

## Lessons in Serving without Distraction

*Luke 10:38-42*

*“But Martha was distracted by much serving...”*

George Mueller (1805-1898) lived his life serving the Lord and serving others. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, he established orphanages in England that cared for hundreds, and did so by joyfully depending on the Lord for all his needs. In 1841, at the age of 36, he made a **life-changing discovery**:

*“While I was staying at Nailsworth, it pleased the Lord to teach me a truth, irrespective of human instrumentality, as far as I know, the benefit of which I have not lost, though now...more than **forty years** have since passed away.*

*The point is this: I saw more clearly than ever, that the first great and primary business to which I ought to attend every day was, to have my soul happy in the Lord. The first thing to be concerned about was **not**, how much I might serve the Lord, how I might glorify the Lord; but how I might get my soul into a **happy state**, and how my inner man might be nourished. For I might seek to set the truth before the unconverted, I might seek to benefit believers, I might seek to relieve the distressed, I might in other ways seek to behave myself as it becomes a child of God in this world; and yet, **not being happy in the Lord, and not being nourished and strengthened in my inner man day by day, all this might not be attended to in the right spirit.**”<sup>1</sup>*

What was so life changing about this “discovery”? Mueller had spent years getting up an hour before breakfast engaging in prayer alone (I know what you’re thinking, ‘only an hour!?’) What changed in his discipline is what he called *obtaining food for the inner man*, allowing prayer to pour out after finding comfort, encouragement, and humbling of his soul through Scripture. As his heart was made happy in this way, prayers of thanksgiving, confession, supplication, and intercession would pour forth. After doing this for 40 years, he felt like he could commend it as a good way to pursue Christ (I know what you’re thinking, ‘only 40 years?!).

Listening to this faithful man wrestle through this is both **enlightening and humbling**. Mueller was a man who **accomplished much in his life, was used by God, and left a lasting legacy**. But what he was concerned about was his **heart attitude** in doing all of this. He easily could have looked at the workload, stresses, pressures, and immense amount on his plate and little time in his day to devote to prayer, let alone to the intake of God’s Word. However, he discovered what we will examine in today’s passage, with familiar story of Mary and Martha.

As we come to this short story, we remember the surrounding context: God hides Himself from the wise, but reveals Himself to the child (10:21) and the demands of love are too high for any of us to obtain, and thus we must admit we cannot attain to them, and must simply cry out in repentance. This passage expands on that thought by what we bring to the table in terms of service to the Lord. The Lawyer thought he was good and DID love God with everything. Martha believed she needed to serve God in her own strength and in her own way, or believed that’s what Jesus needed.

In this we learn: ***It’s not about what we do FOR God that matters as much as reveling in what God has done and making much of Him in all that we do.***

**The Common Setting:** *Displaying Hospitality*

<sup>1</sup> John Piper, “Desiring God”, p. 154-55.

**Luke 10:38-39** Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a **village**. And a woman named **Martha welcomed** him into her house.<sup>39</sup> And she had a sister called **Mary**, who sat at the Lord's feet and **listened** to his teaching.

- **One sister frustrated trying to serve**

This story begins in a non-descript village at a nebulous time, but we know that this was months before He entered Jerusalem the final time, and we know that the town was **Bethany**, which was situated just a few miles outside of Jerusalem (see John 11 & 12 for Jesus' other visit to Bethany). Apparently He had befriended this family (which included Lazarus, whom Jesus loved – John 11:3), and stayed here for rest and refreshment.

As He came into town Martha, most likely the oldest and owner of the house (with no mention of a husband she may also have been widowed), invited Jesus into her home. In Jewish culture, as in Middle Eastern culture today, hospitality is of utmost importance. What Martha did was a good thing, as hospitality to strangers is commanded throughout the New Testament:

**Hospitality is a good thing:**

***Its to be sought - Romans 12:13*** - Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

***Its primarily about kindness to strangers - Heb. 13:2*** - Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

***Our attitude in it is important - 1 Peter 4:9*** - Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.

***Was a mark of mature widows - 1 Tim. 5:10*** - and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, **has shown hospitality**, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work.

This is all important as we analyze what the source of the conflict is in this passage. Martha gets a bad rap sometimes, some of which she deserves, but others are not the point. Martha was an outspoken servant who felt compelled to put out the best for her guest. You could easily see her as the "get it done" type more than the dreamer, the matter of fact rather than the emotionally contemplative. Martha has often been identified as a symbol of over-activity compared to Mary's quiet contemplation, Martha's action driven life to Mary's restful peace. For sure there are aspects of this, but that does not seem to be the main point. Martha's service to Jesus was a good thing, and even her desire to put out a meal rather than Tootsie Rolls was a good thing.

