

Listening to Jesus' Words

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Date: 05 March 2023

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- [0 : 00] Why don't we remind ourselves of what we've been talking about in the past two weeks. So from two weeks ago, Jesus sends the 72 disciples on a journey, and they meet the children of peace.
- Or in our translation, it's the people who promote peace. But in the Greek, it's the children of peace. And these children of peace will welcome them on their journey to their homes.
- And then from last week, the theme of loving our neighbors. And Jesus illustrates his point by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan, who shows love and care towards other people, especially those in need on a journey.
- So there is a similar theme here that ties the different stories together. Hospitality towards those on a journey.
- And that theme is continued in our passage. The opening of the passage in verse 38 there says, As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, they're on a journey, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him.
- [1 : 29] She had a sister called Mary who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. And so there are expectations that arise as readers read even the opening of the story.
- Martha and her sister Mary welcomed Jesus and his disciples who are on their journey. So a natural expectation as we read this story in light of what has happened is that here are true disciples, children of peace.
- Here are people who love and care those people who are on a journey. So our natural expectation is that this is a good example of discipleship.
- We can sort of expect that Mary and Martha would write a book, a how-to book, what to do or how to welcome Jesus into your homes.
- Or we can even imagine Martha and Mary having a YouTube channel, right? Hey guys, we are Martha and Mary. Today we're going to talk about welcoming Jesus into our home.
- [2 : 54] As we read the opening of the story, we can expect some tips for us to do, three things to do when we welcome Jesus into our home. Some action points.
- But remember last week, we encountered a surprise. As we tried to answer the question of what should I do to inherit eternal life, we found that salvation is not about what we do, but what Jesus does for us.
- So we can expect to be surprised here again. So let's continue the story and find the surprise. So Mary and Martha together are being hospitable and welcoming towards Jesus and his disciples.
- But the passage contrasts how the two do welcoming and how the two do hospitality. Mary's welcoming of Jesus seems a bit passive.
- And it looks like she's doing nothing. She's just there sitting at the Lord's feet and listening to what he's saying.
- [4 : 11] While Martha's welcoming seems active and productive in verse 40. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.

Active and productive. Now in case we want to quickly throw judgment against Martha, based on our modern Christian interpretation, because of the word distracted there, it's worth understanding that what Martha was doing was the cultural norm, the societal expectation.

Everyone would have thought that what Martha was doing was good. Being distracted with a lot of responsibilities was good. The passage makes it clear in two ways.

The second clause of verse 38 opens like this in the Greek. As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village.

A woman now named Martha opened her home to him. So instead of using the more natural grammar of, now, a woman named Martha opened her home to him, the sentence emphasizes the word woman by putting it as the first word of that clause.

[5 : 30] A woman now named Martha opened her home to him. It's an emphasis to make the readers assume things about Martha's role in the story.

Women back then were expected to support men. Men were the ones learning and performing in the public space.

Women were not allowed to learn at all. Women were expected to do domestic work to support the men so that the men, in turn, could learn.

So by emphasizing the word woman there, the verse tries to highlight that expectation, that cultural expectation. But also, we can see that social and cultural norm in Martha's own words, in verse 40.

Martha says to Jesus, Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me. It sounds like Martha is very certain that it's her correct duty to be distracted with domestic domestic tasks.

[6 : 51] There's no indication whatsoever that Martha even desires to be in Mary's place. Martha wants Mary to be with her in their proper place.

In fact, the way Martha expresses her protest shows that she thinks Jesus should be concerned. Lord, don't you care?

notice how she asks, are you not concerned? Don't you care, Jesus? And then, without waiting for an answer, she says, tell her to help me.

Or in the Greek, there's an extra word there. Therefore, tell her to help me. In other words, she's saying, Lord, you should be concerned that Mary is not in her place.

many cultures today still have the same expectation. In my family in Indonesia, that's still the case.

[7 : 58] Hospitality is a big thing over there. I remember when my two siblings and I were little and our cousins from another city came and spent the night.

all three of us had to move into our parents' bedroom and slept on the floor while our cousins and their kids got their own private bedrooms and private bathrooms.

