

The One Thing Necessary

Luke 10:38-42

We will be reading from the tenth chapter of Luke.

The human heart was made to crave, to yearn, to long, to burn even with unquenchable desire. If you have frequented larger cities here in America, then you doubtless have seen our most sizeable houses of worship, temples where the fervent voices of men and women may be heard a mile around, where the well of the soul overflows and sends out rivers of zeal. Ah, what are those churches called? Oh, yes, football stadiums.

These prove that we were made to crave. You see a man at his work—his passion may seem as narrow as his cubicle. He sits and types with a tired face—you think, here's a man as stale as last year's bread. But last week, last week if you had seen him at the fourth quarter of the Giants game, you would be amazed. His features were vibrant, his voice as loud and his heartbeat as fast as the most animated and excitable of people.

Perhaps you've come to church today quite unexcitedly. You found your usual seat, and during the worship you excused your mind to go and think about your week, your dinner last night, your Christmas gifts, the Giants game, the temperature, your clothing, politics, parties, people. And now your mind has temporarily returned for the first several minutes of this sermon, but already it is pulling at its chain and wanting to go.

"Well," you tell me, "I'm just not a passionate person. I don't get excited about things." I could wash a hog with that statement. Don't get excited about things? I grant that you may, by genetics or some physical malady, have less energy than other people—but I know a man in the final stages of cancer, with a tumor in his head and not enough energy in his body to stand up, who recently wept tears of joy at the thought of being with Jesus Christ. Cancer could not keep him from craving the Savior.

It is not that you don't get excited about things, but rather that you're not excited about the best thing, about the one thing necessary: Jesus Christ. Our text today has much to say to you.

But before we consider it, I must address another group of you. I know there are some in here who once craved Christ more than their necessary food, but now have lost some of their appetite for Him. And it grieves you beyond grief. You are like the pastor I once read of, who would often go aside to weep, and when he was asked why he wept so, he said, "Because I cannot get this cold heart to love Christ more." You plead, "Lord, I love, help my unlove." I trust he will help your unlove by the preaching of his word today.

And lastly, I must turn to a final group. There are, I trust, some in here who are exhilarated even by the mention of Christ's name. He is to you the chief among ten thousand, and wholly desirable. I think I can almost smell the smoke that rises from your burning hearts. Oh that God would fill his church with many more of your kind and kindred. I cannot help but note, however, that the devil treasures your zeal as much as you do, and wishes to snatch it away from you. It is all the more necessary, then, that you give careful attention to God's word to you this morning, so that you may not lose what you have.

Our hearts were made for Jesus Christ and they are restless until they find their rest in him. They were made to burn for him, and they blaze uncontrollably until they are focused into a single blue flame toward him. They were made to crave, and they glut themselves with garbage until they feast upon the person, the presence, the word of the King of glory. Enjoying Jesus Christ is the one thing necessary in your life.

But how? How do we crave Jesus Christ and become excited about him? How do we do this one thing? That is what we will consider in our text today.

LUKE 10:38-42

Here we have two hearts laid out before us: Martha's, and Mary's. Martha's is presented to us to show us how we should not be, choked by worries and cold toward Christ; Mary's is presented to us to show us how we should be, attentive to Christ and warm. Let's look at Martha's heart first, and then Mary's.

Martha's Heart

First, Martha.

Commendable

There is certainly something commendable about Martha's behavior. Here come Jesus and his disciples down to Bethany, where Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus live. Jesus is only half a year away from his death in Jerusalem—his prognosis, you might say, is six months. And since Bethany is less than a day's journey east of Jerusalem, we must wonder if his sufferings were not upon his mind. At the same time, since he has nowhere to lay his head, no hole like the foxes have, no nest like the birds, he depends upon the generosity of friends to house, feed, and fund him.

And so Martha, who appears to be the older sister and the mistress of this house, comes out to Jesus. "Come in, come in," she says, "and let me prepare you and your companions a meal." Later on, Jesus would raise Martha's brother from the dead, but at this point we do not know if the two had ever met. Nevertheless, Martha throws open her doors and lays forward her services.

