

WEEK 9
04.29.18

BETTER CHOICES: MARY AND MARTHA



FOCUS VERSE

Hebrews 6:10

For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister.

LESSON TEXT

Luke 10:38–42

38 Now it came to pass, as they went, that he entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house.

39 And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word.

40 But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me.

41 And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things:

42 But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.

John 12:1–9

1 Then Jesus six days before the passover came to Bethany, where Lazarus was which had been dead, whom he raised from the dead.

2 There they made him a supper; and Martha served: but Lazarus was one of them that sat at the table with him.

3 Then took Mary a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair: and the house was filled with the odour of the ointment.

4 Then saith one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, which should betray him,

5 Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor?

6 This he said, not that he cared for the poor; but because he was a thief, and had the bag, and bare what was put therein.

7 Then said Jesus, Let her alone: against the day of my burying hath she kept this.

8 For the poor always ye have with you; but me ye have not always.

9 Much people of the Jews therefore knew that he was there: and they came not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might see Lazarus also, whom he had raised from the dead



FOCUS THOUGHT

There is a critical balance between that which is needed and that which is best for the moment.



CULTURE CONNECTION

Choosing the Better

Working to reach souls in Brazil, Janice Alvear has put aside many important things to embrace that better thing the Lord has asked of her. In the book *Step Up!* by Julie Jasinski, Missionary Alvear explained what it has meant to choose God's plan for her life:

"It has meant being challenged by witch doctors and priests, being threatened by bandits, standing before cannibal Indians, working in a leper colony as well as speaking in public schools and universities of Brazil.

"It meant going into places where male preachers had never been allowed but some condemned me for being willing to go. I had to wade across alligator-infested streams to

reach and baptize new converts. Being a missionary meant mixing mortar and laying bricks to build new churches. It meant performing weddings, burying the dead, and sometimes delivering babies.

"It meant teaching new converts and preparing people for the ministry. It meant seeing a work be born and grow into maturity. It meant hours of radio programs. . . .

"It meant sitting in the conventions in the homeland and listening to men who made cutting remarks about women in the ministry. . . . It meant being different from the ordinary."

In the decisions of life, individuals must choose that better part the Lord requires of them.

OUTLINE

- I. THE NECESSARY AND THE OPTIMUM**
 - A. The Physical Life
 - B. The Spiritual World
 - C. The Continuing Process of Choices
- II. THE NEED FOR BALANCE**
 - A. The Balance between the Physical and the Spiritual
 - B. The Balance between Work and Worship
- III. THE ADMONITION OF JESUS**
 - A. Jesus Loved Both Mary and Martha
 - B. Jesus Reprimanded Martha for Her Worry and Anxiety
 - C. Jesus Commended Mary's Choice
- IV. THE TOLERANCE FOR DIFFERENCES**
 - A. Believers Have Different Gifts and Callings
 - B. Believers Should Be Unified as One Body of Christ

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

Buying an expensive set of china dinnerware, having a new home built, hiring a professional band for a wedding—at times

even the most frugal people may do extravagant things. We tend to justify our own extravagances while perhaps condemning those of others. One person may buy the latest fashion in clothes, another may purchase a new car, or still another may install an in-ground swimming pool. We humans tend to be biased about what we should splurge on and where we should scrimp. The foodie who thinks he has not eaten unless the food was a gourmet meal might scoff at the person who pays sticker price for a vehicle. The imbalance does not stop with material things.

In the kingdom of God, people can be extravagant with their time, prayers, and resources. One person may invest abundant energy and money into a children's program but may be irritated by the teens who only want to sing in the choir and not do much else. One church member may think the pastor should spend more time visiting people in their homes and hospitals while another may think he should spend more time studying and preaching—even adding more services per week. The janitor may get frustrated when he wants to tidy up the church but people are lingering in prayer. On the other hand, a prayer warrior may frown at the janitor's focus

on earthly things and think the janitor does not spend enough time in prayer.

