

Listening to the Lord

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Preacher: Mark Chew

[0 : 0 0] I don't know whether you have the same kind of experience, but there are certain things in life where you know the right thing to do. It's not hard to do it.

And yet you find yourself forgetting and constantly needing a reminder so as not to fall into bad habits. For me, the thing is having the right posture.

So sitting up straight, not slouching. So, you know, everyone's now sitting up straight. Yep, good. For me, it's, you know, remembering to get up every half an hour whenever I'm sitting at my desk trying to finish my sermon.

But as is often the case, I forget. And so what I end up doing is paying for it, paying for it in the form of a chronic lower back pain and paying for it in terms of costly physio fees as well.

Well, I think similar things occur to us as Christians. And today, as we come to this passage, what it reminds us again is of one such thing that we should keep doing as Christians and as a church.

[1 : 1 3] It's actually quite a simple habit. And yet I find that we frequently slip into it. That is the bad habit. It's what I call the Martha mindset.

Now, the story here is of Mary and Martha, another familiar one, a popular story, actually. In fact, if you go down to the old church, there's actually a stained glass window on the first left in the old church that's dedicated to it.

I've got a picture of it, actually, on the slide. Now, I've often wondered why Luke includes this story in his gospel. After all, there's no miracles here.

There's no big debate between the Jews and Jesus. Over the last few weeks, we've been talking, Jesus has been talking about mission with his disciples. So it seems odd at this point for Luke to be including a story like this.

And yet, of the many wonderful stories that I'm sure the disciples had of Jesus, this one stuck particularly with them. And I think stuck with the early church as well, which is why I think Luke records it for us here.

[2 : 1 9] I think, like us, the early church needed to be reminded as well of this particular habit of not falling into the Martha mindset. So what's this Martha mindset?

Well, let's look at the story. Which, if you look at your outline in point one, I describe as being of two sisters who both wanted to please the Lord. And yet, Mary and Martha each chose to do it in a different way.

Verse 38. 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, who sat at the Lord's feet, listening to what he said.

But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. Now, Martha, in keeping with the culture of the time, was keen to show hospitality to Jesus and his disciples.

And you have to say that that was actually a good thing. Her welcome of Jesus expressed her devotion to him. And we can't really fault that of her.

[3 : 23] Mary, too, was a follower of Jesus, as Luke says. What she chose to do, however, is to sit at Jesus' feet to listen to what he said.

Now, in my younger days, the picture I had of Mary is like this one, a painting from the Romantics, where I imagine Mary as a star-crossed admirer, you know, sitting with her head in her hand, looking longingly at Jesus and hanging off every word he said.

But I think that that's actually the wrong image of Mary. More likely, Jesus was teaching his disciples, all of them, and Mary actually was choosing to sit with them to learn from him.

The phrase to sit at someone's feet is a description of discipleship. And Jesus was most likely teaching them from the Bible, just like a rabbi or teacher would.

So both Martha and Mary were each in their own way trying to please the Lord. Although, if you ask most people, they would probably say that Martha was doing a better job of it.

[4 : 33] But here's the rub. Martha, although trying to please the Lord, is said to be distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. Now, I don't think Martha was trying to make Jesus a cup of tea kind of thing, you know.

She was probably in the thick of preparing the equivalent of a roast dinner for Jesus, for the Twelve, and maybe even more. And again, you have to say, this is probably work that needed to be done.

You know, after a long day's teaching, they had to eat. Who could fault Martha for wanting to serve them this way? But resentment was beginning to build in her, and we can all understand that feeling, can't we?

If we're stuck in the kitchen cleaning up after dinner, and the rest of the family is sitting in front of the TV, yeah, watching, I don't know, MKR, something like that.

And so when Martha couldn't take it anymore, she came to Jesus in verse 40 and asked, Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself?

[5 : 43] Tell her to help me. All that pent-up frustration finally boils over. Now, if I were her, I would probably phrase it maybe a bit more diplomatically.

Perhaps I'd say, Lord, I'm really under the pump here. Could you maybe ask Mary to give me a hand? But no, so frustrated was Martha that she even accuses Jesus of being uncaring.

Do you see? So what goes wrong for Martha? Why is serving the Lord in this instance not a good thing? Well, if you look at the second point in the outline, I mention two.

First, Martha erred, as I said before, because she was distracted. Yes, the preparations that she was doing was important, but she was distracted from something more important, and that was to listen to what Jesus had to say, to listen to his teaching.

And Jesus' reply to her gets to this very point. Martha, Martha, the Lord answered. And that, I think, is a great sign of compassion by Jesus for her.

[6 : 51] Martha, 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.

