

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village... The passage here just says that Jesus entered a village. The village is not named. You would assume upon reading this that the village is any one of countless villages in Palestine in Jesus' day, but actually we have a pretty good guess as to which village this is. As we shall see, this is the village where Mary and Martha live, and other passages in the New Testament inform us that Mary and Martha lived in the town of Bethany. Since people did not move very frequently in those days, it seems a pretty safe conclusion that the village of this story is Bethany.

Bethany was a village a couple of miles southeast of Jerusalem. Since it is called a village, we are pretty certain that it would have been small with a population of maybe a few hundred. It would not have had walls surrounding it. It would have been a collection of houses surrounded by agricultural land of some sort, like grainfields, pastures, and/or olive groves. It was strategically placed on the major road from Jericho to Jerusalem, and being a short walk from Jerusalem it might have been a little more prosperous than your average village. Also, it is possible that travelers to Jerusalem might prefer to stay in quieter Bethany, rather than in busy Jerusalem.

From various hints that we pick up in the Gospels, it appears that Jesus himself would frequently stay in Bethany when he was visiting Jerusalem. And that is what happened here. Vs. 38 continues: **And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house.** Martha welcomed Jesus into her house. The fact that this is her house implies that Martha was a widow or a spinster. We believe that this house at one time belonged to Simon the leper who might have been her husband or her father. We are pretty certain that Mary and Martha were relatively wealthy due to the fact that Mary owned at least one jar of very expensive perfume. Most commentators think that when Jesus visited Jerusalem he made a habit of staying in the home of Mary and Martha. If they were wealthy, they could afford to feed and house Jesus and twelve disciples. Also, Jesus struck up quite a friendship with Mary, Martha, and their brother Lazarus.

So here in this passage Jesus is falling in line with his normal practice of eating and probably staying in Martha's house. We do not know when this event took place. We know that Luke and the other Gospels do not always relate events in chronological order, as that was not their intent. My impression from reading this story is that Jesus is already good friends with Mary and Martha but this is one of the first times that he has visited with them in their home. Remember, that is just my impression.

I feel like there is another background detail that I need to give you before we move on, and that is the importance of hospitality. This is difficult for us to understand in our day in America. We like to think of our homes as our private castles. We may invite people into our homes on occasion, but for the most part, we retreat into our homes in order to block out the rest of the world. In Palestine in Jesus' day, and in fact in much of the Middle East today, hospitality was one of their highest moral standards. There are many reasons for this. One of the main reasons is that there were very few hotels. The only place for travelers to stay was in someone else's home. Therefore, it was considered to be an obligation to take in strangers to stay in your house. In fact, it was more than an obligation, it was an honor. They would have considered it an honor to house and feed even the lowliest of travelers, but it would have been an even greater honor to welcome the likes of the miracle-working rabbi Jesus. Since Martha and Mary were rich homeowners in the town of Bethany on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem, they may have had frequent guests, but they may have considered Jesus to be the greatest guest they had ever received. Keep all of that in mind as the story unfolds.

So Martha has invited Jesus to dine and probably to stay the night in her house. Martha is not alone. Look at verse 39: **And she had a sister called Mary...** This Mary is not Mary the mother of Jesus, or Mary

Magdalene, or any of the other Marys. This Mary is identified as being the sister of Martha and Lazarus and as a resident of Bethany. In this story we find Mary doing something unusual. Look back at verse 39: **And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching.** The picture here is of Jesus sitting on some kind of raised piece of furniture, maybe a chair or a stool or a bench, and Mary is sitting at his feet listening to him speak. This is an image associated with Jewish rabbis of Jesus' day. A rabbi would gather a group of disciples, who were his students and followers. He would sit in an elevated position, and they would sit on the ground or the floor at his feet and listen to his teaching. Now in the translation I am using it says that Mary **listened to his teaching.** You may have something a little different. It may say that she was listening to his word or to what he was saying. The point here is that Jesus was not making casual conversation. The words he was speaking were his teaching, his message. And there is Mary, sitting at his feet drinking it all in. You may not see what is so unusual about this picture. It sounds pretty good to us. What is unusual is that Mary is a woman. Most likely it was not customary for rabbis to take female disciples. Mary was going against the standards of propriety of the time.

