

Choosing What Is Better

Luke 10:38-42

In 1984, a banquet was held in Washington D.C. to commemorate Harry S. Truman's 100th birthday. All the big names were out in ties and tails.

One guest turned to the woman seated next to him. "Did I get your name correctly?" the man asked. "Is your name Post?"

"Yes, it is," the woman replied.

"Emily Post?"

"Yes," she replied.

"So you are the world-renowned authority on manners?" the gentleman inquired.

"Yes," Mrs. Post replied, beaming. "But why do you ask?"

"Because you've just eaten my salad."

Turn your attention to another dinner party. It was probably occasioned by less primness and fanfare, but still, getting everything just right seemed to be important to the hostess:

³⁸As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. ³⁹She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. ⁴⁰But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

⁴¹"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, ⁴²but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

After teaching the story of Mary and Martha, a Sunday School teacher asked a little girl what her mother would do if she knew that Jesus was coming to her house. The little girl answered, "She'd put the Bible on the coffee table!" I get a sense that this was also the way Martha was wired.

Even though this visit marked a brief respite for Jesus, He could not simply turn off Who He was. He always built up those closest to Him. Mary assumed the role of a disciple, planting herself at Jesus' feet to gather in every word. Resist the tendency to see Martha as unspiritual. She too loved the Lord. She too was honored by His visit. It was sweet that she had a nice meal planned. Still, the attention she was giving to her preparations left her a little crabby and stressed. She was criticizing her sister and, perhaps, even Jesus Himself when she asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself. Tell her to help me."

Jesus never missed an occasion to teach something useful. He answered, to paraphrase: "Martha, a home-cooked meal is thoughtful, but not essential. Look how all the fuss has agitated you. One thing is absolutely needed. Mary has figured it out. I will not redirect her in this matter."

What is this one needed thing? One might assume that Jesus was hinting that contemplation and worship are more important than service, but that conclusion has perils. Properly rendered, service and ministry *ARE* worship. For Mary, to sit at the feet of Jesus and to learn of Him was to assume the posture of a disciple. When the opportunity presented itself for Mary to gobble-up all she could of the kingdom of God and of the King Himself, it was a no-brainer.

Occasions to serve Jesus will always be present, but He said, "Seek first the kingdom of God." To grasp and to embrace the values and the life of Christ's kingdom will actually inform our service. Jesus never called anyone to do nice things for Him, but to know Him and to obey Him.

²⁸"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." – Matthew 11:28-30

That beautiful passage from Matthew reflects all of the things that Mary found at Jesus' feet. Busy Martha - ever the nurturer. But what she needed more than anything else was to stop long enough to let Jesus be the Nurturer of her soul. The concerns of the soul are always more important than the concerns of the body, but they seldom receive anywhere near as much attention. One thing is needed. Seek the kingdom of God in an authentic posture of discipleship. How might we describe this posture of discipleship in practical terms we can understand?

I. The Elements of this Better Thing

A. We Might Call this One Needed Thing "Care of the Soul"

Early African converts to Christianity were earnest in their private devotions. They gave great attention to the care of their souls. Each one reportedly had a separate spot in the thicket where he would pour out his heart to God. Over time the paths to these places became well worn. As a result, if one of these believers began to neglect prayer, it was soon apparent to the others. They would kindly remind the negligent one, "Brother, the grass grows on your path."

The care of the soul is a general way of looking at what Mary was tending to. Martha, on the other hand, was concerned about a material need, not a selfish one, just material. She wanted to make Jesus comfortable. But her busyness blinded her to something that was better.

I notice this often in our labors for Jesus. We love Him. We serve Him passionately in ways we think best, but sometimes, we just need to stop and listen to Him. At times, we must slow down to insure that our fellowship with Him is solid and that our service and our expended energy are actually obedience *TO* Him and not just nice things that we are determined to do *FOR* Him.

