

New Year 2022
First things First
Facing the New Year with Mary and Martha
Luke 10:38-42 January 1st 2023

At the dawn of a new year, it is customary to look to the future, and consider changes that will improve our lives in the year to come, because there are areas in all of our lives that need enrichment. Companies tap into this human hope and promote products and services they claim will “revolutionise life in 2023.” A wonder diet, a new vitamin pill, a fun exercise regime, and so on. Youtubers and bloggers jump on the bandwagon, “Watch these four minutes to change your life in 2023.” “These 23 resolutions will change your life in 2023”, and so on..

I’d like to make and share a claim with you this morning, “*No daily activity will impact your life more positively in 2023 than reading the Bible.*” Many of you will need no convincing because this is already your experience: every day you feel the gracious power of Scripture in your life. This claim is true only because the Bible is God’s Word to mankind, God breathed it out.

The claim is true whether you are a Christian or not; if you are not yet a Christian, reading God’s Word in 2023 will transform your heart and life and bring you hope and salvation. In Luke chapter 10, read to us a few moments ago, Jesus commends Mary for listening to his words. He refuses to send her into the kitchen! Listening to his words is a good thing, Jesus says to her. Where can you and I hear the words of Jesus Christ? We hear his voice in the pages of the Bible. Let’s turn to this familiar story, where we shall learn not only the importance, the priority of hearing the words of Jesus from Mary, but the need to serve the Lord with joy, from Martha.

(1) The Story

Jesus and his disciples are on their way somewhere —we’re not told where—possibly Jerusalem since Bethany, where sisters Mary and Martha lived, was close to Jerusalem, “As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman by the name of Martha opened her home to him.” Jesus is not planning to stay for long, for he is on his way somewhere. Martha seems to be the leader of the home, perhaps the eldest sister, and when she hears that Jesus was in the area she invites him in for a meal. It’s important for us to note that Jesus’ disciples are with him, verse 38, because if we add up the total number of folk for this meal, it could be, up to 12 disciples, plus Jesus (that’s 13), plus Mary and Martha (that’s 15), plus Lazarus, he’s not mentioned here, but he’s brother to Mary and Martha (possibly 16). Up to 16 people. Even if only half that number were present, this meal was going to need a lot of preparation!

All these people come to Martha and Mary’s home and quite naturally, people want to listen to Jesus, including Mary. “Martha had a sister called Mary, who sat at Jesus’ feet listening to what he said.” Imagine the scene? Martha slogging away in the kitchen wanting to make the best meal possible for their honoured guest! Mary sitting at Jesus feet tuned into his every word!

We ask: is Mary one of those blissfully unaware head-in-the-cloud types?! Or has she made a conscious decision to leave the cooking and sit at the feet of Jesus—these moments don't come around often—Jesus will soon be gone!?! Whatever is going on in Mary's head, Martha is boiling inside—and it's probably showing on her face. She's angry at Mary for leaving her to do the work by herself and she's cross at Jesus (a) for not caring about her need of help and therefore (b) for not sending Mary back to the kitchen! Martha's getting all wound up inside, and what's inside often comes out; Oh dear, are you ready for this? "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" What an outburst, it's all very embarrassing! The tranquil domestic scene has been shattered by Martha's irritable outburst. How does Jesus respond? A gentle rebuke, because all of us make mistakes! "*Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is good, and it will not be taken away from her.*"

What does Jesus mean by his gentle rebuke?

(2) Learning from Martha: How we serve matters!

We need to correct a common misunderstanding. Jesus is not drawing a negative contrast: "serving is bad" but "listening is good." Some people have used—even abused—these verses to suggest reading the Bible all day long is better than serving people! In the Scriptures both listening to God's Word and serving have their place. "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed" but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is that?" In the same way, faith by itself if it is not accompanied by action is dead." (James 2)

The problem here, partly, at least, is that our translation, the NIV, otherwise a very good translation, has probably led us astray here, because it reads, "Mary has chosen the better part." Other translations, such as the KJV, ESV and NASB read "Mary has chosen a good part" which is a more accurate translation because the Greek word is *agathon* means good, not better.

What Jesus is saying is that "under the present circumstances, with me around for just a couple of hours, Mary's chosen the right thing. Both serving and listening are important, but under the present circumstances one is better than the other. If Jesus was staying in Bethany for a week, then perhaps he might have sent Mary into the kitchen, but he's only around for a short while, he's on his way", and in those circumstances listening to his words is the right thing to do."

If Jesus is not saying that listening is more important than serving, what is he teaching here?

Our attitude counts!

How we serve in our families and homes, how we serve in our work places, how we serve in the church, whether it's making coffee on Sunday, playing a musical instrument, teaching the children, serving as the car park attendant, counts. What's going on in our hearts counts! People may only see the outward act, but the Lord sees the heart, "*Serve the Lord with gladness!*" (Psalm 100:2), "*do*

everything without complaining.” (Philippians 2:14)

Martha’s beautiful act of kindness has been ruined by her frustration and bitterness and resentment. Brothers and sisters, what is the value of serving the Lord, whether at home or work or in church, with hearts full of resentment, or frustration, annoyance, irritation?