Friends, I don't know about you, but it's easy to get distracted in life, isn't it? Particularly with less important things. The phone rings, the email pops up, and nowadays, you get your notification on Facebook or WhatsApp, and the next thing, you know, you're watching a YouTube clip of dogs running somewhere or other, or Lady Gaga doing something outrageous.

Or else, it's an invite to this or that event. I know you young people have lots of those, and some of them, you know you really shouldn't be going, but you do it anyway because there is the whole idea of FOMO, fear of missing out.

Compared to all these other distractions we face, Martha's was actually quite noble, wasn't it? She was trying to serve the Lord. And yet, Jesus calls it a distraction because she's neglecting something even more important, that of listening to the Lord.

It really does show, doesn't it, the priority that Jesus puts on listening to him. Of course, what this then leads to is Martha's second error, which was to be resentful towards Mary.

[8 : 22] And again, that's common nowadays. It's easy, for example, for me to get really passionate about some ministry in church or in the world, and then I get resentful because no one seems to be enthusiastic about it.

Why isn't anyone helping me, even when I'm asking them to? Why is no one getting on board? Can't they see that this is important work? Now, let's not understand Jesus here.

He's not saying that as Christians we are to be passive, that all we need to do is come each Sunday, sit here, listen. That's not what he means when he says that few things are needed, or indeed only one.

Rather, what he means is that listening listening to him is something that takes first priority, so that if needs be, all else should be put aside for it.

It's the first duty of a disciple of Jesus. Even before we think about serving him, even before we think about doing mission, listening to the Lord is our first and ongoing duty.

[9 : 27] And when I use the phrase listen to the Lord, what I mean is that we are to be reading, hearing, and studying God's word. We are to be knowing the Bible well.

I don't mean as some think that we need to go off somewhere and listen to extra words from the Lord. You know, perhaps listen to something from the inner voice or dream or something.

No, the Bible is God's complete and sufficient revelation to us. And to listen to the Lord means to allow the Spirit to use the Lord's words in the Bible to apply to our lives.

That's what listening to the Lord means. It's what Jesus promised in John chapter 16, verse 12 to 15, which I've got on the slide, that Jesus promised that when the Spirit comes, he will not speak on his own, but only what he hears, talking what is Jesus, taking what is Jesus to make it known to us.

So we don't need extra revelation, only the application to our lives of what is already said in the Bible. Now, the story of Mary and Martha ends here.

[10 : 38] It's a very short passage tonight, but I want to flesh out one or two more things by asking, why is listening to the Lord so important? Why does Jesus prioritize it over serving him and doing things for him?

You know, why is it that Mary chose the better and therefore it's not going to be taken from her? Well, in point three, under the first point there, because listening to the Lord and responding by faith is what saves us.

That's the gospel that Jesus has been preaching over the last few weeks. We are to live by faith in the word of the Lord. We don't live by works, we don't live by doing things for him, we live by faith responding to what we hear in his word.

And to live by faith has always been God's way, even way back in the time of Israel. So, hence I chose the Old Testament reading today, which I put up again on the slide. Israel was told that they are not to live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from God's mouth.

God was teaching them about the only thing they needed, the one thing, not bread or even water in the desert, but his word, which they are to trust in, including the promise that he will provide for them even when there isn't bread or water.

[12 : 06] And that is the same for us too. You know, it's very easy to think that the most important things in our lives are food and shelter, a job, relationships, security.

But as it was back in Jesus' day and back in the days of Israel, it is really hearing and believing in the word of God that is the one important thing we need in life.

Because in it lies eternal life, not just for now, but for eternity. It's worth thinking about that, isn't it? More important than food and shelter is God's word.

That's why in Romans chapter 10 and verse 17, which I've got on the slide as well, Paul highlights the urgency of preaching the gospel. Because faith comes only from hearing the word and the message is heard through the word about Christ.

People die or live in response to what they hear from God's word. God's word. And so, if you're new to our church, you're just visiting for today, that's the reason why we place such emphasis to reading, listening to, and studying God's word here in this church.

[13 : 24] That's the most important thing we can do as a church, hearing the message through the word about Christ. everyone who comes to our church from the very youngest down in Sunday school right up to the very oldest, we want them to be able to hear God's word so that they can listen to the Lord, put their trust in him, and be saved.

That's the first and foremost priority before all else. But second, we want to keep listening to the Lord even after we've believed in him because we want our ministry, that is our serving of the Lord, to be a direct response to listening to the Lord.

So yes, as Christians, we're not to be passive. We're to do the works that God has prepared for us. But even as we serve God, how we do it, why we do it, must proceed from faith in him.

Paul goes on to say in Romans 14, verse 23, everything that does not come from faith is sin. Why is that? Well, when our ministry isn't a response to God's word, then what we've done is become presumptuous of God's will.