This is commendable. In the history of the church, some have portrayed Martha as entirely condemnable, rather than partly commendable, and have argued that a life of contemplation, where you sit around and do nothing but think, is the best kind of life. We should not, they say, be so busy about tasks as Martha is, but should rather sit at the Savior's feet and simply listen all of our lives, doing nothing else—the monks and the nuns are the truly holy people, or the preachers and scholars, while the working man and house mom are second-class Christians.

But, I must ask, did Mary do nothing her whole life but sit and listen? Certainly not. She spent her share of time cleaning, cooking, working. If she was an idler, Jesus would have reproved her for it. Young wives, Paul writes, are to be workers at home, and young widows are to marry so that they don't become idle, going around from house to house as gossips and busybodies.

To sit around all day and do nothing but meditate and think and read may make you seem quite pious and holy, and may gain you fame in your Christian circle—but it won't gain you food. That's the order from the apostles: "If anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either." And, even more boldly, Paul declares, "If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his own household, he has denied the faith and is worth than an unbeliever." You were made to work, and if you are not working than you are not right.

So what Martha did was commendable: she was showing hospitality to the worthiest of guests. She was busy with her preparations, getting everything ready for Jesus and his companions.

Condemnable

But we learn more from what Martha did poorly than from what she did well.

Distraction

Look at verse 40: “But Martha was distracted with all her preparations.” “Martha, Martha, Jesus is in your house! The King of glory has entered your gates, O Martha, but you will not lift up your head from your cooking to look at him. You’re so busy making him a feast that you’ve made no time to feast on him.”

Distraction is among the devil’s favorite tools. It is a hard thought to think that there are some of you here who have Jesus Christ set before your very eyes every week, who yet refuse to look at him because you are distracted by stupid, meaningless things. Young people, I can remember a time in my own life when I would have traded the Prince of Life for an hour on an Xbox. I urge you, do not be as I was. Think! Does your Xbox love you? Can your Playstation save you from the wrath of God? Will your tablet or phone bless you with unfading joy and eternal hope and happiness?

I am grateful for technology, and applaud its proper use by Christians—but I think that by far it has proven more a distraction to us than a benefit. I’ve heard of an African pastor who paid a visit to the United States, and who was asked to give his opinion of the state of the church here. His reply was, “Too many gadgets, too little time.” If you wonder why your heart beats only faintly for the Savior, it may be because your attention is invested in your television, your phone, your Facebook, and only a small portion is available for him.

Worry

Yet there is poison that will kill your love for Christ more quickly than distraction, and it is worry. Look at Christ’s words in the 41st verse: “Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things.” “Martha, look at your sister Mary. She is sitting at Jesus’ feet with a child-like simplicity and happiness. And here you are, flustered and fretting over something as unimportant as food.”

Christian, look at the way Jesus addresses the mistress of the house: “Martha, Martha.” Tenderly, sighingly, compassionately.

I say this because I am not a stranger to the flustered and worried mind. Mine has often been, and at times is, such a mind. And for such a mind, a strong rebuke may prove too crushing a blow. There you are, thinking, “Ah, this is me—my heart is so cold toward Christ. Oh, I am too distracted by trinkets to think much about Christ.” And perhaps you have been offended by the way I speak or the way I look, or my age or manner, and you have scolded yourself for being so offended, and here you are, partway through the sermon, with an exhausted mind and a downcast heart.

If I now say, “You worry too much! Do not worry—It is choking your communion with Christ!” then what will you do? You will worry about your worry. There is only one sure cure for a mind diseased with worry, and that is to simplify your focus. Jesus says, “only one thing is necessary,” or, depending on your translation, “only a few things, even one.” You are worried and troubled about many things—well then, we need to distract you from those many things by focusing your mind upon just one: Jesus Christ.