There is another reason that this is unusual, as we see in the next verse, verse 40: **But Martha was distracted with much serving...** Martha is not able to pay much attention to what Jesus is saying. Jesus is too preoccupied with serving. By "serving" the text means that she is preparing the meal. It says she is distracted by "much" serving. She may have been feeding all of the disciples as well as Jesus. Also, as we have said, it seems that Martha was wealthy, so she may have been pulling out all the stops for her honored guest. Perhaps she was not going to serve the great Jesus simple fare of bread and cheese. Maybe she was preparing a multi-course feast. It is understandable that she would be so busy.

And this is why Mary's actions are so unusual. Women stereotypically were not supposed to be listening to the men talk. The women were supposed to be making the meal. And remember, hospitality was extremely important. This is a big deal for Mary and Martha, and Mary is not helping. Anyone reading the Gospel of Luke in the first century AD would have been slightly dismayed. What was Mary thinking? And poor Martha is left to do all of the preparations by herself.

In fact, this is how Martha feels, and she eventually cannot keep her opinion to herself. She comes up to Jesus. Verse 40 says **and she went up to him.** As a side note this is another contrast between Mary and Martha. The text says literally that Mary was sitting beside Jesus. The word here for Martha going to Jesus or coming to Jesus literally means that she came up and stood beside him. Mary is sitting beside Jesus, and Martha is standing beside Jesus. I leave you to ponder what the significance is of their difference in posture.

So Martha comes up to Jesus. Verse 30 continues: **and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me."** Clearly Martha is upset, irritated, and even offended by what Mary has done. Mary is a woman. She is supposed to be helping with the preparations. Mary even seems to live in the house. This is Mary's home. Mary should be helping. Hospitality is very important to them morally. Mary is breaking the accepted moral code of her day. The preparations for their guest are extensive. There is a lot to do. Martha needs the help. Not only that, Mary is Martha's sister. If anyone should be helping with the preparations it should be Mary. Martha is doing what needs to be done. Martha is doing what she is supposed to be doing. What Mary is doing is entirely unacceptable. In fact, Martha probably believes that what Mary is doing is morally wrong.

Notice how Martha feels. She says **my sister has left me to serve alone.** She feels abandoned. She feels overwhelmed. She feels put upon. She's trapped. She's stuck doing all of the work herself. Notice how

she approaches Jesus. She says **do you not care?** Lord, are you oblivious? Can't you see what is happening? Don't you see the impropriety here? Can't you see how I am being treated unfairly? And if you have noticed, don't you care? The way she asks the question she assumes that Jesus agrees with her point of view. She assumes that Jesus of course thinks that Mary should be helping with the meal rather than sitting at his feet. So she asks Jesus, **Tell her then to help me.** It's almost like she is saying that Jesus is part of the problem, so he needs to be part of the solution. Jesus, you're distracting her from her duties. You're allowing Mary to just sit there. Mary is only sitting there because you are letting her. Please, use your influence to get her to do the right thing. Please tell her to help me. The way that Martha has phrased this request she has given Jesus no other option. She assumes that Jesus agrees with her assessment of the situation, and she presumes that Jesus will instruct Mary to do the right thing.

I am sure that she was very surprised by Jesus' answer. Look at verses 41-42: **But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; but one thing is necessary.** Instead of speaking to Mary, Jesus speaks to Martha. He says her name twice, probably indicating kind and patient affection. This is not a harsh rebuke. It is a kind rebuke. But strangely enough, it is still a rebuke. Instead of scolding Mary, Jesus seems to scold Martha. He points out that she is anxious and troubled. She is troubled by many things. She is getting too carried away with her preparations. She is making it into too much of a production. She's making it too complicated. Then most of your Bibles have Jesus saying something like **one thing is needful** or **one thing is necessary**, but if you look at your margin you will see that there are other ways to read this. For instance the newest edition of the NIV says, **"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed--or indeed only one.** Scholars are unsure as to the best way to read this. Most settle on the shorter version, but in the end it does not make a huge difference. The point is that Martha was running around doing too much, instead of focusing on what really mattered.

So not only does Jesus rebuke Martha instead of Mary, he commends Mary instead of Martha. He was supposed to get Mary in trouble, but instead he gets Martha in trouble. He was supposed to praise Martha, but instead he praises Mary. Look what he says in verse 42: **Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.** He says that Mary has chosen the good portion. What does he mean by this? Well, for one thing, when he says that the portion is the "good" portion he means the better or the best portion. Sort of like when you have company over and you offer them the "good" chair. You mean that you want them to have the best chair.

