listening to him tell stories and jokes, they're all laughing and enjoying themselves and completely ignoring all the work that there is to be done, completely ignoring that Martha is the only one doing any of it. So you can understand why she'd be a little upset, both with Mary and with Jesus for not noticing what's happening and sending Mary back to the kitchen. If you are anything like Martha, you probably know exactly how she feels, and you probably think she's completely within her rights to feel that way.

And if you are a Martha, or if you're married to one, you might have read this story or heard sermons on it before and you heard preachers talk about how Martha should have abandoned all her chores and her tasks and just come right in and sat beside Mary and listened to Jesus, because a life of devout study and

contemplation is so much holier than ordinary life full of cooking and cleaning and busyness and grime, and maybe you've come away from this story and those sermons thinking, that is the stupidest thing I've ever heard. I mean, if Martha drops everything and walks in there and sits with Mary to listen to Jesus, that's great, but then everybody's going hungry that night. There will be no dinner for anybody unless somebody cooks it, and Martha seems to be the only one who's remembered that fact. We have a very bad habit in the church of elevating clergy and theologians up into this holy rarified air as if there's nothing better in all the world than to sit around reading and thinking and praying all day, all the while ignoring the all the problems right outside your door, all the people in need. I don't think it's an accident that in the Gospel of Luke, this story comes immediately after the story of the Good Samaritan, where Jesus tells the people around him to Go and DO likewise – go and help your neighbours, go feed the hungry, care for the weary, heal the sick, Go and DO all things that Martha is doing working so hard in that kitchen. The priest and the Levite who pass by the poor beat up man on the road to Jericho, they're probably Mary types who would love to listen to a nice long lecture from a distinguished scholar about the epistemological significance of transubstantiation, but dirty their lily white hands on some bloody hobo? Oh, heavens no. Meanwhile the Good Samaritan is a Martha if I ever saw one, he sees the man lying beaten and bloody and he gets to work, bandaging and anointing, brings him to the inn, makes sure he's safe and comfortable – that's just what Martha would do. Martha does the hard work of caring for the people around her, making sure that Jesus and his friends have a warm meal and a pillow under their

heads that night. And all she asks is that she get a little help doing it. Is that too much to ask? Just send Mary back to the kitchen, Jesus, and then with two people working on the meal, everything will go by so much faster, and then maybe they'll even have time for both Mary AND Martha to come back in and sit down with Jesus and relax, with their work done, they can finally listen to Jesus.

See, I don't think Luke tells us this story, and I don't think Jesus said what he said to Martha in the first place, because we're supposed to get the idea that praying and reading your bible and those kind of quiet activities are somehow holier and more refined and more Christian than going out and healing the sick and feeding the hungry and helping those in need. That doesn't fit with everything else we've been hearing from Jesus all through the gospel of Luke. The greek word that Luke uses to describe Martha's many tasks, all the work she is doing, that word is dia-ko-NOW, which means to serve. It's a word that Luke uses again and again throughout his gospel and in the other book he wrote, the book of Acts. When Jesus tells his disciples that whoever wants to become great in the kingdom of God must be one who serves, he uses dia-ko-NOW. When Jesus tells them that he has come among them as one who serves, he uses dia-ko-NOW. And after Jesus' death and resurrection, when the church is growing too quickly for the 12 disciples to keep up with it, they use this word, dia-ko-NOW, to describe the people they appoint to help provide for those in need in the new Christian community, and from that Greek word we get our English word for Christians who serve, deacons. So Martha is doing the work of a deacon here, she is doing what Jesus told his followers to do, she is doing what Jesus said he had come to do, she is serving.

So what's the problem? Why doesn't Jesus take Martha's side? Why doesn't he send Mary to help? When Jesus tells Martha that there is need of only one thing, and that Mary has chosen the better part, what does he mean? And if we're going to understand that, we have to take a closer look at what Mary is actually doing here. Luke says that Mary sat at Jesus' feet, and that is a phrase that describes a lot more than just seating arrangements. To sit at someone's feet means that you are declaring yourself to be a disciple, a pupil, a follower of some great teacher – it means that you are aligning yourself with that person's way of life, you are going to conform who you are to match with who that person. By sitting at Jesus' feet, Mary is making herself part of his community, committing herself to following him and being his pupil, taking on a role that at the time would have been strictly for men. So Mary isn't just trying to get out of a little housework – she's making a life-long commitment, that from that moment onward, she will belong to Jesus, she will follow him.

