

# The Word of Christ

Luke 10:38-42 | October 13, 2019 | Bryce Beale

I have sometimes heard a warning offered against worshipping the Bible—we worship Jesus Christ, not the Bible, it is said.

This is true. Yet I have always wondered who this warning is for. Where is the person who is too attached to the Scriptures? Who studies them too much, spends too much time committing them to memory and meditating upon them? Who has so idolized the Scriptures that they need to read them less, think less about them, put them aside for a season in order to more purely serve the Savior?

I recognize that some may treat the Bible like a talisman or magic book, or that others treat it only as an academic volume to be dissected. These are poor approaches to the Scripture; these need to be corrected, and I think really these approaches are intended by those who warn against bibliolatry. In such cases, the warning is fair.

But really the problem is not too fervent a devotion to the Scriptures that becomes idolatry, but too weak a devotion to them. To treat the Bible like a book that can be read but not cherished, studied but not applied, is to love the Bible far too little.

If we have contained within these pages the word of Christ, and if it is a true word, then we shall let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also, before we let go this word. When William Tyndale, the English scholar, risked his neck to translate the Scriptures into the English tongue so that his kinsmen might have access to them, and when as a consequence he had a rope wrapped round his neck and was strangled and burned, we dare not say he was too fervent a devotee of the Scriptures. He gave a very little thing—his life—to secure what was vastly greater—the Sacred Writings entrusted us by God.

The prophet Isaiah took hold the scrolls of ancient prophecy and lifted them above the stars in importance. “All flesh [that is, all humanity, everyone who lives and has ever lived] is grass,” he was instructed to say, “and all its beauty is like the flower of the field....The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.” If it were necessary for us to surrender up

our homes, to sacrifice our health, to see our blessed nation dissolve and the union of our states collapse so that we might keep our access to this book, then we would allow these inconveniences and think them minor if only we might hold onto this word. For we could travel through the gloom and terrors of Sheol by the strength of hope offered in this book; but to stroll the gentlest paradise without this word from Christ is misery.

You and I are not too much devoted to the Scriptures—we cannot be! We have before us a mountain that, like Sinai, ascends up into the clouds. Every step we take up the mountain, every inch of progress in our ever-growing devotion to God’s word, only provides us with endless opportunities for further growth. We never arrive at the peak. We never love the word too much; we have never yet loved it enough.

Others may object, may point to difficult passages and dispute their truthfulness, just as the crowds did with Jesus when he said what made no sense to them. But whatever others choose to do, we stand by this book and say with the Twelve, “Where else will we go? It is only *here* that we find the words of eternal life.” Here we find Christ, here we, his sheep, catch the sound of his voice. And so we have no physical possession as precious to us as this book. And we aim, not to cool our love for it, but to love it more and more.

In the gospel of Luke, in the passage we encounter today, Jesus shows that this is his heart and his desire for us, that we should value his word above all else in this world. And this he shows by means of two sisters.

#### **LUKE 10:38-42**

Here are two sisters—Martha, who seems to be the older, and Mary. We are not told the town, it is only “a village,” yet we know from John’s gospel that it is Bethany, just a short trip east from Jerusalem. These are the Mary and Martha whose brother, Lazarus, Jesus will later raise from the dead. But we’re not yet there—for now, Jesus means to impress upon these sisters, and upon us, how we should regard his word.

We all of us come to this text with a certain view of Christ’s word. Always the voices of this world are singing or whispering or shouting their opinions of the Bible, and always we are fashioning in our minds a certain way of looking at the Scriptures. Yet this

morning Jesus himself teaches us how we should think about his word.

So then let us sit like Mary at his feet and listen. Whatever our former opinions, they must bow to this new opinion. And this new view of the Scriptures Jesus conveys not just by what he says, but by the actions of these two sisters, Mary and Martha. Martha demonstrates a wrong opinion of Christ's word; Mary, a right one.

So let us then begin with Martha and see where she errs; let us see at what places Christ wants to correct our thoughts about his word, by seeing him correct them in this woman who is so much like us.

## Distracted

Begin then with Martha in the text, at verse 38: "Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house."

