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"Christ with Mary and Martha" by Del Parson

Choosing the “Good Part”¹

Brent L. Top

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One New Testament episode teaches us concerning what matters most in life. It also illustrates the dangers associated with becoming distracted, losing focus, and being diverted from our primary objectives.

We are familiar with the details of the story of Mary and Martha, but do we really understand the principles the Savior was teaching them and us? It is much more than a story. It is much more than a gentle chiding of conscientious Martha. Contained in this ancient account is a message for a modern world. It may be a simple story, but it is relevant for us today—it is vital for our emotional and spiritual survival in these challenging times. In Luke 10:38–40, the story begins:

Now it came to pass, as they went, that he [Christ] entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house.

And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word.

But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me.

Let me interject an item for your consideration at this point. From a cultural perspective, Martha had a good reason to be upset with her sister. Anciently (and even in some Palestinian settings today), the women did not socially intermingle with the men. The women gathered

together preparing the meal—eating by themselves and mingling among the other women in the party but not associating with the men, even if the guest of honor was speaking in the other room. So Martha is asking Jesus to remind Mary of “her place.” But how does Jesus respond?

And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, [You know you're in big trouble if the Lord says your name twice!] thou art careful and troubled about many things:

But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her (Luke 10:41–42).

This story is often misquoted and misinterpreted. First, consider the misquote. If you ask people to quote the passage, more often than not they will say, “Mary chose the *better* part.” However, it doesn't say that; it says “that *good* part.” In fact, some Bible translations say “the *best* part.” That leads to the misinterpretation. I have often heard people use this scriptural story to justify not doing housework—saying it is better to devote yourself to associating with good people and pursuing intellectual or spiritual learning than worrying about a clean house. They want to pit Mary *the learner* against Martha *the housekeeper*. Yet that is not the intent of the story at all!

What is it that Jesus wants us to learn from this experience? What application can we draw from Jesus' words that will have meaning to us amidst the stresses and struggles of modern society? Important concepts emerge as we examine more closely some of the words and expressions in Jesus' tender teaching of His friend, Martha.

Let's look at Luke's statement, “*Martha was cumbered*.” One translation of the word *cumbered* is “perplexed” or “frustrated.”² What was the source of her frustration? At first glance, she was perplexed and annoyed by Mary's unwillingness to help, but there seems to be something else that is bothering her. Martha was frustrated—or, as one translation says, “harassed”—by all the different cares and demands placed on her, pulling her in different directions at the same time. It was not a choice between good and bad or between sin and righteousness but rather the difficulty of having to decide between too many good things, good choices.³ Elder Neal A. Maxwell said:

So often our hardest choices are between competing and desirable alternatives (each with righteous consequences), when there is *not* time to do both at once. Indeed, it is at the mortal intersections—where time and talent and opportunities meet—that priorities, like traffic lights, are sorely needed. Quiet, sustained goodness is the order of heaven, not conspicuous but episodic busyness.⁴

The Devil’s Dangerous Doctrine of Distraction

Have you ever been to a magnificent buffet dinner with table after table filled with sumptuous dishes—salads, main courses, and desserts of every imaginable kind? Despite all the good things to choose from, we often find ourselves frustrated because our eyes are bigger than our stomachs—we don’t have room for everything.

Our lives are often like that buffet experience. It is not uncommon to become impatient, frustrated, stressed out, and ultimately disappointed because there are so many good things we want to do (or perhaps feel we should do) that we cannot do them all.

The Savior told Martha, “Thou art careful and troubled about many things.” He was acknowledging her conscientiousness but also reminding her that her conscientiousness, as a strength of character, had in some ways become a weakness in her life. The phrase “troubled about many things” could also be translated as “You are distracted. Your attention and efforts are divided, and, as a result, all you do is less effective.”