- **One sister listening at Jesus' feet**

Mary was a foil to her sister, the younger who was more bent toward emotion and outward affection (as she poured perfume on Jesus' feet – John 12:1-3). While Martha was the one who got things done, Mary would ponder. In this event, Mary went away from the cultural norm and sat at Jesus' feet to listen. This was slightly shocking but was received by Jesus as she did what God directs all people to do (Luke 9:35).

It begs the question: *Which sister was right?* The answer, at this part of the story: they both were. Neither choice was right nor wrong, but what was displayed in the next section, their heart and attitude was exposed in this situation.

**The (far too common) Reaction:** *Distracted in serving*

**Luke 10:40-41** 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.**"<sup>41</sup> But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are **anxious** and **troubled** about many things,

- **Anger directed toward others**

Here we see what the real issue was. The word for “distracted” meant pulled or dragged away. Martha was pulled away by much serving. You can see in your mind this story unfolding. Martha has guests in her house and wants to serve well, with the expectation that her sister would help her (after all, they were *their guests*). Martha begins to feel frustration, self-righteous smoldering, and anger. She begins to bang the pots a bit louder, begins to mutter under her breath, begins the passive aggressive actions of letting the group know she was not pleased.

Can you relate to this at all? Have you been in situations, especially family situations, where you are in a position of being put out, or having expectations that weren’t met, or where you felt like you got the short end of the stick? Have you ever felt like so much was expected of you, assumed of you, but no one asked, thanked, or cared about you? This is what Martha was feeling, and what came out of her mouth is what reveals our heart in times when our focus is directed toward us.

Notice that her anger was directed toward her sister and Jesus. She came to Jesus to complain about Mary, but her words revealed her anger was directed toward Him for seeing this whole thing and doing nothing about it:

- Why don’t you notice?
- Why don’t you care?
- Why don’t you fix it?
- Why do I have to do this alone?
- How in the world is this FAIR?!

*What emotions were going on inside of Martha? What sins of attitude was she struggling with? Where was the focus of her service?*

- **Anxiety & Trouble driven from self-driven expectations**

Notice Jesus’ gracious and loving response. His use of her name twice was not condescending as much as showing Fatherly care. His concern for Martha was that she had allowed her attitude to shift and led her down a path of anxiety and trouble. What were the points of anxiety that she faced:

- Why doesn’t she serve like me?
- Why don’t people work as hard as me?
- Why is always left for me to get it done?

Her anxiety came from unmet expectations. She made a good choice to serve, but expected her sister to help, or for someone to notice, or for Jesus to invite her to sit at His feet. But no one said anything. She simply was left stewing and brewing as her perspective got small, her focus turned inward, and her attitude changed. Notice how quickly attitudes can change. We can easily start out with the best of motives and our heart can be drawn away in no time, especially when we feel like we’ve been wronged.

*What was Martha’s real issue?*

Martha’s real issue had more to do with **fussiness rather than busyness**. She allowed herself to get distracted in her service, allowed her attitude to deteriorate, and rather than having perspective to stop what she was doing and join in the discussion, continued to brood over the perceived slight to her. Again, do we resonate with any of this? Have we ever let our attitude move from service to complaint? From thankfulness to anger? From selfless to selfish?

**The Solution:** *Determining the most necessary*

**Luke 10:42** but one thing is **necessary**. Mary has chosen the **good portion**, which will not be taken away from her."

- **The lesson from Mary's choice**

Jesus ends this section by lauding the choice that Mary made. Mary chose the good portion, or the best dish at the table. Mary stopped to listen to Jesus' word, to come to Him in child like dependency, and did not let distractions get in the way of it. Mary chose the Word which will not fade nor come back void and could never be taken away. Mary chose well.

- **The lessons from Martha's journey**

But we'd be remiss if we did not tell the rest of Martha's story. Martha's story is redeemable, and that's good news for us because I would venture a guess that we are often more like Martha than Mary. In the months to follow, we see Martha again at the death of Lazarus.

**John 11:17-27** Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. <sup>18</sup>

Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, <sup>19</sup> and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. <sup>20</sup> So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. <sup>21</sup> **Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."** <sup>22</sup> But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." <sup>23</sup> Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." <sup>24</sup> **Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."** <sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, <sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" <sup>27</sup> She said to him, **"Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."**

Something changed in Martha. She was still outspoken, stating that Jesus could have saved her brother. However, Martha delivered one of the most clear, succinct, and true statement about Jesus that is recorded in Scripture, rivaled only by Peter's statement in Matthew 16:

**Matthew 16:16** Simon Peter replied, **"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."** <sup>17</sup> And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! **For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.**

Notice that only the Father could reveal this to His children. What changed in Martha was the realization of who Jesus was, is and who He will be forever. She became a little child who no longer was living for herself, or serving for herself, but did it now for Jesus. How do we know? Notice the scene in Bethany in the days before Jesus went to the cross:

**John 12:1-3** Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup> So they gave a dinner for him there. **Martha served**, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at the table. <sup>3</sup> **Mary** therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, **and anointed the feet of Jesus** and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

We have nearly the same situation. A house full of people, Jesus there, Lazarus was hanging out with the boys around the table, and here is Mary again at Jesus' feet. In the middle, it says that Martha

served, only this time there was no anger, resentment, or drama. What do we learn from this cycle that Martha experienced?