Are you often agitated and restless? No one questions your devotion to Jesus. But, why are you agitated? Sad? Perpetually angry? Feeling aimless? Can you not even really put a finger on what you're feeling? Slow down. Tend to the care of your soul. As David said, "Be still, and know that I am God." Mary could see that the one needed thing for her was to sit and to soak in Jesus.

B. We Might Call this One Needed Thing "Fear of God"

The Bible does not call us into the cowering fear that a whipped dog has for a cruel master. Biblical reverence, or fear, is that sense of God's holiness that keeps a sinner, who knows he is a sinner, from acting like a precocious child under God's watchful eye. When Jesus revealed the Father to us, He painted a number of pictures to illustrate the relationship between Himself and man. He is our Savior, Friend, Shepherd, Teacher and Healer. We delight in all such images.

None of those pictures, however, invoke any particular sense of God's holy, divine character. All those tender images must be balanced against the reality that Jesus is One with the same holy and often terrifying God Who created the earth, Who shook the mountains and Who descended into the most holy chamber of the temple, veiled in a cloud of holy glory. He is not your Pal. He is not your Buddy. He is still Lord God Almighty. Maybe Mary recognized that God was in the living room while Martha was shuffling about in the kitchen, cooking dinner for a good friend.

There are times when it seems that God blesses everything we touch. The job is going well. Our labor at the church is joyful and fruitful. We're actually getting ahead with finances. Even the kids aren't getting under our skin too often. Then, for a season, things seem different. Your job is at risk. Your service to the church just seems tedious. Money gets tight. The kids are at each other's throats. Will you still trust God, or will you start looking for fixes to deliver yourself?

When our striving fails to bring about our desired remedies, we get agitated, impatient or even depressed. You say that you know that you were never in charge when you walked on mountaintops and the blessings were raining down. Is it any less prideful, really, to beat up yourself because you're walking through a valley? God is to be revered in the valleys as well as in the mountains. You no more call the shots in one moment than in the other. Sometimes, valleys are nothing more than a holy God trying to teach a prideful child to be utterly dependent on Him, but sometimes, we can never explain a valley. Still, when is God *NOT* to be revered?

C. We Might Call this One Needed Thing "Loving Obedience"

I don't mean some worldly description of love that is so subjective that it doesn't mean anything in particular. Jesus set standards for love: "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14:15). How's your obedience to God, really? I do not mean your energy for God. I don't mean your own plans that you're working and dedicating to Him. I mean your obedience to the things that He actually has said that He cares about. Maybe you have some secret sin that you don't resist anymore. Maybe you have unholy emotions that you are not surrendering, some area of lust or greed, a bad temper, an unforgiving grudge or a prejudice of any nature - racial, social, economic or generational. Could it be that all your service really means is that in busy-ness, you are simply trying to outrun God Who wants to heal you and to render you truly useful to Him?

II. The Essentiality of this Better Thing

A. We Cannot Grow in True Wisdom without this One Needed Thing

Sometimes, after a man has spent years amassing all the information he can, in a moment something can happen that instantly shatters his illusions about his own wisdom.

Each evening, bird lover Tom stood in his backyard, hooting like an owl. Finally, an owl called back to him. For a year, the man and his feathered friend hooted back and forth. He even kept a log of the "conversation."

Just as he thought he was on the verge of a breakthrough in interspecies communication, Tom's wife had a chat with her next door neighbor. Half-embarrassed, she said, "My husband spends his nights ... calling out to owls."

"That's odd," the neighbor replied. "So does my husband."

Even the wisest man is a fool if he does not think his thoughts against the backdrop of the God Who made Himself known in the Person of Jesus. In almost every line of the book of Proverbs, Solomon calls the reader to a wisdom that only faith in God can secure for His people:

⁷The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,
but fools despise wisdom and discipline.

⁸Listen, my son, to your father's instruction
and do not forsake your mother's teaching.