So Mary has chosen the best portion. But what does he mean by "portion," a portion of what? It could mean that Mary has chosen the best part of the hostess duties. Martha took the serving, and Mary took the entertaining. But that is probably not entirely what this means. The word for "portion" can refer to a lot of different things, and Luke is using it here as a kind of play on words. For instance, "portion" can refer to a portion of a meal. Here they all are waiting to eat dinner, and Mary has chosen the best portion of the meal – a portion that is not actually food at all. "Portion" can refer to a portion of a sacrifice. Perhaps Jesus is saying that Mary's actions are a better offering than Martha's, but that is doubtful. Perhaps the most common use of the word "portion" is to refer to a portion of an inheritance or an inherited piece of land. Jesus is giving a metaphor that of all of the inheritance, Mary and Martha had a chance to choose their portions. Mary has chosen a better portion than Martha.

Not only has Mary chosen the best portion, but Jesus says that it will not be taken away from her. He is not going to take this portion away from her, and neither will anyone else. She has made a good choice,

and she will reap the rewards. The implication is that Martha has made a poor choice, and she will have to live with the choice that she has made.

But what is Jesus really saying here? His response to Martha is not very straightforward. It is kind of mysterious and cryptic. He doesn't explain himself in detail, and Luke doesn't offer us any further explanation either. The story ends here. What were the reactions of Mary and Martha? What else happened? We don't know. It's all a big mystery. And that is the point. It was the way rabbis taught back in that day. They would kind of teach in riddles. You had to work your brain. You had to think about what they said. The process of thinking about it was just as rewarding as arriving at the answer.

So, let's think about it for a little bit. What is Jesus' message to Martha, and what is his message to us today? And this is where I am going to get into trouble with the homemakers, hosts and hostesses, and cooks in the congregation. After all, you've all had this experience, right? If you have guests at your house and you are the cook for the meal, it is almost guaranteed that you have been in this exact same situation. You are out in the kitchen and the dining room, slaving away, making food, setting the table, pouring drinks, laying out appetizers, etc., etc. But where is everyone else in the house, they are out in the living room, sitting around on comfy chairs and couches, yakking away. You are sweating over a hot stove; they are sipping cold drinks. You are getting increasingly frustrated.

So let me start out with some reassurances here as to what Jesus is not saying. Jesus is not saying that hospitality is bad. He is not telling Martha to give up practicing hospitality. Throughout the New Testament the practice of hospitality is encouraged and even commanded. We are supposed to be having each other over for dinner. In fact, one of the main purposes of the book of 3 John is to instruct us to especially be quick to open our homes to traveling preachers like Jesus. We should be jumping at opportunities to have missionaries and guest speakers staying in our houses. So Jesus is not down on hospitality.

Jesus is not saying that we should quit serving others. In verse 40 the word for "serving" is mentioned twice in reference to what Martha was doing. Martha was serving. And the New Testament says everywhere that we are to be servants. We are to serve one another. Jesus himself says that he did not come to be served but to serve. He came as a servant, and he expects all of us to follow his example. Look at the passage right before this one. It is the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus praises a Samaritan man for helping out the victim of a violent robbery. The Samaritan binds the man's wounds. He feeds him. He provides for him. Jesus wants us to be loving and serving one another. So Jesus is not down on service.

Jesus is also not promoting laziness. He is not saying that we should all be spending our lives as couch potatoes, doing nothing productive or helpful. The book of Proverbs is full of sayings condemning laziness. Go to the ant you sluggard, and the like. Paul says He who does not work, neither shall he eat. He also says that instead of stealing we should work hard so that we have enough to share with others. He says that widows should not be idle and that young wives should be busy at home. The Proverbs 31 woman sounds an awful lot like Martha. So Jesus is not against hard work. Jesus is in favor of hard work, and he is against laziness.

Jesus is also not promoting spiritual laziness. A lot of people love the saying, "Let go, and let God." Now there is nothing wrong with that saying when used properly. Oftentimes we try to do the things that are supposed to be left up to God. We are too controlling. We interfere in God's business. But oftentimes the saying "Let go, and let God," is used to justify spiritual laziness. I don't want to take action. I don't

want to actually have to do something, so I am just going to let God take care of it. And people sometimes use this passage here to support spiritual laziness. I am not going to help out around the church, because I am more of a Mary than a Martha. I just like to sit around and be all spiritual and pious. I don't want to do anything. I just want to feel good about myself. I want to sing songs and read the Bible and talk to people and be super saintly and holy.

But the New Testament teaches that we are supposed to be spiritually active. James tells us that Faith without works is dead. John tells us that we should not just love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. Paul tells us to not grow weary in doing good. The author of Hebrews says that we must spur each other on to love and good deeds. We are supposed to be very active in our faith. You cannot follow Jesus by sitting in a pew only. You have to do things. So Jesus is not praising Mary for spiritual laziness.