Thus far, Martha has done well. Our Lord had nowhere to lay his head, and he, like his twelve and his seventy-two disciples, depended upon those sons and daughters of peace who welcomed him into their homes. And here Martha, in welcoming Jesus, welcomed not him but God who sent him, as Jesus stated only a short time before in Luke's gospel.

We do not know if Martha was married; perhaps she was a widow. At the least she was the older sister who takes the lead in welcoming Jesus and, presumably, his twelve disciples into the house.

To practice hospitality is everywhere commended in the Scriptures, New Testament and Old. It is one of the requirements in 1 Timothy 5 for those widows who would be supported by the church; in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, we are told no man can be an elder unless he practices hospitality.

"Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality," writes Paul to the Romans.<sup>1</sup> "Show hospitality to one another without grumbling," writes Peter.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 12:13 (ESV).

<sup>2</sup> 1 Peter 4:9.

Martha welcomed Jesus into her house and showed hospitality to him—this is a virtue and not a vice. And, if the text ended here, Martha would be our example of what to do, rather than what to avoid.

Yet, the text does not end here. After describing Mary in verse 39, verse 40 states, “But Martha was distracted with much serving.” Again there is a gem in this rough, for this phrase, “much serving,” seems a good thing; at least “serving” is. Paul praises it in his letter to the Corinthians—he speaks of the household of Stephanas, “that they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints.”<sup>3</sup>

We cannot say that Martha’s actions were evil in themselves. *What* she did was good. But, *how* she did it was a problem. “Martha was *distracted* with much serving.”<sup>4</sup> She was, as the verb may suggest, dragged along by her preparations and her household concerns. Her attention was taken captive by meat and bread and wine; her eyes were slaves to her service, so that they did not have the freedom to gaze upon Christ’s face.

This is the very thing that Jesus tenderly rebukes in Martha, in verse 41: “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things.”

Distracted, anxious, troubled—here is *how* Martha serves, and it is a problem. To serve Christ is good; but when our service of the Lord bears the fruits of fear and distraction in our hearts, we are doing it wrong. When we are so busy in the kitchen making food for Christ, that we do not go into the living room to spend time with him, our souls have fumbled their priorities.

So know this for certain, believer, and let it be your relief: Christ does not need your service.

There are millions who this moment are perishing apart from Christ, and our hearts join the prayer of the disciples, “Lord, send laborers into your harvest!” There is the unreached Macedonian who is still crying out, “Come over and help us!” There are the nearly 2,000 languages, half of all that exist, with no part of the Scriptures in them.

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 16:15.

<sup>4</sup> Emphasis mine.

Then there are the great physical needs. Seven hundred million persons live in extreme poverty; hunger and preventable diseases still claim the lives of young and old. Injustices sweep away the grain that would feed the poor. If we look locally, Evansville's poverty rate is at 23%. There are families wondering how they will buy groceries this month. Then there are the numberless broken families, eating disorders, opioid addictions; our foster care system is overloaded with vulnerable children who have no permanent home.

We who believe have hearts that ache and yearn to rise up and meet every one of these challenges. And I am confident that God's intention is to meet these challenges and to overcome many of them through the labors and the sacrifices which we have ahead of us as the Church of God.

Yet just here Christ surprises us. Any other religious leader might set a fire beneath us, or apply the whip of guilt to our heels to get us going. Like Martha, we see the much serving that needs to be done in this world, and we expect that Jesus would want us to just do it. Notice that when Martha in verse 40 speaks with Jesus, she expects him to be on her side: "And she went up to him and said, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.'" Certainly, she thinks, Jesus wants the much serving to be done. And certainly, we think, the suffering and needs of humanity are heavy on his heart. We are not wrong.

But Jesus goes deeper than the mere doing of the service. We could like Martha give ourselves over to this world's many needs in such a way that they consume us, distract us, pull our hearts and minds away, trouble us and worry us. Jesus does not want us to lead such lives.

Imagine if Jesus had taken Martha's side—imagine that the highest priority to Jesus was the simple doing of much service, and that listening to his word had a much smaller place. If such were his will, then all churches of whatever creed would do best to join together for the common good. We could, after all, accomplish much more good as one large body of persons, as opposed to so many denominations and separate gatherings. We would become the one church of Evansville, and with every other fellowship would set ourselves to alleviate the social concerns of our city. This is the pragmatic thing, which gets the most serving done.