While we should appreciate each other's strengths, a bigger battle might be within ourselves. We have to settle on what priorities will consume our time, money, and attention. We know Jesus said to seek first the Kingdom, but there are so many avenues of Kingdom involvement that we must learn the hierarchy of Kingdom values. Do we wait until some urgent need comes along? Do we wait for opportunities to present themselves? What if two opportunities are available? What if an individual has to choose between a special church service on Friday night or a birthday party for someone who could be won to the Lord? How does one decide which is the best way to put the kingdom of God first?

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

We can see a clash of values between two sisters in Luke 10:38–42. Jesus entered the town of Bethany to visit Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. The three were devoted to Jesus; they were His disciples and His friends. In this particular instance, Martha was busy in the kitchen and got upset that Mary was sitting at the feet of Jesus listening to Him instead of helping her prepare the meal. Clearly, there was some rivalry between these siblings.

Is it better to bask in Jesus' presence or to mow the church lawn? Should one spend an evening in prayer or at a soup kitchen? One person spends time cleaning her house and tending to the needs of her children; another spends time in prayer, Bible study, and going to church meetings. Which one is more spiritual?

The point is not that one option must be chosen to the exclusion of all others. The important thing is to choose the better part at the proper time. Learning the how and when of priorities is the key.

I. THE NECESSARY AND THE OPTIMUM

Unlike clear-cut moral issues, the physical-spiritual differences overlap in many ways. It is imperative that people take care of their physical needs. They have to eat and sleep. Unless they are retired or incapacitated, they

need to work. They have to do mundane chores such as cleaning out the refrigerator and washing clothes. They have to take out the trash. But they also need to maintain a friendship with Jesus Christ. Taking time for prayer, Bible reading, and church attendance is important to that relationship. Finding the proper balance between physical and spiritual needs is the challenge.

A. The Physical Life

God made the physical world, calling it good. Cooking, cleaning, working, traveling, eating, sleeping, and a host of other physical things come to us by divine design. A responsible person takes care of physical needs. Individuals cannot be so spiritual they no longer have to manage their money or put their clothes in the hamper. Spirituality does not eclipse the physical realm; it enhances it.

Jesus Christ was perfection in the flesh. He was physical. He came as a baby who dominated his mother's waking hours (and sleeping hours). In the boat on a stormy lake, His disciples found Him not praying but sleeping. (See Luke 8:22–24.)

Some people become so spiritually focused they can feel guilty about enjoying a family feast or taking a Sunday afternoon nap. Jesus feasted as well as fasted. Jesus slept soundly at times and stayed up all night praying at others. The key is not isolating one from the other but keeping both in the proper perspective. Rather than being exclusive, the physical and spiritual are both necessary and appropriate.

B. The Spiritual World

Unlike animals, humans are spiritual and we have an eternal destiny. This sets our priorities.

We must emphasize the importance of the spiritual in all we do. Paul prayed for the believers in Ephesus that the Spirit of God would make them stronger in the inner person (Ephesians 3:16). We should pray the same for those we are reaching for the Lord. We do want to see people advance financially and have better health, but our most important prayer is that they would grow spiritually.

We should pray for others with the same desires John had for his converts: "I wish

above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth” (III John 2). First, he made sure the inner person was prospering by teaching them the things of the Kingdom. Second, he wished for their physical abundance and blessing.

Peter also helped to put the physical and spiritual in balance. He told wives they need not put their focus and finances into drawing attention to the physical body. Instead, I Peter 3:4 says to develop the hidden person “of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price.”

Jesus told us not to be stressed about physical things. He will take care of the physical when we focus on the spiritual: “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matthew 6:33).

C. The Continuing Process of Choices

Two challenges face humanity: balanced choices and consistency with decisions. Not only must we learn to balance the values and priorities in our lives, but we also must periodically reexamine ourselves to be sure we are staying consistent with what we found to be the right choice.