⁹They will be a garland to grace your head
and a chain to adorn your neck. – Proverbs 1:7-9

Through Moses, God told the Israelites that wisdom means staying as close to Him as possible:

⁵See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. ⁶Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." ⁷What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? ⁸And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today? – Deuteronomy 4:5-8

One greater than Solomon or Moses appeared. Mary recognized Him, and Jesus told Martha,

"...one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

I suspect that Jesus quickly raised Martha's mind higher than dinner. Once, in a more formal teaching setting, Jesus asked a question also intended to lift the minds of His hearers:

"What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?" – Matthew 16:26

It was a rhetorical question. Nothing has more value than a soul. That is why Jesus died for us.

B. We Cannot Secure Eternal Life without this One Needed Thing

I read somewhere that the most valuable tool a trainer of big cats takes into the cage is not a whip and not a pistol. That crazy little stool that he thrusts repeatedly at the big cat is his most valuable asset. He thrusts the stool with the four legs pointing toward the wild animal. Apparently, as the cat tries to focus on all four legs at once, its attention becomes fragmented. Essentially, it becomes disabled and it is easily controlled, manipulated and defeated. I guess too many things distracting us is one of the reasons Jesus said something we looked at fully last week:

¹³"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. ¹⁴But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. – Matthew 7:13, 14

Modern audiences don't like to hear about it anymore than modern preachers like to preach about it, but there is such a thing as Hell. Life in Jesus is the one thing that averts it. There are many people in this world, and in the church, who are falsely assured about their eternal salvation because of a religious experience that once nudged them. Some are sure that they are saved because they observed some church's prescribed entry requirements. They believed the facts of the gospel. They called Jesus, "Lord." They may even have repented of past sins. They were baptized. But for many, that was the last serious thought they ever gave to such matters.

According to the parables of Jesus, true believers and false believers, wheat and tares, good and bad fish, sheep and goats – abide side by side in the world and in the visible church. Whatever your status in the visible church, please ask yourself, "Do I simply abide in a love relationship with Jesus?" I don't mean to raise fears where they don't belong. Not one of us loves Jesus perfectly. But with the imperfect love you can muster, do you love Jesus authentically?

C. We Cannot Enjoy Spiritual Fruit without this One Needed Thing

When I was little, the merry-go-round in the playground was always occupied. The older kids would grab the rails and run to get it moving as fast they could before jumping on. Every once in a while, someone's really cool Dad would grab the rails and sling them, generating even more speed. The bigger kids sat at the edge, even hanging over it to maximize the thrill. The little ones were taught to not be afraid by moving toward the center pole. The closer you got to the center, the more stability you enjoyed. That's what Mary and Martha teach us. As your life moves faster, you learn that safety, stability and peace can only really be found as you work your way back to the center of your faith. That's not necessarily your church involvement or even your Christian service in the community. The closer we move to Jesus, the more stability we enjoy.

²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. – Galatians 5:22, 23

Not perfectly, but generally speaking, does this passage describe your life? These virtues are not dependent on your circumstances. They are not dependent on the success or blessing you are enjoying at this precise moment. These are things that the Holy Spirit produces in you regardless of how the external issues of your life are falling into place. If this fruit is not generally present, then, why not? It may be that you do not have the Holy Spirit, that you are not a Christian. If that is the case, one thing is needed. You need to come to Jesus. He will receive you.

Among this gathering, it is more likely that you are already a Christian. If your life is not generally typified by the presence of the Holy Spirit's fruit, if you are not "in step" with Him as Paul puts it, more of Jesus is still the one thing needed. What can be done to satisfy that need?

Are you willing to inventory your life? Do your passions lie with Jesus? He was never the least bit vague about the status in your life that He requires? Does He fill that place? Is the care of your soul being neglected? Does one cherished sin rob you of peace? One worldly love? One stubbornly-held attitude? One flaw of character that you will not face? Whatever it is, examine it carefully. Look at it from every angle. Turn it upside down. Spin it around. Is it worth it?

If you are a believer, is anything worth surrendering your joy, your peace of mind or your ability to love as He loves? One thing is needed, and whatever is keeping you from being an authentic disciple of Jesus is not it. Choose the better thing. Sit at the feet of Jesus. Know His kingdom.