

Disciple or Doer?

Today's New Testament reading takes us to the home of Jesus' friends, Martha and Mary, and their brother, Lazarus. Luke's Gospel has a particular interest in the important role of women as disciples of Jesus. Luke's the only gospel writer who gives us a record of this event, realizing its importance for our understanding of discipleship. This encounter shows the vital difference between acting as a true disciple of Jesus and a frantic doer for Jesus.

Follow as I read...**Luke 10:38-42:**

³⁸ Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. ³⁹ She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." ⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; ⁴² there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

I've actually heard more sympathy expressed toward Martha than toward her sister Mary. Usually I've heard this conflict referred to in a rather light-hearted way to justify the role, especially of women, in taking care of the practical matters of life and church work. Traditionally, women like my late mother, would say, let others of a more spiritual and less practical mind, do the spiritual work, such as prayer and worship.

William Barclay said it this way:

"Lord of all pots and pans and things,
Since I've no time to be
A saint by doing lovely things,
Or watching late with Thee,
Or dreaming in the dawnlight,
Or storming heaven's gates,
Make me a saint by getting meals
And washing up the plates"

I come from a strong background of Christian pragmatism. My father was a strong church leader and aggressive church planter during the years of his ministry and was very productive in achieving the results he sought in planting new churches that resulted in large numbers of converts and church members throughout Ohio, where he served for several decades. My mother, while being a devoted wife, mother and church worker, was a domestic "activist," as was her mother to an even greater degree. In their culture, which was primarily in the Deep South, women were expected to perform only a background role in the church, usually doing most of the work with children and church hospitality.

But activist pragmatism also characterized the approach to kingdom work. Prayer was on the agenda, but even prayer was approached pragmatically as a means of accessing power to perform a task that may or may not have originated in the mind and heart of God. Even in church ministry there's more pressure to work like Martha than to worship like Mary.

Martha, Mary and Lazarus were close friends of Jesus whose home in Bethany was a welcome place of hospitality for Jesus and his disciples. Martha was probably the older of the two sisters and seemed to function as the one in charge of domestic duties, and the house in Bethany is referred to as "her home." Both Martha and her sister received Jesus and his disciples and extended to them their gracious hospitality. Their hospitality toward Jesus shows their receptivity toward him that went deeper than mere formality. They had both committed their lives to him as Lord. Luke is fond of using "Lord" for Jesus and not as just a title. Jesus was received as the Master and his presence in their home made him not only the guest but also, in a deeper way, the host. In fact, *their* house became *his* house.

Mary, who had been the host, was now Jesus' guest because in fact it was now his home and he was offering her his spiritual food. Martha, on the other hand, never quite grasped this. She received Jesus as her guest but didn't submit to him as her host. To sit at Jesus' feet as a receiver is difficult for a doer like Martha. Martha was busy in the kitchen and all the while thinking of Mary's worship at Jesus' feet as a waste of time. But Mary related to Jesus as a worshiper, as she did later, during Jesus' last week before the cross, when she anointed Jesus' feet with expensive perfume in an act of extravagant devotion (John 12:1-8).

As disciples of Jesus, we're called first of all to be his worshipers. The Father, said Jesus, is seeking those who will worship him, glorifying and enjoying him, even as he delights in us (John 4:23). The most important posture we can take is one of sitting at the feet of Jesus. Mary served, and certainly Jesus would have expected her to assist her sister Martha in serving. Jesus taught the importance of serving (Mark 10:42-45). But our service to Jesus is not done *for* him, but *with* him, and in the spirit and context of worship in his presence. Without worship that focuses on Jesus and centers us in him as Lord, we're fragmented, and our practical living soon becomes as empty and unrewarding as was Martha's. Mary, unlike frenetic Martha, was in a position to hear the words of Jesus, listening to what he said about himself, which were words of eternal life. Mary helped to feed Jesus, but it was now time for her to let him feed her, as she feasted upon the Bread of Life.

A disciple is one who is devoted to the word of God, not primarily as a "how-to" manual, like a first-aid booklet that we pull off the shelf when we find ourselves, our marriage, our family or our career in trouble. The Scriptures are the

revelation of Jesus Christ himself, and unfold before us the one we are called to know, love and obey. And as we learn of him and commune with him, we become more like him; thus, the importance of hearing the preached word and reading the word in listening prayer. It's the way God has given us to feed upon him and to find our strength, encouragement and even delight and joy for our souls (Psalm 119). Listening to the Word doesn't require a life of monastic seclusion from the world. It's simply turning living into praying as we focus upon Jesus, who speaks to us regularly, shapes our thoughts, guides our decisions and influences our conversations.

The Message gives this paraphrase: "Later, she (Martha) stepped in, interrupting them." Martha burst into the room where Jesus was teaching his disciples and, as we would say, got in Jesus' face out of sheer frustration and anger. Make no mistake about it. Martha was sincerely *doing for* Jesus. She simply was not, however, acting like a disciple. Jesus never asks us to do *for* him, but only that we do *with* him. Mary was alert to the interest of Jesus in teaching his disciples and Martha was busily trying to do things that would please Jesus, not knowing his desire to be her teacher rather than her guest diner.

I hope you can catch the tenor of this text and the atmosphere around Martha's house. The meal has been served and eaten and now it is time for Jesus to teach and for his followers to listen to and to worship him. Martha, however, is busily still working in the kitchen, preparing additional courses to the meal. It isn't that Jesus and his disciples didn't need to eat at all. I'm certain they had been hungry and ate with gusto and appreciation what Martha, along with Mary, had prepared for them. But it seems from the implication of the text that Martha continued to work in the kitchen, preparing additional and even superfluous courses of food. She had stopped working *with* Jesus and had begun working *for* Jesus.

