

Title: Why do you serve?
Reading: Luke 10:38-42
Preacher: Tim Bermejo

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This short story of Martha welcoming the Lord into her house in Bethany is placed by the author Luke within the larger travel narrative of chapters 9 to 19. Its language and setting resonate with the social custom of ancient hospitality, which was highly valued:

- The host was expected to provide food, shelter and protection to the travellers. This is a theme that runs through both the Old and New Testament, the writer to the Hebrews exhorting his readers “do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (Hebrews 13:2).
- Showing hospitality is precisely what Martha was seeking to do, an act of kindness, love and generosity that Jesus very much commends (Luke 14:12-14), for He is someone who cannot pay her back in kind, and yet, rather harshly, she is often portrayed and remembered simply as the fly in the ointment, who spoiled the enjoyment of the occasion.

Martha was serving the Lord by showing hospitality, but she nevertheless earned the Lord's gentle correction for having neglected a most important characteristic of ancient hospitality, as we shall soon see. I therefore wish to centre our thoughts on Martha this morning, rather than on her sister Mary, with the objective that we understand where Martha tripped up, so we may reflect on how and why we serve (what motivates us) and determine if there are any areas that require adjustments, and act upon them!

As already mentioned, Luke places this story within the context of a larger travel narrative that starts in the previous chapter (9:51-52) “*When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem, and he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him*” ... “*But the people did not receive him*” (9:53) – so James and John decided to deal with the situation and, based on their robust Bible knowledge, thought it would be appropriate to call fire from heaven on them (as Elisha had done long before, add some ancient manuscripts). They were disregarding the Lord's instructions to “*shake off the dust from your feet as a testimony against them*” (9:4) and hadn't quite understood the nature of their service and mission: to go “*through the villages preaching the gospel*” (9:6), with the obvious objective to save them, not to destroy them. We are reminded, therefore, that it is of the utmost importance to know the mind of Christ in our service to Him.

We jump forward and Luke tells us that “*as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house*” (10:38). What a contrast with what the Samaritans had done and what a wonderful act of hospitality towards Jesus, who had no home to call his own “*Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head.*” (9:58). So, let's not be unkind to Martha in our thinking.

Imagine Martha's joy and excitement to be able to use her property, her time and money in preparing and sharing a meal with her dear friend Jesus, and those who were preaching the gospel as they travelled from one village to another on their way to Jerusalem. She was doing her bit to support the evangelistic mission. So, Martha was “totally occupied” / “preoccupied” “with much serving” her guests (other translations say: “*all the things she had to do*” (Int'l

Standard Version) or “*all the preparations that had to be made*” (NIV). That is a shame, for the word is service (“diakonein” in Greek) and to say “had to do” disfigures one of the underlying lessons of this story, which is, **when serving we must prioritise between what is important and what is essential**).

So, let’s get this straight, then: Martha was serving, but she had placed a lot on her plate, to the extent that she became anxious and troubled, setting the stage for very public family feud. We know what happened:

- Mary is sitting at the Lord’s feet whilst Martha is doing all the work. Bearing it no longer, she has no problem in telling the Lord off (it wasn’t the first time - John 11:21 – at the death of her brother Lazarus) and snaps at Him “*Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.*”
- She is basically accusing her principal guest of being part of an injustice.
- She embarrasses herself and her family in front of her guests,
- and she embarrasses her guests in the process.

Have you ever wondered how the drama ended?

- Did some of the guests leave out of sheer embarrassment?
- Did Mary glance at Martha with a “that will teach you” look in her eyes?
- Did Martha apologise and decided to trim the menu down?

We’d like to know what happened, but the Lord has told us what we need to know, let’s listen to that, otherwise, we will run into trouble, as the disciples had done by disregarding the Lord’s instructions and wishing to call down fire on the poor Samaritans!

Martha was serving, but the problem is not that she was serving, by providing hospitality. She had got that right, as we mentioned before. Nevertheless, she receives the Lord’s gentle correction because she has neglected the most important characteristic of hospitality, both in ancient and modern times, which is: **the personal engagement and interaction with the principal and honoured guest. Martha’s busyness distanced her from the Lord; she was not listening to what the Lord was saying.**

Martha wanted to serve the Lord, but she was distracted (pulled in different directions) “with much serving” and she consequently took her eyes off Jesus. She lost sight of the object of her service, and such distraction caused her to become anxious and troubled.