Hospitality is a big thing. We would rather sacrifice our own comfort so that our guests could have their comfort. And the women in that culture in my family are expected to be the ones being busy of welcoming and being hospitable while men learn.

That is, they get together and they talk about business and politics. So, this is all culturally and socially expected especially during that time even by Martha.

And so, we can imagine that the readers back then would have started reading this and they would be like Martha is doing a good thing. Mary is slacking off.

[9 : 18] But readers are in for a surprise. They expect a how-to of discipleship full of action points. They expect Martha's action to be laudable and Mary's lack of action to be something of a concern.

But Jesus' words afterwards change our perception. In verses 41 to 42. Martha, Martha, the Lord answered, you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed or indeed only one.

Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her. Jesus commended Mary's lack of action and rebuked Martha's busyness.

Martha's action-packed service is portrayed as being distracted. She's anxious about fulfilling all the cultural expectations. In fact, the word much or many in the Greek it's one word, much or many, is emphasized twice in verse 40 and 41.

But Martha was distracted by much service and the Lord answered, you are anxious and troubled about many things. There's a clear connection here to Luke 8 where Jesus tells the parable of the sower who sows the word of God and some who hear are distracted by many worries of life.

[11 : 08] The sea that fell among thorns stands for those who hear but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures and they do not mature.

So even though Martha is a disciple and the passage makes it clear that she is a disciple, she is a child of peace, she belongs to the kingdom, she's doing great thing, a great thing by doing all the responsibilities she is distracted from real growth to maturity.

And not only that, Martha is also portrayed as being rather me-centric here. In his statement to Jesus, she emphasizes the word me three times.

In the Greek, this is how the passage is arranged. She came to him and asked, Lord, is it not concerning to you that my sister, instead of naming her, that my sister, alone me, has left to serve.

Instead of she has left me to serve alone, there's that emphasis on me. Speak therefore to her that me she might help. So even though she calls Jesus Lord, she wants to get Jesus to help her achieve her social duties rather than getting herself to achieve what Jesus expects from her.

[12 : 52] And so this passage is not talking just about any distraction in life. It's particularly talking about the kind of things that are first good, hospitality is good, and that are socially and culturally expected, but also that boost our ego by making us think that we can contribute actions into our discipleship.

So it can distract and make us anxious. Whereas, on the contrary, Mary's doing nothing in verse 39 is portrayed as Jesus-centric, being still, sitting in a disciple's position, full of submission towards her Lord.

The focus here is not on what she can do, but what Jesus does. She's fully receiving his words and enjoying his presence.

I don't know if you've seen this movie, but as Jackie Chan says, being still and doing nothing are two very different things. Being with Jesus and enjoying his words is the one thing that is necessary.

In verse 42, Jesus says, few things are needed or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better or in the Greek it literally means her best portion and it will not be taken away from her.

[14 : 44] And that reminds us of our first reading, Psalm 119, where the psalmist declares God as his best portion.

And so he will obey God's words and seek his face with all his heart. The presence of God is our best portion. So again, it doesn't mean that other things and tasks and responsibilities are not good.

This is not talking about something bad versus something good. It's talking about something good versus the best portion. God himself and his presence and his words.

And so even though our responsibilities are good and we must do them, when the opportunity arises to be in God's presence, we must seize it because it's our best portion.

when I was about 12 years old, my dad went on a business trip to South Korea for one whole month.

[16 : 04] We missed him, right? We missed him badly. My brother and I used to play with him all the time. And one day he called us all the way from South Korea and he said that he was coming back soon.

We were excited. Yes, dad is coming back soon. And then he said that he was bringing us a gift, a toy. We were even more excited. So when dad returned, we hugged him for five seconds and then we demanded to see the toy and we played with it, fighting each other over it and we forgot that we had been missing dad all along and he was there.

After another month we got bored playing with a toy and by that time dad had to go on another business trip. Often we are like that.

What are our cultural expectations now that demand our attention and that could sometimes distract us from time with God.

Achieving things at work, having kids that are high achieving, good at sports, academics and so on. Now these are good things, these are gifts to be able to do all these things, to be able to achieve all these things, these are gifts.

[17 : 39] But compared to God and his presence, they are the lesser portions. Unfortunately, we often choose the lesser portions.