In our day, the Lord has commanded us to be “anxiously engaged in a good cause” (D&C 58:27). However, that doesn’t mean we have to be anxiously engaged in *every* good cause. Trying to do all things or be all things to all people all the time results in Martha-like frustration. I believe we must learn, like Martha, that being “cumbered” with over-involvement in too many “good causes” actually diverts us away from the things that matter most. Martha wasn’t sinning or being evil in any way. All her efforts and attentions were drawn to doing good for someone else (in this particular case, the Savior), but instead of finding fulfillment and peace and joy in her labors, she was more frustrated and worn out than ever. *She thinks the problem is Mary*—for not helping out with all the preparations—*but the real problem is Martha, herself*—for being over involved and distracted from that which mattered most. She was “*cumbered about much serving.*”

Serving is a good thing. Yet when that useful activity takes us—our hearts and minds and souls—away from that which the original service or activity was intended to bring us to, we are left, like Martha, “harassed”—frustrated. *Good things can take away better things.* As Elder Maxwell said, “Some choices are *diversions* more than they are transgressions. As a result of these diversions, the sins of omission mount up. And they constitute a real *deprivation* because of what we withhold from our fellow human beings. Perhaps it is unintentional, but without that first commandment [to love God with all our heart, might, mind, and strength], some things get omitted.”⁵

How many things in your life—good, desirable, honorable, righteous things—are actually getting in the way of the “good part,” which is an intimate relationship with God? As C. S. Lewis wrote: “God wants to give us something, but cannot, because our hands are full—there’s nowhere for Him to put it.”⁶ Many times these “other things” that fill our hands and our lives are not worldly or wicked things but are needful things—things that cannot be ignored or, as one religious leader called them, “the tyranny of the urgents.” We all can relate to Martha to some degree—pushed and pulled in many directions and by many different demands, most of which are not only good but also necessary. The end result can still be the same—distraction, frustration, and spiritual and emotional “burnout.”

It is important—more than important—how vital it is to take periodic inventory of our lives—discarding those things of lesser value and replacing them with the essential things. We need, like Martha, to be stopped dead in our tracks once in awhile and examine *what* we are doing and *why* we are doing it. Eternal priorities absolutely must guide our lives and actions and choices—for without them we will end up being “cumbered,” “perplexed,” and frustrated that we are spending our time and resources on lesser matters at the exclusion of celestial values.

Satan realizes he cannot always use his heavy arsenal of temptations to be immoral or dishonest or violent on good, conscientious people. These “fiery darts” would probably have little, if any, immediate effect on faithful people who are diligently striving to be righteous. He knows he will be far more successful if he can get us frustrated—“harassed” and “perplexed”—by our inability to do all the good things we would like to do (or sometimes feel we “have” to do).

I believe this is the very thing that Jesus is warning Martha about—the devil’s dangerous doctrine of distraction. It doesn’t seem as dangerous as many of his other temptations, but the end product is often the same. We become lost in the “mists of darkness” of the world because we have been distracted and have looked “beyond the mark” and, with our devotion diverted, end up letting go of the iron rod. Elder William R. Bradford of the Seventy counseled the Saints in general conference to “unclutter” their lives of such diversionary encumbrances.

We need to examine all the ways we use our time . . . [including] our work, our ambitions, our affiliations, and the habits that drive our actions. As we make such a study, we will be able to better understand what we should really be spending our time doing.

At the top of our list of basics, we will surely have the family. Next only to our devotion to God, the family comes first. Their

temporal and spiritual well-being is of vital importance, and so there must be work to provide for it. This means hard work. . . .

A mother should never allow herself to become so involved with extras that she finds herself neglecting her divine role. A father must not let any activity, no matter how interesting or important it may seem, keep him from giving of himself in the one-on-one service and close, constant care of each member of the family.

The titles of Mother and Father will persist after this life. All that we may acquire and any titles we may earn which are worldly will pass away. In the meantime, they may be cluttering up our lives and affecting our eternal outcome.

Young people must learn that none of the exciting and entertaining and fun things are worth it if they take you off the path that will lead you back home to your Heavenly Father.⁷

When we get any of these priorities “out of whack” or when we intentionally or unwittingly mix up their proper sequence, we, like Martha, are “cumbered by much serving”—frustrated instead of fulfilled, harassed and harried rather than happy. When we get diverted and distracted and drawn away in so many directions from what matters most, our spiritual tanks are left empty. We are left depleted, depressed, and discouraged—all because our priorities got mixed up.