What can we take away from this story? Well, let’s ask ourselves if our work for the Lord is causing us to become anxious and troubled, and whether this story highlights some aspects of your serving and my serving that needs readjusting.

Let’s now consider three possible consequences of losing sight of our Lord in our service:

1. **We can so easily fall into the routine of doing our duty, tricked into thinking that service is simply to carry out our obligations or using our talents.**

Martha busied herself with many tasks (“was distracted with much serving”):

- I wonder whether that's what was expected of her (given the social context), so she is going about her duty and carrying out her obligations as she saw it.
- Or perhaps her talent was in her organization and resourcefulness, and it was a no-brainer that she should put her talent to good use.

Either way, whether she saw it as an obligation or simply the obvious use of her talents, Martha had lost the perspective of why she was serving in the first place, which was to serve the Lord and to minister for the furtherance of His kingdom and be ministered by Him. It was not to appear as a wonderful and competent hostess or making sure she reaches the expectations of others.

Remember: The reason and focus of our service is the Lord. There should be no alternate reason, be it a sense of duty or obligation, or because that is what is expected of me, or because I must make use of my natural and God given talents. Our busyness in what we simply consider our "obligations" distances us from the Lord.

If we lose our primary focus in our service, we can make another mistake:

2. We can easily make our service more about us than about its primary purpose, which is the expansion of God's kingdom and to be ministered by our Lord.

Please take note of Martha's **complaint** to our Lord: "*do you not care that **my** sister has left **me** to serve **alone**? Tell her then to help **me***" (v.40):

- notice how she refers to herself several times ...which highlights the fact that ...
- in the exercise of her service, Martha had taken her eyes off the Lord and placed them firmly on herself.
- Sadly, Martha's generous hospitality had become more about her than about her guest. She had lost her perspective of why she was serving in the first place.

Be vigilant: Let us ensure that our serving does not become an exercise in self-serving. Ask yourself who are you doing it for; is it for yourself or for Jesus?

- We are to Serve the Lord and to do so with gladness.
- We are to Serve without complaining.
- We are to Serve without calling attention to yourself.

If we lose the primary focus in our service, we can make yet another mistake:

3. We can become so self-righteous in our good works that we start judging others for not doing as we do.

Please note Martha's **demand** to the Lord: "*tell her to **help me***" (v.40), meaning that she should be doing what I'm doing ... "that is the way to serve"! Satan is always trying to disrupt our service for God's kingdom: he whispers lies and accusations, trying to lead us away from Jesus.

Remember: If we are living before the face of God, we have no reason to look around at what others are doing and feel that we have a right to pass judgement on them. We don't always know how the Lord is leading others.

We should ask ourselves: are we “distracted with much serving” and have we become “anxious and troubled”? We want to serve the Lord, but has our preoccupation and busyness causes us to take our eyes off the Lord?:

- has this led us to fall at times into a routine of simply carrying out our obligations?
- has the fact of not having a personal engagement and interaction with our Lord turned our service at times into an exercise of self-serving? It may have become more about us than about our Lord and His kingdom.
- has the fact that we have taken our eyes off our Lord led us to judge others for not doing as we do?

May the Lord help us to put our service in its proper perspective, making Him the primary focus and reason for our service, grounded in a lively and personal relationship with our Lord.

We thank God for having us in His service and for not overlooking “*your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do*” (Hebrews 6:10), despite our failings.

As we draw to a close, please note that Jesus says nothing in the story of Martha and Mary to undercut the idea of service, for there is no doubt God calls all his children to serve, but in serving it is of critical importance, as we saw earlier, to know the mind of Christ in our serving, for “*we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them*”. (Ephesians 2:10). We will know the mind of Christ and the works we must do when we spend time with Him.

And who “should walk in them”? those created in Christ Jesus, which means that every believer has been called to minister to the body of Christ “*And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the **saints** for the **work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ***” (Ephesians 4:12).

Remember: if you are a saint you are called to serve.

Let us conclude this time by joining together in reading the following verses: “*Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. **As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies, in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen***”. (1 Peter 4:8-11)