While we stay vigilant to choose good instead of evil, we must also consistently choose what is better rather than just what is good. Good is the enemy of what is best. The battle between good or better often arrives in the form of now or later. A teacher once set a marshmallow on each of the desks of her young school children. She told them that if they waited until the end of the class, they would get two marshmallows. If they ate the one in front of them, that was all they would get. Out of thirty-two marshmallows, only one remained by the end of the hour.

One area where the now-or-later decision is faced is in the timing of marriage: an individual finds the right potential spouse yet must discern whether it is better to marry soon or delay.

Both breakfast and prayer are good disciplines. When we awaken, which one should we choose first, putting off the other until later?

When weighing good versus better, we might determine that we could do more for

the Kingdom by ministering to the poor of Indonesia than by leading a children’s choir in our home church. However, if the opportunity for ministry abroad has not presented itself, it would be better to invest in the opportunity at hand now. If our calling and desire to serve overseas is more important in the long run, we should prepare ourselves in the meantime.

Decisions in life are often more of an art than a science. The essential ingredients of wise provision, sensitivity, balance, timing, and appropriateness all aid astute Christian living. We must prayerfully examine our opportunities and challenges to see what is good, better, and best for the moment and the long-term. Spiritual matters always take priority over non-spiritual matters, and eternal matters take precedence over temporal matters.

II. THE NEED FOR BALANCE

Mary was criticized for her devotion to the Lord on more than one occasion. A few days before the Passover, Jesus and His disciples visited the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. While the others were eating, Mary came in and began to anoint Jesus’ feet with costly ointment. (See John 12:1–3.)

Judas Iscariot criticized her actions. He said, “That perfume was worth a year’s wages. It should have been sold and the money given to the poor” (John 12:5, NLT).

But Jesus defended Mary. “Leave her alone,” He said. “She did this in preparation for my burial” (John 12:7, NLT).

Mary’s actions exhibited extravagant worship. Some religious people feel it is more important to feed and clothe the poor than to give toward Kingdom matters. Those who think charity is more important than tithes and offerings may be of the spirit of Judas. He was a thief and did not care about the poor—he just used such opportunities to benefit himself (John 12:6). Pride causes one Christian to criticize another. We must all serve the Lord with abandon.

While Jesus taught us to care for those less fortunate, He told Judas, “The poor always ye have with you; but me ye have not always” (John 12:8). Believers today might get caught up with mowing lawns and scrubbing church windows and forget to focus on the Lord.

Working for Him and serving others does not substitute for a close relationship with Him.

A. The Balance between the Physical and the Spiritual

When Mary gave to the Lord, her gift could be given only once. We can give money. We can give time. We can give years of our lives to a career or other consuming focus. Will we give our time to self-amusement or to lingering in the presence of the Lord? Will we intercede in prayer, or will we distract ourselves from our burdens by pursuing some natural diversion? Mary made the right choice. Again.

Daily, perhaps even hourly, we face decisions between the mundane and the sacred. When forced to choose between the two, will we choose that good part? When faced with the opportunity to pray or to play, which will we choose? When the needs of Jesus are before us, will we tend to them or let something else distract our focus?

When we know what values arrange our priorities, our decisions are not so hard. The highly skilled dentist who does not pay his taxes soon sees his office shut down. The doctor with a successful method of eliminating cancer who does not insure her business may have to close the doors. One must take care to establish priorities and balance the demands of the physical and the spiritual in order to have health, happiness, productivity, and profitability.

B. The Balance between Work and Worship

The key to balancing two worlds is to realize that both are not mutually exclusive. Is it necessary to have to choose between the natural and the spiritual realm? What if we could have both? Perhaps we can.