Mary’s Heart

And so we turn our attention from Martha to Mary. Martha has shown us how to quench the embers of our zeal. Mary will show us how to ignite them.

We have already noted what Mary was doing while Martha was frantically preparing the meal. Mary “was seated at the Lord’s feet, listening to His word.”

At the Lord’s Feet

Notice Mary’s position and posture. She was seated at the Lord’s feet. This was Mary’s favorite place. We only see Mary three times in the Scriptures: here, in John 11, and in John 12. Here, she is seated at the feet of Jesus, listening to him. In John 11, after her brother Lazarus dies, she comes to Jesus and falls at his feet. And in John 12, she anoints the feet of Jesus and wipes them with her hair. She is always at his feet.

Now, this is an odd thing for us, but it was not so odd in Jesus’ day. The ancient teachers were accustomed to having their students or their disciples sit at their feet as they taught them. The feet-seat is the place of the disciple.

And it is the only appropriate place for Christ's disciples to sit today. We who are Christ's disciples are being changed to resemble him more and more—but since we are not yet exactly like him, it is possible for there to be areas in which we do not see eye to eye with Christ. I have undergone some horrible suffering, and I cannot see why Christ, who loves me, would allow it. Or I have come across a difficult statement in the Scriptures that is hard for me to swallow.

If you wish to see your doubts dissolve and your love to Christ grow, you must be content not to see eye to eye with Christ on every issue, but eye to knee. A disciple is not above his teacher, but below him, at his knee, by his feet. Who are we to speak against the wisdom of heaven? Do you think that you can teach God something? If you do, then you know nothing of discipleship, and you are none of his.

Listened

Mary did not speak, but rather listened to the word of the Lord. When a young man is romantically attracted to a young woman, and he hears her voice, how does he feel? Is he easily distracted from the noise? Does he try to slip away and attend to other business? No, no, no. He would happily miss every appointment just to hear her speak.

Jesus Christ calls out in the streets. His teaching ministry is not finished—it has been preserved for us in Holy Scripture, and it is brought to our hearts by his Spirit's activity. Jesus teaches still, his voice may still be heard by faith, not as an audible voice for the ears, but as a sweet melody for the heart.

A fine example of this listening was found in Sarah Pierpont, a young lady who would later marry the American preacher and theologian Jonathan Edwards. Edwards, busy with his studies, wrote this about her in the front of a grammar book:

They say there is a young lady in New Haven who is beloved of that almighty Being, who made and rules the world, and that there are certain seasons in which this great Being, in some way or other invisible, comes to her and fills her mind with exceeding sweet delight, and that she hardly cares for anything, except to meditate on him

...

She will sometimes go about from place to place, singing sweetly; and seems to be always of joy and pleasure; and no

one knows for what. She loves to be alone, and to wander in the fields and on the mountains, and seems to have someone invisible always conversing with her.

This is Mary, seated, settled, listening, loving.

How important this is: while we listen for the voice of Christ in the Scriptures, and nowhere outside of them, yet there is a way to read the Scriptures without hearing Christ. Those who read the Scriptures only as a mental exercise, for example, will never hear the voice of Christ, will never have their hearts warmed and experience true communion with him. They seek some secret knowledge, perhaps, but they will not find it if they seek it that way. The Scriptures are only opened to Mary's, who sit lovingly at the Lord's feet; to Sarah Pierpont's, who walk lovingly with him in the cool of the day.

You must resolve to bring not only your mind to the Scriptures, but your heart as well. You cannot stand at a distance and flip the pages of the Bible with a pole, so as not to have it impact your life. Those who read without the intention of obeying, will never hear the voice of Christ—only those who are willing to do the will of God will truly know his word. You must read it like any other book, in that it is not to be taken as some mystical tome; but you must also read it unlike any other book, for it is the word of your Lord, the eternal declarations of Almighty God.

Sit at Christ's feet, listen to him, enjoy him. A teacher is not best served with fancy food, but with attentive ears. If you consider Christ's yoke heavy and go about your business with a curved back and a drooping face, and treat his word as a difficult and unpleasant thing, then you're completely missing the one thing necessary, and you are thereby dishonoring the teacher.