If we drill down a little deeper, perhaps we can find underlying problems which led to Martha’s outburst

Perhaps Martha is a perfectionist! Perhaps Martha has set the standard for this meal so high that there’s no way she can achieve 5 Michelin stars without Mary’s help! Perhaps that’s the real problem here, Martha is a perfectionist! Is this one reason, I wonder, why some believers are nervous about showing hospitality? They have these super high culinary standards, which they feel they’re unlikely to meet, so they just don’t invite anyone around? They can’t imagine lowering their standards to something manageable, so they just never invite anyone for lunch!

Why couldn’t Martha have dropped a couple of courses from the menu? Why not Pizza and salad? It’s not the grandeur of the menu that matters, it’s the sweetness of the fellowship that counts! Pizza and salad with good fellowship is infinitely preferable to Aunt Bess’s finest Sunday roast with a miserable chef in the kitchen!

(And perfectionism, brothers and sisters, let’s beware, in its worst guise, can be a form of self-righteousness– look how good my cooking is!!)

Perhaps Martha isn’t a perfectionist, but a universal worrier! I think we’re getting closer to her problem, here, because Jesus says, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things.” “Your present worry about this meal is the tip of a great big anxiety iceberg—you worry about many things!” Jesus doesn’t want us to be worriers! “do not worry” he says six times in a row in Matthew 6!

Whatever the deep cause of Martha’s irritable spirit, Jesus’ rebuke is telling us that when it comes to serving, inward attitude counts.

Let us pray for help wherever we serve, whether in the home, neighbourhood, workplace or church, to spread the sweet aroma of joy, “*Serve the Lord with gladness!*” (Psalm 100:2), “*do everything without complaining.*” (Philippians 2:14)

Our attitude towards others counts

Have you ever found yourself saying, “Well she doesn’t serve **as much** as I do” or “He doesn’t pull his weight in the home like me?” Comparing ourselves with others and then judging them and holding a bad attitude towards them for not serving as we do? That’s what Martha is doing—she’s judging her sister, “I’m pulling my weight but Mary is not.” Out it comes: “*Tell her to help me!*”

Perhaps Mary should have done more, but the problem is at least half Martha’s for setting a standard

so high that she needed Mary's help to fulfil it, and when Mary "failed" to supply that help, to judge her. If Martha had settled for Pizza and salad she wouldn't have needed Mary's help and consequently wouldn't have harboured a bad attitude towards her!

It's all well and good for us to set high standards for ourselves, but we should be careful not to impose them on others, and then cultivate a judgemental attitude towards them when *they* fail to keep *our* standards! Let's not compare our service with the service of others. We all have different capacities, yes some folks may need to be stirred to "love and good deeds" but let us not judge one another and then serve with resentment.

Our attitude towards Jesus matters

Perhaps the saddest thing in the story: Martha is mad at Jesus! "**Lord, *don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!***" Martha is mad at Jesus!

And so can we! We can be resentful towards the Lord for all of the time, the energy, the money, the sacrifices we have made for him, over the years, cant' we? It's a wrong attitude!

Summary

With me brothers and sisters? How we serve the Lord in our homes and work places and churches matters to the Lord. "Martha, Martha" is Jesus' gentle rebuke. Let's repent of wrong attitudes, let's not judge one another, let's cultivate a joyful attitude

But returning, as we close, to the year that stretches ahead of us, we can't escape the lesson from Mary.

(3) Learning from Mary - Hearing God's Word is of first importance!

"Mary has chosen what is good, and it will not be taken away from her."

With Jesus leaving in a short while, the right thing, the most important thing anyone could have done was to listen to his words: Hearing God's Word is of first importance. Jesus is speaking to all the busy-bee Marthas at MPC—make sure that listening comes before serving, that spiritual input comes before practical output. On many occasions I have been tempted first thing in the morning, with a long list of tasks to be accomplished, to pass by or to shorten my own quiet time and get on with the list of tasks before me. Pastors have to resist that temptation and remind themselves that listening comes before serving that serving flows out of listening.

So as we begin a new year, and as I close this sermon, may I encourage you to make listening to God's Word a great priority.

For someone here, that might mean raising Sunday morning worship—where God's word is preached - higher in your list of priorities!

For someone else, it's reprioritising home groups, where we share God's Word with each other.

For all of us, it's taking time out during the week— every day if possible—to read God's Word. Perhaps you've got out of the habit?

To be practical about these things, you will find a sheet on your chairs this week, to take home and consider, and next door in the coffee hall, a table of books and information you can look at this week and next week too.

The Blessings of God's Word

Through the Scriptures;

- God **leads and guides** us “Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.” (Psalm 119:105)
- God **comforts us**, “you, Lord, have helped me and comforted me.” (Psalm 86:17)
- God **warns us away from sin**, “By them is your servant warned.” (Psalm 19:11) [My father used to say to his six children, “This book will keep you from sin and sin will keep you from this book.”]
- God **calls backsliders home**, “Return, Israel, to the Lord your God. I will heal their waywardness and love them freely” Hosea 14:4)
- God assures us **that we are forgiven**, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9)
- God **reminds us, in a cold world how much we are loved** by him, “what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!” (1 John 3:1)
- God **brings light into our lives**, “the unfolding of your word gives light” (psalm 119:130)
- God brings **salvation to our souls**, “For you have been born again... through the living and enduring word of God.” (1 Peter 1:23) “Lord, you have the words of eternal life. “(John 6:68)

May the Lord help us to put first things first in the year that lies ahead. May we all be found sitting at the feet of Jesus day by day! May our service flow out of our communion with him. It will make a great difference not only to our lives, but to all those around us.