And that means that both these sisters, both Mary and Martha, are acting as model disciples here. In completely different ways, they both fulfill what Jesus wants those who follow him to be and to do. Mary goes deep with God. Martha goes wide with the world. So when Jesus tells Martha that there is need of only one thing, and that Mary has chosen the better part, he isn't elevating one of those models of discipleship over the other. What Jesus wants Martha to understand – and what Luke wants us to understand – is not that one of these things is better than the other, but that one of them has to come first. It's not about stature, it's about sequence. Jesus wants all those who would follow him to serve others, but

before they start serving, first they need to come and sit at his feet, they need to declare themselves as his disciples, they need to let themselves be shaped by who Jesus is and what he is saying to them. Martha's work is good work, but unless it is fueled by her relationship with Jesus, she can never accomplish the great things Jesus wants her to accomplish. We can see that happening in the story – instead of taking joy in being able to feed and comfort Jesus and his followers, Martha gets so distracted by the perceived inequality between her and her sister that she lashes out at Jesus, accusing him of not caring about her plight. When service gets separated from discipleship, it stops being a joyful calling that builds up the one serving and instead leads to weariness and bitterness and burn out. Martha stops looking at Jesus and what she is doing for him and instead starts looking at Mary and wondering why Mary isn't working harder – it stops being about serving Jesus and becomes a production and a chore.

Every church needs Marthas – the men and women who are always working away, getting things done, printing bulletins, watering plants, keeping the sound running, vacuuming the rugs, sharpening the pencils, all the little thankless jobs that need to get done and always get done without anyone noticing. There are the Marthas who teach Sunday school, make tea and coffee, help with the Monday community meal, visit the sick – all these things are part of being servants, serving each other inside this church and as a church serving the community around us, the people we meet in our neighbourhoods every day. Doing all those things, living as servants, this is an essential part of being a Christian, being part of a Christian community, and we are all called to bring all the gifts we have and use them to build

up God's kingdom as best we can. We're all meant to be Marthas. But if we're not careful, we can get so caught up in doing that good work, serving everyone around us, making sure that everything gets done, that we can forget why we're doing it, we can forget who we're doing it for. The reason we do what we do, everything we do, every worship service, every dinner, every visit, every cup of coffee, the reason we do it all is we do it for Jesus Christ, we do it to grow closer to him, to learn more about him, to be formed more and more after his example. We are meant to sit at Jesus' feet, to proclaim ourselves as his disciples and let our lives be shaped entirely by that fact, and that mission and purpose is what gives us the energy to accomplish all the work he calls us to do. When we forget that – when we jump ahead to getting the jobs done, when we forget to come back to Jesus to be refreshed and restored by his presence every day, then the work he has given us starts feeling like a burden. We take our eyes off our saviour and start looking at the people around us, wondering why they're not working as hard as we are, and we get tired, and worn down, and burnt out. And that's not what our God wants for us. Jesus never gives us a job to do without giving us everything we need to get it done, but we can get so distracted by the jobs we've been given that we forget to come to him to receive his help, his energy, his power, his love, because they are inexhaustible, they are abundant and free, and they are his promise to all those who sit at his feet and learn from him and follow. We are all meant to be Martha, but first we all need to be Mary – we all need to declare ourselves as disciples of Jesus Christ, to let his Word mold and shape us, through prayer and study and worship, let him feed and sustain and restore us. When we come to Jesus Christ, when we sit at his feet as his

disciples, that's when we are given the power to accomplish the impossible, to serve the world as Jesus did, to give everything that we have and everything that we are to build up the kingdom of God, so that as we are loved by our Saviour, we can learn to love him more and more, and as we love him more, we can share that love with everyone we meet. Amen.