Luke 10:38-42

If we really do desire that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven, then we need to ask, "Who is doing the chores in heaven?" And if the answer is, "No one," then the second best answer for here on earth would be, "Everyone."


Click here, Luke 10:38-42, for an easy to print or email Adobe PDF version of this note.

Sermon by the Rev. Dr. George Hermanson, "Distractions."

As a man, I must confess I feel a certain amount of trepidation each time this text occurs. I'm sure that there are "Mary's" and "Martha's" sitting in the congregation, and the last thing they need is a know-nothing like me naively throwing salt on old, unhealed, wounds. In a few short verses, this lesson opens up a family fight that touches almost every woman who has a sister.

It seems possible that the Mary and Martha we meet here are the same sisters mentioned in John, Chapters 11 and 12. Especially since we read of them playing similar roles:

There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served ...
Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair.
John 12:1-2

It is odd though that Luke makes no mention of their brother, Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead. In John, it is this action that is the final straw which causes the authorities to begin actively seeking to have Jesus arrested and executed.

Verse 38. The fact that Luke says, "Martha welcomed (Jesus) into HER home," suggests that either this is a different pair of sisters or that Lazarus is no longer alive since no woman would ever do the welcoming and hosting that Martha does if there were a male in the household - that would always be the man's role.

Verse 39. However, in the next verse, it is Mary who also acts like a man - sitting and listening at the feet of the teacher. And Jesus, shamefully, allows her to sit there!
Verse 40. Martha's complaint to Jesus finally restores some semblance of normal social order - the woman pleads her case with the senior male - thereby acknowledging Jesus' authority, and properly allowing the man to correct Mary, instead of doing it herself.

Verses 41 and 42. Jesus however turns the world upside down! He rejects Martha's complaint, and not only that, states that:

\[
\text{Mary has chosen the better part,} \\
\text{which will not be taken away from her.}
\]

Wow. It is difficult for us to grasp how revolutionary is this change in the traditional roles of women.

It is one thing to affirm that Mary has chosen the better part.

It is quite another to affirm that it won't be taken away from her.

After all, people can always sin and make bad choices - even if those choices are for the "better part" - if such a choice has been forbidden. (Remember Adam and Eve.) But Jesus affirms Mary and her choice.

The "Mary's" in the congregation may feel satisfied with the lesson, but it feels unfinished to me.

Since Jesus is travelling with his disciples, it is likely that the meal is for Jesus and his followers.

Has Jesus - or any of the commentators and preachers on this text - ever actually prepared a meal for 15 or 20 people? Go ahead. Try doing that without being worried and distracted by many things! Can't be done.

I'm surprised Martha didn't dump a pot of soup over Jesus' head: "Here Mr. Jesus Holier Than Thou Christ. Find that one thing distracting? Try getting this supper ready without worrying."

Jesus' response to Martha is surprising because it is so unlike his responses to almost all the other women he encounters: the Samaritan women at the well (John 4:5-42), the bent over woman (Luke 13:10-17), the woman who touches the hem of his robe (Matthew 9:20-22), the woman who anoints his feet with oil (Luke 7:36-8:3), etc. His response here to Mary is exactly how Jesus is portrayed elsewhere - he meets and treats women as people, as worthy of respect, and as equal with men.

His response to Martha is also surprising because Martha addresses Jesus in very intimate terms, "Lord, do you not care?" (Recall that this is how the disciples in the boat approach Jesus as he sleeps through the storm that is threatening to sink them, Mark 4:38.)

His response just does not seem fair. Does he not care? Does he not realize how many things have to be done in a very precise and timely way in order to get their supper ready? Has he left his God-sized heart and brains at the door?
Instead of chastising Martha, he could have sent Mary back to the kitchen. But that would have been an even worse response for women. Unlike every other encounter he has had with women, that response would have confirmed women in their traditional roles.

But a third alternative was possible.

After all, Mary was not the only person in the room who could help with preparing supper.

What if Jesus had said, "You are right Martha. There are many things to worry about to get supper ready." And turning to his disciples, had said, "Pick up your brooms and follow me," and had led his disciples into the kitchen to help get supper ready! And then served. And then cleaned up. And then had everyone sit at his feet and listen to what he was saying.

Now THAT would have been a truly radical response.

And I can tell you without any hesitation, that if Jesus had done that, he could have died peacefully in his sleep that night and we would still be worshipping him today as our God and Saviour.

Why?

Because people who do work that is not valued are not valued as people.

If Jesus and his followers had acknowledged and valued the work that Martha was doing, it would have transformed our world.

Imagine going into every kitchen in every home throughout the world today and noticing who is doing the work. Then notice how much their work is valued. Then notice how they are treated outside of the kitchen.

I bet that in almost every case, you would find women are doing the work; their work is not valued; and they are not acknowledged, valued, and respected as equal with men. Now imagine a world where men and women work together in the kitchen and in rearing children; where that work is as valued and respected as all other work. I tell you, much of the exploitation and violence in our world would be gone if we lived in such a world.

Jesus blew it with Martha. But we don’t have to.
It's not in the Bible, except that if we really do desire that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven, then we need to ask, "Who is doing the chores in heaven?" And if the answer is, "No one," then the second best answer for here on earth would be, "Everyone." So pick up your brooms and follow Christ!

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Note: Historical background information is primarily from Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels (see link below), page 271.

* Link to Amazon.com Bibliography for Bruce Malina, Richard Rohrbaugh, et. al., Social Science Commentary on ... The Synoptic Gospels; The Gospel of John; The Book of Acts; The Letters of Paul; The Book of Revelation; and others.

Luke 10:38-42 (NRSV)

38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. 39 She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 40 But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." 41 But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; 42 there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

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38 As they continued their travel, Jesus entered a village. A woman by the name of Martha welcomed him and made him feel quite at home. 39 She had a sister, Mary, who sat before the Master, hanging on every word he said. 40 But Martha was pulled away by all she had to do in the kitchen. Later, she stepped in,
interrupting them. "Master, don't you care that my sister has abandoned the kitchen to me? Tell her to lend me a hand."

41 The Master said, "Martha, dear Martha, you're fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing. 42 One thing only is essential, and Mary has chosen it—it's the main course, and won't be taken from her."