Many have thought we are natural beings who contain souls. Others say we are supernatural beings having an experience in the natural. Either way we look at it, the fact remains that the natural and the spiritual coexist. In fact, it is probably rare when one has to choose between the two. Most often we need both elements working together. Once we are filled with the Spirit, we are to “glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s” (I Corinthians 6:20).

The same Spirit of the Lord that resides in our natural bodies can also indwell our natural activities. We do not have to park the car to talk to the Lord. We can pray while driving down the road. While putting together food boxes for the poor, we can sing praises to the Lord. In fact, work should be a form of worship, not an exemption from it. Yes, a believer must make time to sit at the Master’s feet—to focus only on the Lord with no other distractions. Yes, we do give generously and show abundant love toward the Lord. Yet Jesus did not see it as compromise to eat a meal, go for a walk down the road, or ride in a boat across the lake.

There need not be a battle of values for the young mother as to whether she should entertain the presence of Jesus or do menial tasks. Every menial moment can be a ministry moment. Every secular hour should be laced with the Spirit. Because the Spirit of God dwells in us, all the things we do are worship to Him and “together time” with one’s best Friend. We should not choose between being a Mary or a Martha but have both strengths. Our Mary relationship with the Lord should fuel our Martha service to Him.

III. THE ADMONITION OF JESUS

Although in the Luke 10:38–42 narrative Martha was upset that Mary sat at Jesus’ feet instead of helping her prepare the meal, Martha did sit at Jesus’ feet on other occasions. (See Luke 10:39.) To “sit at a rabbi’s feet” meant to be a disciple of that teacher. Both Mary and Martha were disciples of Jesus Christ. They both had been taught by the Lord. They both loved Him. A love for Jesus will motivate a believer to serve Him.

Martha was the older sister and seemed to be in charge of the meal preparations. She was used to Mary being her right-hand woman, but this day, Mary had left Martha in the kitchen to go to the room where Jesus was and listen to Him. When Martha complained, Jesus made it clear that Mary had made the better choice. What she was doing was unto the Lord.

Jesus reprimanded Martha, not for what she was doing, but for her attitude. She was upset and troubled. She was too worried about someone else’s business.

A. Jesus Loved Both Mary and Martha

By God's design, human beings have different personalities, talents, and interests. The church includes such people, who make up the body of Christ. Individuals need to realize the value of those believers who are different from themselves. Those in rural areas should not despise those who serve God in metropolitan areas. City folks should not look down on country-folk believers. Those who love doing ministry inside a church building should not despise those who do street ministry. Those in the prayer room should not criticize those doing online outreach as if what they are doing is of lesser value.

Each believer must sit at Jesus' feet. Jesus loved Martha just as He loved Mary. Martha was a behind-the-scenes type of person. Mary was the outgoing woman who led many to Christ (John 11:45). Martha was no less of a believer, however. She was the one who understood the deep things of the Lord and realized His true identity, much as Simon Peter had (John 11:27). The insightful introverts must not condemn the expressive extroverts or vice versa.

Pride, or at least self-absorption, can cause a person to want to discredit another. Martha did not realize how unbecoming her attitude was when she tried to point out Mary's alleged faults. When we meddle in someone else's business, we only make ourselves look bad.

B. Jesus Reprimanded Martha for Her Worry and Anxiety

Martha got it wrong on two counts. First, she let what she was doing for the Lord overwhelm her. Even Jesus did not let the work of the Kingdom crush Him. If things got too intense, often He would leave town, go out on the lake, or climb a mountain just to get away. Pastors and church workers may burn themselves out by not taking time to relax and rest. Even God rested and has invited us to rest in Him. (See Matthew 11:28.)

Martha's other mistake was taking Mary to account for not being where Martha thought she should be. No one will have the same perspective on life, the same motivation, or the same purpose in the Kingdom. For example, it does not make a person less of a child of God for desiring to raise foster children instead

of being a missionary in the Amazon jungle. While our places in the kingdom of God will vary, our heart for Him and love for each other should not waver.

