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Luke 10:38-42

### “Choose the One Thing Needful”

There *is* only *one* necessary thing. Despite all of your objections, there is nothing you can say or do to make it otherwise. You might assert the need for food, a home, and clothes, a job, family, and friends. Yet I will adamantly disagree with you. And I will be in good company. For the gospel writer, Luke, recounts for us these very pertinent words of Jesus: “But only one thing is needed.” The Lord of life, the provider of all good things, proclaims in our gospel for today, that there is only *one* necessary thing. He calls to us, **Choose the one thing needful**, because you need it now and it endures eternally.

The road is dusty, the sky is blue, the wind rustles the long field grass. The hot Judean sun blazes down on the tired group of fisherman. They have been traveling for weeks, from place to place. It is one long, driving road towards Jerusalem. Just a few more weeks and they will enter those gates, following *Jesus*, riding on a donkey, to the cheers of the crowds; the very cheers that, for some, will become jeers, jeers that will devolve into a blood-hungry cry of “Crucify.” But that time hasn’t yet come. *He* turns aside and enters a small village, Bethany; is welcomed by two sisters, Mary and Martha, to enjoy dinner with them, his friends.

The smell of spicy food, dust, and smoke fill the air of the home, while the shadows grow long in the late-afternoon. Jesus sits, teaching; Mary sits at his feet, listening intently. Yet the bustle of preparation goes on in the background. “Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.” Literally, she is pulled away. She is concerned by all of her service. Any Jewish housewife would do the same: show hospitality to the honored guest, prepare the best. She simply sees Jesus’ physical need, and caters to it, out of love. As God-pleasing as it all is, the gospel writer tips his hand when he says, “distracted.” Yes, concerned with good work, but pulled away from what is important.

As she prepares dish after dish, cleans this or that, passes by that spot on the floor again and again, her frustration builds: Mary sits, listening, obviously not helping. “Why isn’t she helping me? She’s just sitting there! Do I have to do everything? The most important guest of all comes to our home, and she sits!” Any ambiguity concerning her frustration ends as she abruptly appears standing very near to them. Frustration with a sister turns to frustration with her Lord. She thinks she is right: everything must be prepared, this is most important. She even thinks that Jesus agrees. You can hear it in her words. “Lord, it’s a concern of yours isn’t it, that my sister has left me alone to serve? Tell her to help me.”

The gentle, compassionate rebuke arises out of the tense silence, “Martha, Martha.” The love in his voice is evident as the Savior breaks down the wall of her frustration. His concern for a confused believer rings out, calling her to repent for her skewed priorities. “Martha, you are worried and upset about many things.” You are distracted from what is important. Your worry is unfounded. Hospitality is good, your preparation is appreciated. But the food you have to share with me doesn’t compare with the food that I bring to you.

Then comes the astounding phrase, “But only one thing is needed.” Only one thing? How can he say that? So many things are necessary: food, clothes, house, love for God, service to Him. Only one thing is needed. The words pin Martha in her sin. My Word. My care is for your soul. What I have to offer you is the most important thing of all time. I bring you food that will not rot or grow cold. No matter what threatens to harm you, what distracts you, this food will always sustain you. It is most important because it feeds your soul. “Mary has chosen what

is better,” literally, the “good part.” Mary sits and listens and listens. She keeps taking it in, waiting for more. She eagerly learns at the feet of the Savior, as a student, from her teacher. The bustle and noise of preparation, smell of food and hunger in the stomach, all are put aside for now, to receive the best food of all. She has no worries or concerns, only contentment at hearing the Word that is given freely to her.

You have eagerly received the same guest, Jesus, into your home as well. And isn't your house just as busy as Martha's? The chore of homework, getting ready in the morning, putting on the uniform for work, paying the bills, cleaning up, raising the family, teaching class. And your work isn't worthless. No, you faithfully serve your Lord as well. You try hard to be a good father to your children and a good husband to your wife. You work hard at your job, as many hours as it takes, to serve as best you can. You prepare your sermon, do your exegesis, make your hospital calls, visit the sick, non-stop until week blurs into week. You really are concerned with those things that God expects you to be concerned with. How best can I serve the God who has done so much for me? This is the most important thing after all, isn't it? That I do what God commands? That I seek how best to serve him with my whole life?

You do your best to serve God day in and day out, passing by that place in the room where Jesus sits alone. That space on the shelf, where the Word rests is blocked in by the dust of disuse. Until, over time, you forget that your guest is even there. You have to do what you have to do. Sometimes you even forget that you have a guest in the house, because you are so busy preparing to make things right for him.