So what is Jesus saying? I think that there is a lot that we could draw out of this passage, but I will mention the things that are most clear and most significant. First, Jesus seems to pretty clearly rebuke Martha for her attitude and her mental state. Look again at what he says in verse 41: **Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled...** Martha is anxious. She is worried. We are often commanded in Scripture not to worry or be anxious. Worry is the opposite of faith. I like to think of worry as active unbelief. When we are worrying it is like we are saying over and over in our brains, "God's not going to take care of this. God can't take care of this. God's not in control." Martha was worried. She was worried that the lamb was going to overcook and dry out before the barley loaves had time to finish baking. She was worried that she didn't have enough clay bowls for the first course. She was worried that the fish might be starting to go bad. Instead of trusting God, she was worried. And look at her sister Mary. Mary does not seem to be concerned in the slightest. Mary is not anxious. Instead of worrying, Mary is displaying childlike faith, sitting at the feet of Jesus.

Jesus says that Martha is troubled. In verse 40 it says that Martha was distracted. She is preoccupied. Her mind is on other things. Jesus says that she is in this state of distraction for two reasons. First, she is distracted because she is doing too many things. Verse 40 says that she was distracted by much serving. Jesus says in verse 41 that she is troubled by many things. She is doing too much. She is going overboard. Perhaps she could have made a simpler meal. I got to thinking of a Superbowl party. At a Superbowl party, none of the guys want to miss a second of the action. They don't want to leave the room at the wrong moment and miss the big play. But they still need to eat, right? So what do they do? They pile the chips and pizza all around them so that they don't have to get up. And if they do get up, they get up during the commercial breaks. They plan their route through the house so that they are away from the TV for the shortest time possible. Jesus is saying that Martha could have had this same mentality. She could have made preparations for the meal in such a way that she could have still been part of things. She was trying to accomplish so much, that she was missing out on what really mattered. But look at Mary. She is not doing many things. She is only doing one thing. She is not distracted. She is focused.

Jesus is also saying that Martha is distracted because she has picked the wrong things to do. She has let the things that are less important distract her from the things that are most important. She is worried about food and dishes and cleaning and seating arrangements. Those things are important, but there are more important things. Things that are important can often distract us from the things that are most important. Good things can distract us from the best things. Turn over a page or two to Luke 12:29: **And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be worried. For all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you.** Jesus says you don't need to be distracted by things like eating

and drinking. You need not be worried about food and drink. God knows that you need these things. He will provide them. Seek first his kingdom. Seek first the things of God, and he will make sure you get the food you need. Focus on the most important things, and God will take care of the lesser things.

Think of the irony of this situation back in Luke chapter 10. Look who Mary and Martha have for a house guest. This is Jesus. He has fed 5,000 with five loaves and two fish. He fed 4,000 with seven loaves and a few small fish. On a couple of occasions he helped fisherman miraculously haul in large catches of fish. He himself is the bread of life who came down from heaven. He can give living water to whomever asks. He is the Son of God – the God who fed the Israelites in the wilderness with manna and quail and gave them water from rocks. This is the Jesus who is in their house. And Martha is worried about what they are going to have for dinner.

And this is part of what makes this story so hard for us to understand. Jesus is not saying that talking to your houseguests is more important than feeding them. He is not saying that when you have company over for dinner that you just sit and talk to them and hope that food miraculously appears on the table. If you have guests at your house, please make dinner. What is different about this story is that the houseguest is not just a normal houseguest. Their guest is Jesus. If Jesus comes in the flesh to visit your house, your tendency would probably be to go all out and whip up the grandest most sumptuous feast you can. But let me make a recommendation to you. If Jesus stops by your house, if Jesus is your guest, don't waste your time on meal preparation. Spend as much time as you can with Jesus. Talk with him. Listen to him. Sit at his feet. And let him worry about dinner.

And now we have come to the crucial point. We have asked the question of what Jesus meant by saying that Mary has chosen the good portion. What is the good portion that Mary has chosen? But that is the wrong question. The right question is not What is the good portion. The right question is Who is the good portion. The good portion that Mary chose was not a thing. It was not the best portion of the meal. It was not the best activity. What Mary chose was a person. She chose Jesus. Jesus was in her home, and she put Jesus before everything else. Once Jesus stepped into that house she forgot about eating. She was no longer concerned about serving or preparations. All she cared about was Jesus. She was entranced. She was captivated. She was drawn to him. She was drawn to sit at his feet and listen to his teaching.