Great career, happy family, successful kids, which are again, great things, but we often choose them over our best portion.

The Lord himself, his presence and his word. God himself is our portion, who's altogether beauty, who's altogether lovely.

But it's so easy for us to enjoy the gifts and not the giver. Just hug him for five seconds and then we leave him and play with the gifts. Unfortunately, when we get very busy playing with the gifts, trying to do all these cultural expectations and achieving things that are about us, often the first thing to go is time with the Lord.

And that's true for me too, often. Now, notice that the passage doesn't talk at all about practicalities.

[19 : 02] For example, if Martha doesn't do all the tasks, who's going to do them? He doesn't talk about it at all. It could be that the food is already there, but she's anxious about more food or better food or I don't know, something else.

Or it could be that the time of Jesus' teaching is limited so she can serve them later, for now she can just sit there and listen. We don't know.

The passage doesn't include any practicalities. The point is that the best portion has to be desired over the good things, whereas it doesn't seem that Martha even desires it.

There's no indication that she does. And that's the point. The passage doesn't prescribe any practicalities because as long as there is desire for the best portion, the way to achieve that best portion can vary.

Everyone has to work out what works for them and their families. Perhaps for now I can share what works for me.

[20 : 16] Again, these things might not work for you. You have to work out what works for you and your family. But I'll share three things that work for me in terms of savoring time with God in Bible reading, prayer, and church.

I try putting Bible reading as the first thing I do in the morning while I have breakfast with my wife and son. That way it becomes a habit.

When I have breakfast, I have to have breakfast, right? When I have breakfast but without a Bible next to me, it feels weird. So it becomes a habit. And I don't have to choose between breakfast and Bible reading.

I don't have to be like, oh, I have to have breakfast first, but what about Bible reading? No, I do them together. But still, it's not easy. Often, a new rhythm throws off the habit.

If when we're on a holiday or when we start a new job, the habit can easily stop. But because I know that this works for me, I can easily start working on it again.

[21 : 30] Now, some other people prefer to listen to audio Bible on the way to work or while doing other things, and that's fine if that works for you. Second, what works for me is I try to pray while walking the dog or while washing the dishes or while rocking kites to sleep, which might take a while.

That way, even while I do my responsibilities, I can have some time with God. And especially when I rock my son to sleep and then he starts to act up and doesn't want to go to sleep, it helps me to have patience when I pray, so that's good too.

Now, some people need more alone, calm atmosphere for them to sit and pray, and that's okay. That's good if you have that time and that works for you.

That's good. Third, we prioritized church. So even before we began church ministry, we had always tried to prioritize going to church on Sundays over sports, socializing, studies, or conferences, because we think that it's our prime time with the Lord.

These are the things that work for me. The passage doesn't prescribe any practicalities because each of us has to work out how to seize that best portion in the way that works for us.

[23 : 11] Now, if you're a mom, I know you're particularly very busy, especially if you have young kids, and reading this passage can be annoying.

you might think, Jesus, I want to be in Mary's place, but I have to do a Martha, because otherwise, who's going to do all the domestic labor?

mother. But I want to encourage all of us, not just the moms in the room, to not get too hung up on the domestic labor versus reading the Bible, because that's not the point of the passage.

Because as I've said, other things can be distracting us from time with God too. Work, sports, social time. So this passage doesn't only address moms.

The point is to have the desire to enjoy God's presence and His words, but moms can be encouraged that the Bible talks about you and your hustles and bustles of life.

[24 : 24] That Jesus cares and wants time with you. Be encouraged that the Bible says that Jesus is your best portion too.

And time with Him is worth fighting for. If you're a mom with young kids, consider the support networks around you who might enable you some kid-free time to spend cultivating your relationship with Jesus.

love love. And if you're a husband or a grown-up kid or a grandparent, are you enabling your wife or mom or daughter to sit at Jesus' feet as well?

Friends, the Lord is our best portion. and to enjoy His words is a privilege that we must always try to prioritize over other good things.

Even though they are our responsibilities, cultural expectations, or personal achievements, time with Jesus trumps the more.

[25 : 43] Let's pray. Father, again, we thank you for your word.