Ah, I do long for the day when there can be one church of Evansville, even one church visible on earth! But Jesus took Mary's side, not Martha's, and so there cannot be such a church this side of glory. We ought all to consider how we can work together with others, those of similar or of far different belief, to do good to those around us, to improve our city, to fight injustices. But as a local gathering, we do not throw our lot in with any and every other gathering in the city because the word of Christ matters. And, in Jesus' opinion, matters even more than the good we could do if we would set it aside.

With Paul we weep but must admit that "many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ."<sup>5</sup> And though to join our hands with those who are Christ's enemies for a common purpose as a local congregation would accomplish much, what would it convey to this world about our gospel? However we sought to prevent misunderstanding, still the world would assume that we hold the same word as they, the same gospel as the gospel of any fellowship in this city. Our gospel, the world would assume, does not differ from that of Mormons—when in fact our gospels are entirely different!

So let us labor tirelessly to do good, yet never set our serving above our Savior or above his word.

## Devoted

Which turns us now from Martha and her preoccupation with bare service to Mary, who is our positive example in this passage. If Jesus does not mean for us merely to be about good deeds, merely to do good to others and meet pressing needs, then what does he want from us? He has just taught about the Good Samaritan and encouraged us to do as that Samaritan did, to love our neighbors.

And this might have made us all into hectic Martha's for our neighbors' needs, if it were not that love for neighbor was, in Jesus' opinion, the *second* most important commandment. The first was this: you shall love the Lord your God with all you are. What this looks like is seen now in Martha's sister, Mary.

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<sup>5</sup> Philippians 3:18.

See verse 39: “And [Martha] had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching.”

If we are being practical, this is a waste. It is as much a waste as Mary’s later act of love, pouring pure aromatic nard upon Jesus’ head and feet before his death. That perfume might have been sold and the money used to alleviate some of this world’s great need. And in the present case, Mary could leave her passive activity of just sitting and listening to Jesus teach, go into the kitchen, and actually get something done.

I mean, look at Mary there—she is just sitting, just listening. Her hands are idle. There is so much to be done in that house, as there is so much to be done in this world! And yet there she sits, minute after minute, perhaps hour after hour, listening and listening. Her listening produces not a single dish for their dinner. It alleviates not a single problem upon earth.

Martha sees her sister sitting there and despises the sight. Martha is actually getting things done, lots of things, so many things that they are overwhelming her. We get the sense that she is not just preparing a simple meal, but trying to offer Jesus an elaborate dinner. Her serving is a much serving. She is not just doing something, but doing very, very much of something.

And perhaps again and again when she looks into the room that Jesus occupies, she sees her sister just sitting there by his feet. What laziness! The woman described at the end of the Proverbs is up early, is out in the marketplace selling wares, is supplying her household with its needs and wants. And in contrast, there is Mary, sitting and sitting and sitting.

But that sitting is, to our great surprise, the very best thing that Mary could do. That is Jesus’ assessment of the scenario: what Mary is doing is, in verse 42, the “one thing...necessary.”

But how could her activity be the only necessary one? Is it not necessary for us to share the gospel with others? Is it not necessary for us to let our lights shine before others, so that they see our good works and glorify our Father who is in heaven? Is it not necessary for us to take in the fatherless, to defend the widow, to seek justice, to love mercy? To Martha, the deed of Mary looks much less necessary than her own bustling about the kitchen. But to Jesus, Mary’s deed is the only one that is *ultimately* needed. It is not that other Christian service has no

place, but that it does not have the first place. This is what Jesus means by the statement that follows: “Mary has chosen the good [or we might say “the best”] portion.” She could not at this moment be doing anything more important than what she is doing.

And just what is it then that she is doing, which must be every believer’s highest priority, above even the very many good deeds of service we long to perform? What is this one thing necessary? It is not the bare act of sitting, for there are those who sit in the seat of scoffers and they do not please God. What then is her activity?

Look back on verse 39: “And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching.” Mary does sit, but it is the location of her sitting that matters the most. She is sitting at the Lord’s feet, which is where a student would sit before his teacher, or in this case a disciple before her rabbi. That place at the feet is the place of humble learning—and that is just what Mary is doing, “listening to his teaching.”