Putting Christ at the Center of Our Lives

In the story of Mary and Martha and their interaction with the Master, there is another important statement that is relevant to us today: “One thing is needful.” Jesus gently and lovingly chided Martha for being worried and troubled about many things (Luke 10:41). The “many things” were not just worries about family or health or conditions in the world. An interesting translation of this passage reveals that the “things” causing her so much consternation were, in reality, the many different “dishes” she had prepared for this dinner.⁸

Jesus is teaching her that all her elaborate preparations and the wide array of side dishes she had prepared Him and her guests were *nice, but not necessary*. She had done much more than the Savior required or even desired. “Only one thing is needful,” Jesus said to her. Remember the translation of the word *thing*—dish. Jesus is saying to her that a simple meal with only a few dishes—really only one—would have been ample. Martha was, in reality, wasting much time, energy, and resources. Worse yet, she seems to have lost perspective as to *why* she was having the dinner anyway. I can almost hear Martha saying, “But I want it to be really nice—something people will remember!”

Now don't get me wrong. I believe we should do things nicely—things that are appealing both to the eye and the taste buds and to the heart and the soul. But that does not seem to be the real issue with Martha, nor is it often with what we do. Are we “stressed out” and “cumbered by many things” because we are overly concerned about how we appear or what people may think of us? Have we lost sight of why we do what we do? Did Martha feel that she would be less acceptable to the Lord or that others would view her with scorn if she did not prepare a big meal and do everything just right and make everything “really nice”? What was more important—to have a “really nice dinner” for the guests or to be able to spend time at the feet of the Savior—especially knowing that His days on earth were numbered? Can't you see how Jesus must have felt? I can almost hear the Master saying, “Martha, I want you to spend time with me, not spend all your time in the kitchen. Why are you upset with Mary when she is doing that which I wish you were doing as well—spending time with me!”

When The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints announced its new budget policy many years ago, there were some expressions of concern. How will we ever be able to do everything for the youth and for the ward on such a small budget? How can we go on a “super activity”? What will we have to cut out? The brethren were mindful of those concerns. Perhaps they were trying to teach us like Jesus lovingly taught Martha about being “cumbered” by “many things” when “only one thing is needful.”

At a fireside for the entire Church to discuss this new budget policy, President Boyd K. Packer taught: “Sometimes *more* can be *less*, and sometimes *less* is *more*.” In addition, “Nothing essential will be lost; rather, essential things will be rediscovered, be found!”⁹ Whether it be in our personal lives, in our homes, in our professions, or in our service in the Church, perhaps we should remember Nephi's counsel in the Book of Mormon. He was quoting the prophet Isaiah when he declared:

Come, my brethren [and sisters], every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters; and he that hath no money, come buy and eat; yea, come buy wine and milk without money and without price.

Wherefore *do not spend money for that which is of no worth, nor your labor for that which cannot satisfy* (2 Nephi 9:50–51; emphasis added).

There is another phrase Jesus used, as he taught Martha, that has profound significance. When Martha was upset that her sister, Mary, was not helping with the “many things” Martha was doing, Martha

asked Jesus to scold Mary and make her help. That sounds like some of the sibling squabbles we have had at our house—“Mom, make her help! Dad make him stop!” Wisely, Jesus did not give in to her but instead lovingly taught an important lesson. We often think that Mary had not done anything to help. But that is not necessarily the case. She may have done her part and made the necessary preparations but reached a point when she thought “enough is enough”—the time has come to be with the Master. What Mary was doing was something, the Savior declared, “*which shall not be taken away from her*” (Luke 10:42). What did He mean by that? The implication seems to be that what Martha was worrying about and spending her time doing would be “taken from her.” How could that be? The dinner—no matter how pleasing the preparations were and how delicious the food may have been—would soon be gone, forgotten, with nothing much to show for it. Mary, on the other hand, had been taught at the feet of the Savior. What she learned in her mind, what she felt in her heart, and what she experienced in her soul could not be taken away.

Similarly, when we get bogged down in the “thick of things” and when our efforts, preparations, and activities—those things that take our time, energy, and money, no matter how noble our intentions—divert us or distract from that which should matter most, we will sense we have lost something important.

I love Nephi’s Book of Mormon imagery that perhaps applies to modern-day Marthas (and Marvins). When we lose our spiritual focus and when we “look beyond the mark”—whether it be individual or institutional—we become like the man who Nephi says goes to bed hungry and thirsty and dreams that he eats and drinks until he is full, only to awake from his dream to discover his stomach is still empty (2 Nephi 27:3). That is why Jesus reminds us that some things do not satisfy the soul or have lasting impact, whereas there is something that does. That one “needful thing”—that which cannot be taken away—is the Lord Himself and His eternal gospel. As Nephi declared, “Come unto the Holy One of Israel, and feast upon that which perisheth not, neither can be corrupted, and let your soul delight in fatness” (2 Nephi 9:51). That leads me to my final point.