This is a common affliction in Christian service—to lose the fine distinction between working with Jesus and working for him. When we work with Jesus we're in fellowship with him and are staying in the word of God through corporate and personal worship. We sense that the work we're called to do is what God invited us to do and is work he's blessing—not always with visible numerical results but with a sense of his pleasure and the accompanying, joy-infusing, peace-producing Spirit. But when we work *for* Jesus we embark on our own projects and may offer a perfunctory prayer, asking God to bless our efforts *for* him. But in that way we're acting as if God is obligated to join us in our mission *for* him, which in all likelihood is not his plan or purpose for us.

How many projects have individuals, churches and Christian institutions undertaken with the expectation that God will bless, without any thought that God never intended those projects to be done—whether it be a ministry, building project or a grand mission endeavor? Just because something has the name

“Christian,” “church,” or “mission” associated with it does not mean that God is involved with it or inviting us to do that project with him.

When we do things *for* Jesus we are placing ourselves and perhaps the church in a position of spiritual risk. Just a glance at Martha shows us that here’s a lady, a good lady who loved Jesus, who had undertaken work *for* Jesus that he did not call for or expect. And what he doesn’t call for he will not bless, even though that project may be done with a certain level of success. The risk for us will be the same as with Martha, who found herself distracted with overload (40).

The work that Christians do that leads to spiritual draught and emotional irritability is not work that we do *with* Jesus. Rather, it is work we do *for* Jesus and that we take upon ourselves. Working with Jesus doesn’t result in an attitude and emotions that are negative and harmful to our fellow believers in the Body of Christ. But Martha’s work for Jesus actually led to a breakdown in her relationship, not only with her sister, whom she resented, but with her Lord Jesus himself. She was distracted in her fellowship with Jesus through doing this work *for* him, that she felt was tiring and unrewarding; it had actually distanced her in her fellowship with the Lord, whom she planned to serve with her big dinner project. Prayerful, worshipful disciples, who take time to sit at Jesus’ feet, are a blessing to the heart of God. Conversely, when we fail to sit at Jesus’ feet and offer him our delighted and joyful praise, we’re taking from God what’s rightfully his.

In Jesus’ face Martha expressed her demand for her sister’s help. Life at the present time for Martha was looking quite unfair. She would not be happy until she could share her miserable burden with her sister. And this does seem to be the way with those who, like Martha, are frustrated doers. Misery loves company, they say. And those who have worked themselves into a miserable state usually look at their fellow Christians with a critical and jaundiced eye. Those who have grown weary in doing for Jesus usually begin to feel resentful toward others who don’t seem to be sharing their part of the load. And there are always those who aren’t sharing their end of the load. But it’s futile to feel resentful when others are not aiding us in our work *for* Jesus if it’s not really Jesus’ work in the first place.

In Jesus’ face, probably with raised voice, Martha asked, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do all the work myself?” (40). But Jesus cared more about Martha’s distressed and resentful spirit than he cared about her inordinate work load, which she had brought upon herself. When we distance ourselves from the heart of Jesus, begin doing things *for* him instead of *with* him, and lose the real motive for Christian service, we can easily become doubtful of Jesus’ love and care. When we lose the joy of his salvation, we doubt his love and care. We begin to think God is like us—hard-driving, demanding and more interested in external results than in hearts of love, joy and peace.

If you ever lose confidence in God's love and care, then you've distanced yourself from him. And no one may be aware of this departure but you. You're still doing the same Christian service, but the joy is gone and your fellowship with Jesus is damaged by your anger, bitterness and doubt of his love and concern. Your image of God has become like your own heart, like that of a relentless, merciless and demanding slave-driver. The truth is that Jesus does care about us. And, as with Martha, he cares too much for us to acquiesce to our wishes or to the demands that God make life easier for us by helping us do our ministry projects *for* him instead of *with* him.

Jesus repeated her name ("Martha, Martha") as a sign of his love and affection toward her, just as you might to an errant child, who needs your affection and affirmation as much as she or he needs your correction. (My mother would say, "Roger Daniel, when will you ever learn?"). Martha was "*worried and distracted by many things*" (41). Anxiety and worry are characteristics of someone who's not living and abiding in the presence of Jesus. In the presence of Jesus, sitting at his feet in worship, receiving his reassuring word, there's no place for continuing worry and anxiety.

Martha knew God, and yet was thinking like an atheist. It's amazing how quickly and easily we as Christians can turn into "practical atheists." We live, and even undertake ministries, as though God were not in control, and even as though he did not exist! Thus, we need to bring ourselves back into his presence and be still and know that he is God (Psalm 46:10). Mary, against whom Martha was directing her anger and frustration, had chosen a better option (42). Become a worshiper of Jesus, and above and before any activity for Jesus, seek to be in his presence, and centered before him as a worshiper. Don't start doing *for* Jesus, do everything as prayer and be sure you are doing *with* Jesus. Jesus said that Mary's choice of a prayerful, worshipful life will not be taken from her (verse 42). She chose a lifestyle that will last through a lifetime and also into eternity. This is the way we'll live throughout eternity as God's children—as his worshipers, working joyfully *with* him in the everlasting kingdom on earth.