Martha stands before Jesus and attempts to instruct him! But Mary sits at his feet and attempts to learn from him. Notice, not one word of Mary’s is recorded in this whole passage, even though she is almost the main character. Mary is doing the one most necessary thing: she is listening to Christ’s word.

And you—you are listening to Christ’s word right now. Whether you are seated at his feet or not, that is a question of the heart that I cannot determine. But listening to his word, that you are doing this moment.

Here are the Scriptures, the word of Christ—both about him and by him—preserved in this one book. What Jesus would have said in the hearing of gentle Mary, he says in your hearing from this book. It was his intention not to stay physically forever but to depart, and then by his Spirit to ensure that, though absent, he would still speak. So we have this book.

And when we gather at the beginning of each week, the message of this book is proclaimed before you. Then throughout your week you have the unbelievably precious privilege of possessing a copy of this text, which you study and meditate upon in private. Many of you also study with others, in small groups or in the Ladies Study or over coffee one-on-one.

And if a Martha of a thought should ever enter your mind to say, “Why waste so much of your time with that book, when there are a million needs in this world? Why not better spend your time serving?” Then call to mind this very passage and remember that one thing is necessary, one portion is the best, which will not be taken away when all serving ceases.

And this is only reasonable—for I promise you, there is no better way for you to do good on this earth than to withdraw at times from doing good to hear this word of Christ, and then to go out into the world again for good. Some have taken this text as a defense of monasticism—that is, of separating fully from this world and living a life of nothing but meditation on the Scriptures and prayer. Yet that was not Mary’s life, was it? Did she do nothing but sit at Jesus’ feet? Certainly not—she did more. But this she did first.

And in like manner, your motivation to do good in this world requires maintenance. If you are to do real good to your neighbor, it will require more than just a little of yourself, or just a little of your sacrifice. It will take all you are. You will need to renounce all you have, to act as though you did not possess what you possess, if you are really to meet your neighbors’ needs.

But what could possibly sustain you when the going gets, as it must get in any true service, tough? What drives you on when you face opposition, or when those you serve misuse your service, or when unforeseen complications arise and cast a gloomy veil over all your labors? If service itself is your highest motivation, what will you do when that service turns sour, or when illness swipes it from you? It will, Jesus suggests, be taken from you eventually.

So Jesus offers an alternative much better, the best even. He says, put the two greatest commandments in their proper places, the first on top of the second, and then the second will be done as well. Love Christ first, sit and hear his word first, and then you will find the zeal to love your neighbor.

I hope none here take this message as an excuse not to lay their lives upon the sacrificial alter for the good of others. We are debtors to all. I hope none have begun to undertake good deeds but now think, “Ah, I must back off from these, lest I be like Martha.” Perhaps a few of you must back off so that your serving is not *too much* serving, so much that you cannot focus on Christ.

Yet Paul was immersed in much serving; Jesus and his twelve could not even eat at times, the crowds and their needs pressed in so earnestly. Christ has redeemed us to be a people zealous for good deeds.

But what drives good deeds—indeed, what drives any lasting endeavor at all—are not the deeds, but ideas. Big ideas. Revolutions were never driven by bare acts, but by grand ideas which swept people up into them, and by living examples who inspired the masses.

How will Evansville's great needs be met? Not by our setting aside our ideas, held in the words of Christ, to get the much serving done. No, these true ideas given us by Christ are the fuel that will see the task accomplished. Justification by faith alone will drive the good. A settled assurance that Christ has conquered hell on Calvary, and that he has disarmed death by his resurrection—these are the ideas which will drive our revolution. The sovereignty of God will give us both vast energy and sweet rest.

These ideas may work more quietly than the world's means. We may look often like Mary, sitting and sitting and listening and listening, and we may draw the world's scorn for our priorities. Yet we know that they alone can do the most good for the most people. Even if they did no good, we would be duty-bound to attend to them, since Christ demands it.

Yet we know Christ wise; he knows the path we should take, and if we will only listen to him, seated at his feet, he will lead us as our Shepherd by his voice.