The key statement in the scriptural account of Mary and Martha—the “moral of the story,” if you will—seems to be “*Mary hath chosen that good part*” (Luke 10:42; emphasis added). Jesus is using a play on words here. The word “part” is sometimes rendered as “portion.” He is using the food and the dishes Martha has prepared as His object lesson. There is a double meaning in His words—“*but one thing is needful.*”

He is certainly telling Martha that a simple meal—“one thing,” maybe even only one dish—would have sufficed for the occasion, but there is something else He is saying. There is something more needful, more important, more life sustaining than just one dish at the meal, for even that will pass away.

However, the “one thing” that is “needful,” “that good part,” is Christ Himself—His atoning sacrifice, His teachings, His plan of salvation, and His charity—His pure and perfect love for us. This is not just “the good part” but is indeed “the best part”—the only part that can never, ever, ever be taken away. No matter what else we do in life, what we choose, what we enjoy, or what we become, it will have been in vain if we don’t fully choose the “good part,” even this “best part,” and take a heaping portion of it into our lives. Christ is the “Bread of Life” and the “Living Waters” that can nourish our souls and satisfy our spiritual hunger. Nothing else has that kind of power.

In recent years, President Gordon B. Hinckley has reminded us of our covenantal obligation to retain the converts to the Church. He often says that it doesn’t matter one whit if we baptize millions and yet do nothing to keep them safe and faithful in the gospel fold. He has said that all of us—the new converts, the less active, and the lifetime members who have pioneer ancestry and who can trace their genealogy back to Adam—need three things to remain steadfast in these trying times. We all need (1) nourishment by the good word of God, (2) a friend (social connections), and (3) a responsibility.

Each of these is important and vital. Yet real spiritual power—indeed, saving power—is to be found in the first one. Any person, even with many friends and social activities in the Church and even with important callings and responsibilities, who does not get the spiritual nourishment the gospel affords will have shallow roots and will quickly wilt in the scorching heat of temptations and tribulations. That is why we must never lose sight of *WHY* we do what we do. All we do in the Church, all we do in our homes, and all we do in our personal lives should be leading us and those we love to Him and to the partaking of His love, His mercy, and His salvation. Some things are interesting; other things are important. But “one thing” is absolutely imperative. He is “that good part.” In fact, He is the “best part.” Only in Christ is there to be found lasting sustenance. Without that “main dish,” all other things are ultimately tasteless and unsatisfying. Only when we choose to partake of “that good part” are we able to know the abundance of life that Jesus offers (see John 10:10). As President Gordon B. Hinckley declared:

With all of our doing, with all of our leading, with all of our teaching, the most important thing we can do for those whom we lead is to cultivate in their hearts a living, vital, vibrant testimony and knowledge of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of the world, the Author of our salvation, He who atoned for the sins of the world and opened the way of salvation and eternal life. I would hope that in all we do we would somehow constantly nourish the testimony of our people concerning the Savior. I am satisfied, I know it's so, that whenever a man [or woman] has a true witness in his [or her] heart of the living reality of the Lord Jesus Christ all else will come together as it should. . . . That is the root from which all virtue springs among those who call themselves Latter-day Saints.¹⁰ **RE**

Notes

1. Adapted from a devotional address delivered at the Education for Daily Living Conference, BYU-Hawaii, 7 August 1999.

2. See *Adam Clarke's Commentary on the Bible*, abridged by Ralph Earle (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1967; reprint Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, n.d.), 872.

3. *The Interpreter's Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick et al., 12 vols. (New York: Abingdon, 1952), 8:198.

4. Neal A. Maxwell, *Notwithstanding My Weakness* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 5.

5. Neal A. Maxwell, “Sharing Insights from My Life,” *Brigham Young University 1998–99 Speeches* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1999), 113; emphasis added.

6. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 96.

7. William R. Bradford, “Unclutter Your Life,” *Ensign* 22, (May 1992): 28.

8. *The Interpreter's Bible*, 197–98.

9. Boyd K. Packer, “Teach Them Correct Principles,” *Ensign* 20, No. 5 (May 1990): 89–90; emphasis added.

10. Gordon B. Hinckley, *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 648.