Christ's Commendation

You have seen now how to avoid that which will cool your zeal for Christ—be not like Martha—and how to embrace that which will promote your love for Christ—be like Mary. But to know is not enough. How can I move you to choose Mary's lot, over Martha's? Well, let me point you to Christ's description of Mary's lot, for it is the most appealing advertisement for it that I can find.

One Thing Necessary

Christ says, first, that to sit at his feet and learn from him is “the one thing necessary.” Here is good news, and here is bad news. Good, in that you need do only one thing to ensure your own happiness and fulfillment. Bad, in that if you don’t do it, you have lost everything. One thing, and one thing only you must do.

To what might I liken this? Imagine a man out on the dunes of a dry desert. It has been nearly three days, his tongue is as dry as the desert floor, his throat hard and cracked. There is only one thing necessary to him—water. If you were to give him the option of a million dollars or a single cup of water, he would happily choose the water and rejoice over his choice.

His friends might later be stunned, “You were offered one million dollars and you cast it aside? Do you not regret your choice? Imagine all that you might have done with such a sum of money!” “No,” the man replies, “I don’t regret it at all. I did not need one million dollars in that desert, nor could all the pleasures purchasable in the world have helped me one bit. The water was the one thing I needed.”

Is your soul not thirsting, like a panting deer in the desert? The soul that has been made conscience of its own desperate need, of its own sinful condemnation, of the wrath bouldering over its own head, can scorn the whole world and reject the whole sum of what it offers. Broken cisterns, that is all the world can give. But you need water for your soul—you need one thing only: Jesus Christ, and him crucified. Jesus Christ, and dear union with him. Jesus Christ, and sweet daily communion with him.

Good Part

Do you not yet thirst for this one thing? Then consider what else Christ says of Mary’s choice: “Mary has chosen the good part.”

The good part, or, as the Greek allows, the “better” part, or even the “best” part. Wasn’t what Martha did, in preparing a meal for Christ and his disciples, good? Why yes. But it wasn’t better. Mary chose the better part.

Aren’t church events, evangelistic outreaches, soup kitchens, charitable donations, and visitations good? Why yes. But they are not the best part. I am not saying to stop doing these things, but only that these you ought to have done and not neglected the other, the best, which is

sweet communion with Christ. I may give all my money and things to the poor, but if I do not have love it profits me nothing. Similarly, no matter what my labor, it is unprofitable if not joined with a love for Christ.

And it says that Mary “chose” the good part. She was not forced, not commanded—she was swayed, she was wooed to choose Christ.

Shall Not Be Taken Away

And so must you be. I have but one more bullet in the barrel of this text with which to subdue your will for Christ. Jesus says of the good part, that it “shall not be taken away from her.”

In no more than one hundred years, almost everything you know and have will be no more. Consider Martha—where is her food now? Search high and low, you will not find it. Where is she? You will not find her either.

You who are not in Christ truly, know that you can do nothing for yourself that will last. Everything you do, everything you have, will be swept away, lost in the fire, at the final judgment. You may labor like Martha in your religious observances, but if you are not a friend of Christ, if you have not trusted in his cross-work, and in it only, to save you from the wrath your sins merit, then your observances mean nothing.

Christ’s life was ended in torment that ours might go on forever in bliss. Mary’s privilege has not been taken from her. She sat at the feet of her Savior then, and, having been saved through him, do you know what she is doing now? She is sitting at his feet, listening to his word.

I hope God has moved you by these weak words of mine, and these strong words of Christ, to devote yourself to Mary’s task. You may not do great things in this world, by the world’s standards; you may not sweep across a continent like Alexander the Great, or launch a thousand ships by the beauty of your face, like Helen of Troy. But you can—no, you must—do this one thing necessary. Go, sit at Christ’s feet, hear his word, and enjoy him forever.