But who is Martha concerned about? Martha is putting on a good show of concern for her guest by running around with all these preparations, but are all of those preparations really about her guest? Look back at what she said in verse 40: **Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.** Lord, don't you care about me? My sister has left me to serve alone. Look at my problems. Pay attention to me. Tell her to help me. She seems to be more concerned for herself than for Mary or even for Jesus. She seems to rebuke Jesus. She not only seems irritated and impatient with Mary, but she seems irritated and impatient with Jesus as well. She got so caught up in what she was doing, she lost sight of who she was doing it for.

And I think I have just described myself and most Christians in America. We get so busy, we get so distracted by the things of this life, that we miss what this life is all about. Life is not about manicured lawns, soccer games, TV shows, diet and exercise, work and promotions, or jam-packed vacations. Life does not consist in the abundance of our possessions. Life is about a person, the person of Jesus Christ. He is what it is all about.

Surprisingly, the place where we so often forget this is in ministry. We get so caught up in doing church, we forget who church is for. We run around doing the little tasks that need to get done to get ready for the church service or Sunday school or some other meeting, and we get so busy that we forget it is all about Jesus. On Sunday mornings we rush about the house getting all cleaned up, dressed up, and spiffed up. We dash out to the car, speed down the road, in a hurry to not be late. We half-run across the parking lot, grab a bulletin on the way through the door, and slide into the same pew we have occupied for the last 10 years. We are so anxious, so troubled, and so distracted about so many things, that we have forgotten why we're here. We're here because Jesus has promised to meet with his people when they gather. This is all about Jesus.

And how is it that we are we supposed to focus on Jesus? One of the main ways is to do what Mary did. Mary sat at the feet of Jesus and listened to his teaching. Sitting at someone's feet was an attitude of humility. She was humbling herself before Jesus. She was saying, "Jesus, you are the teacher. I am the disciple. I need you to instruct me." She didn't tell Jesus her grand ideas. She didn't tell Jesus what he ought to do. That was what Martha did. She told Jesus what to do. Mary, on the other hand, just listened. She kept her mouth shut and her ears wide open. She was listening to Jesus. She was paying attention to Jesus' teaching.

Listening is one of the things that Jesus wants the most from us. Look back a few pages at Luke 8:19-21: **Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. And he was told, "Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see you." But he answered them, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it."** Jesus says that his true family is made up of the people who listen to him and do what he says. Flip forward a page or two to Luke 9:35. On the mount of transfiguration, Peter, James, and John hear the voice of God speaking to them from heaven, and this is what God say: **This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!** Flip forward another few pages to Luke 12:27-28: **As he said these things, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, "Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!" But he said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"** Jesus says that the person who is most blessed is the person that listens to his words and keeps them.

Before you rush into a decision, before you charge into action, before you try to serve God how you think he ought to be served, it is best to stop and first listen to Jesus. Slow down. Lose the distractions. Close your mouth. Sit down. Listen to Jesus. Let him do the teaching. And when you have heard from Jesus, then you'll know how best to act. You listen to his word, and then you keep it.

How do we listen to Jesus today? I think a lot of you already know how. Jesus speaks to us through his Word, the Bible. You can read it on your own. You can study it with others. If you don't know how to get started, feel free to speak with me afterwards. Jesus speaks to us through other believers. He speaks to us through the words of Christians songs. He speaks to us through the teaching and preaching of the Word on Sunday and at other meetings. He speaks to us through the writings of gifted believers online or in books and magazines. Yes, we need to be discerning, but the Bible is clear that God speaks to us through other believers. We can share words of encouragement with one another, when talking after church, when talking on the phone, when we are over at each other's houses. We can send messages by email and Facebook and Twitter. One of the main ways that Jesus speaks to us is in the next passage after the one we have been looking at. In Luke 11 Jesus gives instruction on how to pray. How do you expect Jesus to speak to you if you never come into his presence to have a conversation? Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

I think the most important thing is the heart attitude. We need Mary's humility and willingness to be taught. We need her eagerness. We need her anticipation. We need her expectation that Jesus will teach us something worth learning. We need her faith in Jesus' words. We need to stop trying so hard to look good, and instead be focusing on Jesus. If you feel like you don't really know Jesus, or maybe you feel like you haven't really heard from him in a long time, I would love to talk to you afterwards. Perhaps I could introduce you to him or reintroduce you. He is the good portion, and once you have him, he will never be taken away.