

Between Promise and the Cross: The Promise of Presence

Gospel of Luke 10:38–42

Anchor Truth:

Before we carry the cross, we must learn to sit at the feet of Jesus.

The Tyranny of the Urgent

In 2007, something unusual happened in the Washington, D.C. subway system.

A man stood near the wall during the morning rush hour and began playing the violin. For about 45 minutes he performed some of the most beautiful and technically demanding music ever written—pieces by Bach that concert halls around the world celebrate.

Thousands of people passed by. Most hurried past without even slowing down. A few dropped a dollar into the violin case. Almost no one stopped to listen. But here's what commuters didn't realize:

The violinist was **Joshua Bell**, one of the greatest violinists in the world.

Just a few days earlier he had played a sold-out concert where people paid hundreds of dollars for a seat. But in the subway, surrounded by noise and urgency, people missed the beauty because they were too busy to notice.

And sometimes I wonder if something similar happens in our spiritual lives. Christ is present. His voice is speaking. His grace is being offered. But the rush of life moves us past the moment before we even realize what we've missed. Mary stopped. Mary listened. Mary recognized the moment.

Luke is encouraging us to develop a Mary heart in a Martha world. It can be hard to do because of the pressing responsibilities. Several years ago a writer used a phrase that has stuck with many people ever since. He called it “**the tyranny of the urgent.**”

The idea is simple: urgent things always shout louder than important things. The email feels urgent. The dishes feel urgent. The deadline feels urgent. The text message, the phone call, the schedule, the obligation.

And so we rush. We hurry. We fret. We stress from the noise of this world.

But the most important things in life are rarely the loudest things.

A quiet conversation with someone you love. A moment of prayer before God. The stillness of simply being present. Yet those are the things most easily crowded out.

Many of us live our lives in a constant state of **holy distraction**—doing many good things, even necessary things, but rarely stopping long enough to remember why we are doing them in the first place.

And that is exactly the moment we walk into in today's story.

Jesus enters a home. A meal is being prepared. Work needs to be done.

And suddenly two sisters show us two very different ways of responding to the presence of Christ.

A House Full of Activity

Luke tells us that Jesus entered a village, and a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home.

That detail matters. Martha is not indifferent to Jesus. She is not hostile to Jesus.

She **welcomes** Him. In fact, everything Martha is doing is an act of hospitality. Preparing food. Organizing the household. Taking care of guests.

These were honorable responsibilities in the ancient world. And if we are honest, many of us identify immediately with Martha. Because Martha is doing exactly what responsible people do.

She is making sure things run smoothly. She is taking care of the details. She is making sure everyone is provided for.

And somewhere in the kitchen, with the bread rising and the dishes piling up, the pressure starts to build. Because while Martha is working...

Mary is sitting.

The Posture of Mary

Luke tells us that Mary “sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching.”

This is more than just sitting on the floor. In the ancient world, **sitting at someone’s feet was the posture of a disciple**. It was the position of someone who had come to learn. Mary has chosen to do something unexpected. Instead of moving toward the kitchen, she moves toward Jesus.

Instead of adding to the activity of the house, she gives her full attention to the presence of Christ. She sits. She listens. She receives. And that choice is more radical than it might appear.

Because Mary is choosing **presence over productivity**. She is choosing **attention over activity**. She is choosing **relationship over responsibility**.

Now notice something important. Mary is not lazy. She is not avoiding responsibility. She is doing something deeper. She is **ordering her love**. She understands something in that moment that Martha has not yet recognized.

There’s a famous story about **Susanna Wesley**, the mother of **John Wesley** and **Charles Wesley**. Susanna had **ten children living at home**. Her life was loud, busy, and demanding.

If anyone had an excuse to say, “I simply don’t have time for quiet prayer,” it would have been her. But Susanna had a simple practice. When she wanted time alone with God, she would sit down in the kitchen and pull her apron up over her head. That was the signal to the children.

When Mom’s apron was over her head, she was praying. And the children learned: do not interrupt. Imagine the scene. A crowded house. Children running through the rooms. Noise everywhere.

And in the middle of it all, a woman sitting quietly with an apron over her head—meeting with God. Susanna understood something Martha was still learning. You don’t find time with God by accident. You **choose** it. You make space for it. You sit at the feet of Jesus even when life is noisy.

When Jesus enters the house, the most important thing in the room is not the meal. The most important thing in the room is **Jesus Himself**.

The Weight Martha Is Carrying

Meanwhile, Martha is overwhelmed. Luke says she was “**distracted by many tasks.**” That word “distracted” literally means **pulled in different directions**. Her mind is split. Her attention is divided. Her heart is stretched thin.

Anxiety and responsibility are pulling Martha apart. What about you? Are you being pulled, stretched too thin by responsibility? Work, home, kids, job, making ends meet – life is grabbing you by your extremities and Stretch Armstronging you.

Maybe all of your resources are being spread too thin. Anxiety is overwhelming you because there is too much month at the end of the money. All of this makes you feel thin and stretched, like butter that has been scraped over too much bread. You’re overwhelmed with anxiety, being pulled apart by the fear that not everything will get finished?

Well, Martha finally does what many of us do when we feel overwhelmed. She brings her frustration to Jesus.

“Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone?”

You can hear the emotion in that question. “Don’t you care?”

If we’re honest, that question slips into our prayers sometimes too.