“Christian, Christian.” Jesus calls us to repentance. Believer, you are distracted. Your priorities are skewed. “You are worried and upset about many things.” When you spend all of your time trying to serve me, you don't allow me to serve you. If you have faith in yourself, to serve me as best you can, you really have faith in nothing. Faith in nothing leads, finally, to the loss of everything: really the only thing that matters – eternal service to your King, in heaven.

“Only one thing is needed.” You need it now, and so do I. Jesus points us to His Word. That Word that we left behind, neglected, while we, with good intentions, did what we saw as service to God. But we cannot neglect the Word that is the only way to true life. “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Jesus, the Son of God who stepped into time to become a human being, to live perfectly according to God's law, and then to give up that spotless life for filthy sinners, the likes of you and me. His ultimate service covers over all of our failures and wipes away our sin.

And it doesn't stop there. Our loving Savior also gives us His promise to work through his Word. “The righteous will live by faith.” “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ.” When life moves too fast and is unforgiving, the Word comforts you, “The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?” When we fall in weakness and lose our way, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.” When it seems as though your service to God is never good enough, his Word reminds us where the real work lies, “Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The LORD, the LORD, is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.”

Listen as the Savior calls you to His Word, calls you to come and sit at His feet as Mary did. Don't be preoccupied about what you must do for God. He has done everything for you. Nothing in this life can comfort and care for us as God can through his Word. Listen to His Word; choose the one thing needful, because we need it now. But there is another reason to choose it as well. It promises rewards that don't fade with the world. Listen because it endures eternally.

As Martha stands before Jesus, He affirms the importance of the one thing needed. He says of Mary, "Mary has chosen what is better." Martha, work and service is important, but Mary has chosen to be served by me. "And it will not be taken away from her." There is nothing more important than that she should receive my Words and take them to heart. I won't tell her to get up and help with making dinner. Those things can wait. What I have to give will be with Mary forever.

Jesus had instilled faith in Mary's heart by the power of the Holy Spirit through His Word. Now he promised to both of these women that this Word would not be taken away from either of them. He speaks directly of Mary, but Martha would have understood just as well that what was true for Mary would be true for her. By the power of the Word faith was sparked and grew and would remain forever with both of them. Fed by the Word, it would be strong even under the worst circumstances. And it would last forever. Though meals and houses, clothes and family might all pass away, God's Word would never pass away.

God's Word itself proves this in the case of Mary and Martha. Walk again into the town of Bethany; again with Jesus; this time four days after the death of the brother of these two women. See Martha running up the dusty path to meet the Lord of life. Then listen to her confession: Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" "Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world." A far cry from the moment of weak faith that we heard about in our gospel. The power of the Word shines in Martha's faith as she confesses Jesus as the only answer in life and death. It is a faith that trusts in the promises of God, found in His Word. Even in the sadness of death, it flourished. Watch from the corner of the dimly lit room, the same room in Martha's house, as Mary's faith shines through a simple bottle of perfume. Yet, not just any bottle, but a surprisingly expensive bottle. The smell fills the air, as Mary wipes Jesus feet with her hair. Truly a fragrant offering in the sight of God, one given in faith. As Jesus had promised, so it is, His Word works faith.

God's Word is the good part. Mary chose to listen to it at the feet of her Savior. Martha missed an opportunity, but obviously not afterward. Both displayed a faith that confidently trusted in their Savior to bring them to eternal life. And isn't that really the point of what Jesus says here? Eternal life. "And it will not be taken away from her." Not ever. So many things can occupy our time and our attention, yet all of them will turn to dust. Our service to God will fade away, and it lasts only for a time. Even our own bodies will fail us. The Psalmist says, "As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children." Like night and day: the material always ends in the darkness of death, but the spiritual delivers into the light of God's glory. God's Word works faith, the only thing that will pass through the darkness of death into the light of His Son.

"But the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel (His Word), enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith...On the Last Day he will raise me and all the dead; And he will give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ." Through His Word eternal life is ours. Jesus didn't take his Word and the faith it produced away from Mary, and God's Word won't be taken away from us either. "The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever." The Word shares with us the message of salvation and reveals the risen

Jesus to us. We can confidently confess with Martha, “I know that **I** will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” Why? Because God’s Word endures eternally.

On an afternoon long ago, the Word of life entered into the house of two women to share His Word of life with them. The Word of life shares His Word with you and me daily. He urges us to look past the concerns of this life and listen, simply hear His Word, because We Need it Now, to strengthen our faith and carry us through life. He offers us His Word, because unlike all else, It Endures Eternally, and is the only thing we can take into his glory. Listen to your Lord, learn at His feet, and answer his call: **Choose the One Thing Needful.**