It's something that now becomes something we do, our initiative to God, rather than something we respond to because God has called us to do. Now, I often do that with Elissa.

[14 : 54] I've got such great intentions of being helpful to her. That's my wife, Elissa. And yet, often, what turns out is I'm not being very helpful at all. Why?

Because it's not really what she wants me to do. You know, I don't bother to listen to her. When I, you know, do ask, I don't pay attention. I just presume that's what she would like.

And so it turns out that it's not very useful to her, not really what she wants. Well, that can happen with God as well. If we do not hear His Word regularly and respond to it, we might think we are still serving the Lord, but are we really doing what the Lord would want us to do?

So this is my encouragement to everyone in church. First, make sure that you are regularly listening to the Lord. Are you reading your Bible regularly? Coming to church to hear God's Word preached and taught?

on Sunday or in growth groups through the week. Because that's the first and foremost duty for every one of us as Christians. And then, as you hear God through His Word, that will then inform what we do and how we serve.

[16 : 09] It will allow the Bible to prioritize our ministry. Because face it, as we look out at the world, even as a church, there are just so many needs out there, aren't there? So many things we could do and we can get overwhelmed by it and confused as to what we as individuals or as a church ought to be focusing on.

We have to continue to listen to God so that He will set our agenda for us. Now, some of you who are new to the church, you've come to me very keen to serve and I thank God for that.

I do want as much as many people as possible to get involved. but you would have heard me tell you to hold on and just settle into church first, to establish the habits of listening to the Lord here first.

Even though you've been doing that in another church before you came, it's my intention for you to establish it here in this church and then trust me, once you've done that, I'll be more than happy for you to serve.

That's why as well, I've said to others who are serving that if you cannot be regular at church or if you only turn up when you're rostered to serve, then I'll have to ask you to step down from your role.

[17 : 26] It's not because I want to punish you or make it difficult for you, but it's because I don't want to encourage a Martha mindset in you. It's not a good habit for us to be only serving and not turning up to be receiving and feeding on God's word.

And it doesn't have to be from me, but from whoever is preaching, whoever is leading Bible studies as well. And of course, I want to say that I'm not exempt from this either and particularly for us pastors and ministers, we're the most susceptible because after all, here I am on Sunday and I'm doing my job.

I'm serving already. So I do ask that you pray for me, pray for us as pastors that as we prepare to teach and preach that we are first listening to the Lord for ourselves, applying it to us before we then serve you by teaching.

And if you're a youth leader or Bible study leader or kids church leader, then let me encourage you to do the same as well. You need to sit at the Lord's feet first to submit to the word you are teaching before you begin to teach others about it.

That's also one, just as an aside, one reason why we're going to have Andrew and Jeff preaching more here because as I'm pastoring both morning and evening, it doesn't give me a lot of opportunity to be sitting in a service and just listening.

[18 : 53] But friends, we do need to guard against this Martha mindset because I've seen, you know, I've read history of churches and Christian movements. I've looked at other churches that I've been part of and there's always a tendency for us to start well and then drift into a Martha mindset.

You know, there are churches that start by responding to God's word really good, starting worthwhile ministries really good as well. But after a while, they lose the teaching and the preaching of the gospel and then just focus on these ministries, which was the rationale for the organization or the church setting up these ministries in the first place.

It happens time and time again. And I think the reason is it's just all part of our human nature. It's very easy to just stop trusting in the Lord and then just get on with doing stuff, thinking that we're doing good.

And it actually takes great discipline and humility to continue to sit under and listen to the word of the Lord, to prioritize it, especially when there's so much distraction around, clamoring for us to do stuff to meet those needs.

But if we do that, then we become like Martha. So let's pray that we will not be distracted, that we'll keep reminding ourselves to come back to God's word, remind ourselves, remind one another.

[20 : 22] Yes, let's keep serving the Lord and doing good works, but may it always be a response to God's word and never in place of it. Listen to God's word first and let our life of service flow from faith in him and his word.

Now, just like last week, what I'm going to do is get practical here. This week, however, what I'm going to do is give you a chance to reflect on this passage and then just talk to the person next to you.

So I've got a few questions on the screen. The first one is, if you don't consider yourself a Christian yet, think about this question and maybe ask the person next to you. What do you make of listening to the Lord as the first priority of a Christian?

But if you are a Christian or you think you're one, then second, the next two questions are for you. The second one says, what have you found helpful in helping you not to be distracted from listening to the Lord?

And thirdly, what can you do to ensure that you are serving the Lord as a response to faith in His Word? In other words, all the ministry that you're doing now, how do you know that you're doing it in response to God's Word rather than in place of it?