Lord, don’t you see what I’m carrying? Don’t you see how much responsibility is on my shoulders? Don’t you see how hard I’m working?

And maybe the most revealing part of Martha’s request comes next. “Tell her then to help me.”

Martha is not just asking for understanding. She is asking Jesus to **fix Mary**. She wants Jesus to correct her sister. She wants Jesus to validate her priorities. But Jesus does something different.

IV. Jesus’ Gentle Response

Jesus answers her: “Martha, Martha...”

Whenever someone’s name is spoken twice in Scripture, it signals tenderness. “Martha, Martha...” You can hear compassion in His voice. “You are worried and distracted by many things.”

Jesus does not rebuke her work. He names her **anxiety**. The problem is not her service. The problem is the **state of her heart**. “You are worried and distracted by many things, but one thing is necessary.” One thing.

What Martha was focused on was good. But “good” can become the obstacle to finding better. Too many followers of Jesus settle for “good enough for now” rather than pursuing the best plan and journey for a life. Here, it appears Martha has been stalled out trying to chase “good,” when Jesus redirects her to “better.”

Jesus says something remarkable. “Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken away from her.” Notice what Jesus does not say. He does not say that serving is bad. He does not say Martha should never cook again. He does not say work is unimportant.

What He says is this: There is something that must come **before** everything else.

V. The Order of Discipleship

This is the heart of the story. Before we serve Jesus, we must learn to **sit with Jesus**. Before we do things for Him, we must receive from Him. Before we carry the cross, we must sit at His feet.

Because the truth is, many people try to live the Christian life backwards. We try to serve without first listening. We try to obey without first knowing Him. We try to carry burdens without first resting in His presence.

And eventually the result is exactly what happened to Martha: Anxiety. Frustration. Exhaustion. But Mary discovered something better. She discovered that the foundation of discipleship is **presence**. Being with Jesus. Listening to Jesus. Receiving His words.

VI. Resting In His Presence

Maybe you realized that you were doing many things **for God** but spending very little time **with God**. And perhaps it was in that moment that the Lord gently reminded you:

“You are worried and distracted by many things... but one thing is necessary.” Those moments are gifts. Because they remind us that discipleship is not primarily about what we accomplish.

It is about **who we follow**.

There’s a story pastors sometimes share about a man who was struggling with prayer. He went to his pastor and said, “I feel foolish when I pray. I don’t know what to say, and I’m not sure anyone is listening.”

The pastor suggested something simple. He said, “Go home and put an empty chair in your room. When you pray, imagine Jesus sitting in that chair. Talk to Him the way you would talk to a close friend.”

Months later the pastor heard that the man had passed away. When he visited the family, the man’s daughter mentioned something curious. She said, “The strangest thing happened. When we found him, he had fallen beside his bed... and his head was resting on the seat of a chair.”

The pastor smiled quietly. Because he knew what that meant. The man had learned to pray. He had learned to sit in the presence of Christ. And even at the end of his life, he was still resting there. That’s the promise of this passage. When we choose the presence of Jesus, it becomes the most real and steady thing in our lives.

And as Jesus said, “It will not be taken away.”

VII. The Gospel at the Center

And this is where the story ultimately leads us. Because the truth is, the Christian life does not begin with our work for Christ. It begins with **Christ’s work for us**. Jesus did not come into the world looking for helpers. He came looking for people who needed saving.

The gospel begins with the recognition that we cannot rescue ourselves. We cannot fix our sin. We cannot carry the weight of our brokenness.

Jesus came to carry it for us. He lived the life we could not live. He went to the cross to bear our sin. And He rose again to bring us new life.

Salvation begins the same way Mary's moment began. Not with striving. But with **coming to Jesus**. Sitting at His feet. Receiving what He offers. Trusting what He has done. And maybe today someone needs to hear that invitation clearly. You don't have to earn God's love.

You don't have to fix your life before coming to Christ. The invitation is simple: Come. Sit. Listen. Trust Him. And follow Him.

VIII. Living the Promise of Presence

Once we receive that grace, everything changes. Because when we sit at the feet of Jesus long enough...we eventually rise to follow Him. Service flows from presence. Obedience flows from love. Faithfulness flows from relationship.

The Christian life is not choosing between Mary and Martha. It is learning the **order**. First Mary. Then Martha. First presence. Then service. First listening. Then obedience.

Conclusion: The One Thing

Imagine a hospital waiting room.

A young man comes in, pacing. His mind is spinning. He has a million things to do: work calls, text messages, deadlines. He sits down, but his phone buzzes constantly. He keeps checking it, worried about everything except what's directly in front of him.

Then a nurse comes and says, "Your father is in surgery. He is okay, but you should be here when he wakes up."

The young man suddenly realizes: all the messages, all the tasks, none of that matters right now. The only thing that matters is **being present with the one who needs him**. He sets the phone aside. He takes a deep breath. He sits. He waits. He watches. He listens.

In that moment, the waiting room becomes holy. The mundane chairs, the ticking clock, the overhead lights—everything fades. All that matters is presence.

Mary had a waiting room like that in her home. She could have been distracted by dishes, chores, or frustration. Instead, she chose to **be present with Jesus**. And Jesus said it was the better choice—one that would not be taken away.

That's the question before us today:

In the busy “hospital” of your life, what will you choose? Will you keep pacing, distracted by urgent but temporary things? Or will you sit down and be present with Jesus—because it is **the one thing that lasts forever**.