***How do we avoid the same cycle? What principles do we learn?***

- **Service is negated when it is selfishly driven** – This means that attitude in service is everything. When we serve for selfish reasons, we drift toward the belief that God needs us to accomplish His will, we will seek praise and thanks to validate us, and will often complain when these conditions are not met. To truly be a selfless servant it necessitates that we see ourselves as unworthy servants who have done only that which we ought to do (Luke 17:10). God does not need us, but wants us to serve Him, to His glory, and will accomplish His will with us.
- **We take our work seriously, but not ourselves** – This sounds simple but is difficult to play out. When we begin to see ourselves as servants, we stop fighting to validate ourselves, our positions, or our recognition. Martha took herself too seriously so she could not differentiate between good and best, from serving to seeing. When we do not take ourselves too seriously, we can prioritize correctly, being able to drop the less important for the best dish at the table.
- **We serve to make much of Christ, to show that He is better** – This is so often missed in our experience. We serve to make much of Jesus, to show that He is better because HE IS BETTER. That is why mom's and dad's work so hard at home. We do not serve each other, in His church, or the lost out of mere duty, but because Jesus is better. Husbands come home to work after a day at the office because Jesus is better. This week I talked to a woman who's husband left her after decades of marriage because he was done serving in the marriage. When we serve out of our own strength, for our own purpose, for our own glory we will always reach an end where leaving makes sense. When we serve for and through Christ, there is no limit to our service.
- **When self imposed necessities of ministry or life smother us, service becomes drudgery rather than joy** – This differentiates between preference and command. So much of our anxiety and stress comes from self-imposed standards that are created by ourselves to satisfy our own version of pleasing God. Notice in the story that Martha was dead set on serving a certain way, while Jesus accepted both her and Mary's service. We must evaluate whether our standards are simply our standards of perfectionism, or that our standards are ours, and not what God requires of us. When we can differentiate this, we can rest in Him and have proper attitudes intact.
- **When service drags us away from God's Word it has become an idol** – This may be the most important takeaway from the passage. How often have we convinced ourselves that we are too busy to spend time in God's Word, that we have real responsibilities, real issues to take care of to the point that we can't spend time listening to God's Word. It is abundantly clear that if our service to the Lord trumps our happiness IN the Lord, we have turned service into idolatry. (NOTE: this does not mean that study of Scripture ONLY can take place in the morning, or that we try to simply fill our tank at the beginning of the day with Scripture, but that our entire existence is filled with the food of His word which sustains us).
- **Without listening to the Word we adopt a mindset of narrowness, judgmentalism, and fault-finding** – When we listen to ourselves, we come out with the wrong conclusions. We must

listen to the Word to be able to talk to ourselves, to gain perspective, and see clearly what God is doing.

- **We must set out to have proper expectations, not idolatrous ideals** - Martha wanted Mary to serve the way she did, in the way she did, and felt Mary did not meet her standards. When we place these type of expectations on others, we ALWAYS elevate ourselves above them, and we will always be let down, be frustrated, and left with a complaining heart.

*"It often now astonished me that I did not sooner see this. In no book did I ever read about it. No public ministry ever brought the matter before me. NO private intercourse with a brother stirred me up to this matter. And yet now, since God has taught me this point, it is as plain to me as anything, that the first thing the child of God has to do morning by morning is to obtain food for his inner man...Now what is this food: not prayer, but the Word of God...how different when the sould is refreshed and made happy early in the morning, from what is when, without spiritual preparation, the service, the trials and the temptations of the day come upon one!" George Mueller*

#### Questions to Consider:

- **Who do you identify in this story with and why?**
- **What happens to you when you get into a cycle of unmet expectations? What comes out in you? What is revealed?**
- **Do you ever struggle with complaining in service? How about comparison with others?**
- **What keeps us away from God's Word? How do we often justify our lack of feeding on His Word?**
- **How do we show that Jesus is better in our service at work? At Home? How does our attitude behind this service affect it?**
- **What would be different about our service (and life) if we were happy in the Lord, through His Word, everyday?**