C. Jesus Commended Mary's Choice

Jesus commended Mary for her choice to sit at His feet. "One thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:42). Believers must hear the Master's voice. If we live only for approval from our peers, we will grow disheartened quickly. If He calls us to deeper consecration and greater sacrifice, realize some will not like it. Whatever comforts we give up for Jesus, He will reward us for. This is what He taught His disciples. (See Mark 10:29-30.)

IV. THE TOLERANCE FOR DIFFERENCES

One believer should not set a stumbling block before others. (See Romans 15.) We should notice and value the differences among those in God's kingdom. We should not make others feel any different from the way we would want to feel about our own uniqueness.

A. Believers Have Different Gifts and Callings

Jesus created differences in His people. Division is not of Christ, but distinction is. We should learn to celebrate our distinctions in skills and giftings, but we should not let pride bring division in the body. We can be in unity if we understand that "we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another" (Romans 12:5). The Lord has appointed these gifting distinctions within His body. (See Romans 12:6-8.)

Careless Christians can get into conflict over the distinctions in these functional gifts. The person with the gift of mercy may be first to give someone a second chance and to say we must love even those who are struggling. The person with the teaching gift is able to strengthen a church with a clear defense of truth and a desire to see everyone live right according to God's Word. The teacher and the merciful person might get into conflict if each one thinks his or her gift is better than the other's. The teacher might become

too sharp or critical of those who are struggling, while the merciful person might be too tolerant and even let transgressions slide. Likewise, the servant-type person might think the leader or organizer spends too much time planning instead of working. However, each one would be less effective without the other. Strong believers realize they need each other's giftings to balance their own strengths and weaknesses.

B. Believers Should Be Unified as One Body of Christ

A child of God cannot be in unity with other members of the church if true love is not the foundation of everything. Love must be without hypocrisy—it cannot be just an act (Romans 12:9). All the Marthas and Marys must learn to “be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another” (Romans 12:10).

Born-again believers are not only members of the church but also members of one another (Romans 12:5). To the church, Jesus gave leaders who would build up the body of Christ until we all come into unity of the faith and can grow up into Christ (Ephesians 4:10–15). To love God is to love His people.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Balancing the physical and the spiritual is not as mystical and abstract as some would think. First, one must establish priorities. For example, prayer and Bible study are good,

but physical exercise and proper nutrition are good too. Which is better? A scriptural example helps to bring clarity: “For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come” (1 Timothy 4:8). Exercise is great—many Christians need more! However, one’s exercise routine should not eclipse one’s prayer time.

People who love Jesus also love those individuals for whom He died. If children of God are in conflict with each other, they should remember that Jesus loves the other person too. Martha let her personal agenda cause her to devalue Mary. It is good to go to the Lord with complaints and frustrations against those in the family of God rather than voicing our complaints to others. The Lord can help us to see the situation from His perspective.

Many have traveled a long time with Jesus but have forgotten to enjoy the journey. They are worried about who will fail the Lord next, why did that one leave, or why did the Lord put them in this situation so far from family. Rather than studying the jagged edge of the cliff, we should pause often to appreciate the beauty of the horizon. Look at the miracles, the transformations, and the salvations that have occurred. Look at where He brought us from. Look up, not down.

No matter what we do for the Lord, we must sit at His feet often. We sit at His feet by worshiping Him, soaking in His Word, and learning from those who know Him well. ■

REFLECTIONS

- When have you struggled with the frustration of church members who did not participate in something you thought they should be involved in?
- How did you feel when someone criticized you for not being involved in something that individual thought was more important than what you were doing?
- When have you suffered criticism for doing something you felt was extravagant worship yet someone else called it a waste?
- Where does the balance between physical and spiritual often become a challenge for you?
- What are some areas where you can practice more of the spiritual life in the midst of physical things?
- How can you make sure not to get overwhelmed or worried about the things you do for the Lord?