

Reflection on the Story of two women, two sisters: Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38-42.

This is a story of two women, two sisters- Mary and Martha, women of faith who believed in Jesus's teachings but who served Jesus in different ways.

Jesus was travelling to Jerusalem, (because it says- 'He set His face towards Jerusalem') when he stopped in Bethany, a few miles outside Jerusalem, and Martha received Jesus at her home in Bethany' when this encounter took place. It is called Martha's house, for, probably, she was a widow, and was the housekeeper. Though it was expensive to entertain Christ for he did not come alone, but brought his disciples with him, yet she did not regard the cost of it. Also, at this time it was dangerous to entertain him especially so near Jerusalem, yet she did not care what problems she would run into for his name's sake.

Martha we are told is not comfortable with Mary's approach to Jesus' visit, since she could use another hand in the kitchen. Alyce McKenzie in her reflection reminds us that Martha wanted everything to be perfect. She wanted the meal to be one Jesus will always remember. Not just because she is a perfectionist, but because hospitality is a bedrock value in first-century Palestinian village life. It is a point of honour for families and villages to welcome guests and offer them the best the home has to offer. She wanted to treat Jesus the way she thought he deserved to be treated as an honoured guest.

She cared so much about her domestic affairs:- 'about much serving' Luke 10:40), and in their culture, the woman should be in the kitchen -that was the reason she was not where Mary was—sitting at Christ's feet, to hear his word. {it is not that she was disrespectful to Jesus} She was providing for the entertainment of Jesus and those that came with him. She wanted to prepare a delicious meal on this occasion, as she had a VVIP guest and wanted to impress. We all know how it is when we have guests, especially VVIPs, how we go all out and pull out all the stops. She was angry and she requested Jesus's aid – 'Lord, dost thou not care that my sister, who is concerned as well as I in having things done well, has left me to serve alone? Therefore dismiss her from attending thee, and bid her come and help me.' She asked the question in such a way and was expecting Jesus to give a positive answer. The Lord does care, and Martha fully expected him to tell Mary to go and help her sister, but what did Jesus say to her- 'Martha, Martha why are you concerned with earthly things, worldly things? Martha you are not focused, you are going up and down serving, you are not getting it. Martha you need to get it, come and sit down and listen to my teachings. Mary is getting it, she is listening and absorbing everything I say'. Jesus reprimanded Martha not because of her activity but because of her attitude towards it: 'You are worried and upset about many things.' By comparing what she was doing to what Mary was (not) doing, she had become unnecessarily stressed and anxious. 'Only one thing is needed.' With this remark Jesus set the priorities. 'Mary has chosen the good portion and it will not be taken away from her.' What she has done by sitting at Jesus' feet will remain with her. This meal will last. Jesus was not so much condemning Martha's activity as commending Mary's. He was saying that Mary had her priorities right.

Martha's anger was not directed at Mary listening to Jesus, but at Mary not giving her a helping hand in the kitchen, where she felt overwhelmed, serving so many people.

The fact that Jesus commended Mary and had a meal with Martha shows that Jesus' concern was for all people. Life is full of tough choices, and Jesus was stressing the relative merits of good activities. For conscientious people, such choices are often the most difficult and anxiety-filled.

{It is not that Martha does not have faith in Jesus, quite the opposite as she was the one who professed her faith when her brother died and Jesus went to comfort them after two days and eventually raised Lazarus from the dead. (John 11: 20-27) When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. 21 'Lord,' Martha said to Jesus, 'if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.' 23 Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' 24 Martha answered, 'I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.' 25 Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; 26 and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?' 27 'Yes, Lord,' she replied, 'I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.'}

{Then we also see Mary's expression of her service to Jesus-

At some point during the dinner, Mary makes a memorable gesture. John 12:1-3 tells what happened: Then, six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was who had been dead, whom He had raised from the dead. ² There they made Him a supper; and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at the table with Him. ³ Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil. Mary gave this expensive perfume in service of Christ while He was with them. Despite protests from Judas especially, but Jesus commends her for her attitude of service to Him. Jesus' reply to those who criticized her for what she did was: 'Let her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a good work for Me. ⁷ For you have the poor with you always, and whenever you wish you may do them good; but Me you do not have always. ⁸ **She has done what she could.**' She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial. Jesus praised Mary for doing what she could.} She played her role, though she may not have known the significance of what she did by anointing Him with oil for His burial.

Christian friends, '**I wonder, when does one stop serving, to benefit from listening?** People have served, to their fullest, have sacrificed time, resources, only to burn out, lose families and friends etc. in the name of serving the church. There is a fine line between the two examples. Finding a proper balance is critical, otherwise two things will happen - 1) one will become discouraged from over serving, 2) one will become bitter because others are not helping to carry the load. Neither option is desirable, so we MUST balance the two examples of (Mary and Martha)'.

In summary,-in these accounts Martha comes across as a practical, blunt person, while Mary is more unconventional and contemplative. The sisters' division of labour here in Luke 10:38-42 mirrors John 12 where Martha is the one who serves the meal while Mary focuses on giving Jesus an extravagant anointing (Martha seems to be the hostess in the home, the decision maker in the household).

She 'welcomed Jesus into her home' (Lk 10:38) but then her attention became distracted (v. 40), from Jesus by her multiple duties.

'I don't read this story as Jesus elevating one aspect of the life of discipleship over another, discounting the need for outer preparations and exclusively commending the inward life. In his remarks to Martha (v. 41) he is not chastising her for making preparations. He is suggesting she focuses on the **purpose** of those preparations and therefore simplify them'. [Alyce McKenzie: Keep it simple: Reflections on Mary and Martha].

Sisters we need to be still and listen for the voice of God, in this busy world of ours where we are so busy multitasking every day. God wants us to learn to care and love one another, be our sisters' keepers and help make this world a better place for everybody. Amen.

Matilda Johnson, World Vice-President

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Sources consulted: Alyce McKenzie: Keep it simple: Reflections on Mary and Martha.

Elizabeth Johnson: Commentary on Luke 10: 34-42

Looking to Jesus: Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42) in IVP New Testament Commentary Series