

CHOOSING WHAT IS BEST
LUKE 10:38-42

I want to say, first of all, thank you for supporting me as I have been on this sabbatical for the last three months. I enjoyed it immensely, so much so that I'd like to do it again next year...and every year after that.

When I began the sabbatical three months ago, I wasn't exactly sure what to expect or how I would be affected by it. When you've been running full stride for so long it's kind of hard to know what it feels like to stop and be still. At first it felt like I was just trying to catch my breath, but after about two weeks I began to feel more alive than I have felt for a long time.

After several weeks I began to experience some things that I hadn't experienced for quite a while—alertness, energy, stamina, creativity, enthusiasm, passion, and pleasure. At the *end* of three months I feel thoroughly refreshed, replenished and renewed. Last June I felt like I was running on empty; today I feel like my tank is full, and I'm ready and raring to go.

The second thing I want to do is thank our staff and elders for their phenomenal work in my absence. They have stepped up to shepherd this flock very effectively. The Word has been preached powerfully and accurately, and you have been fed well. They have provided pastoral care for a lot of us, including me, and, besides their regular responsibilities, they have filled in the gaps and picked up the slack. They have worked extremely hard. Unfortunately, all of *them* need a sabbatical very soon.

Finally, I want to say thanks to all of *you* who ministered to Mindy and me during this time. We received countless cards and letters containing timely words of encouragement and heartfelt expressions of love and appreciation. We cherish every one of those cards and letters, and they often came at a time and contained encouragement that we needed at that very moment. We also received meals, pies, books, flowers, and gift cards. One family gave us their lovely beach home for a week in Depot Bay, and then unexpectedly flew us to Hawaii to see our kids and grandkids the week before they moved to Turkey. We were also able to go to a pastors' conference in Jacksonville, FL that was superb, and fanned into flame my passion for preaching the Word.

Thank you for all your love and affection. We felt it, we feel it, and we have been extraordinarily blessed by it.

The message I have prepared this morning relates to something I have learned in the last three months. As most of you know, I was not in very good shape spiritually, physically, or emotionally before I went on my sabbatical. I was exhausted and depleted. I spent a lot of time thinking, praying, evaluating, reading books, listening to sermons, and talking to people who were familiar with what I was going through. I was also trying to figure out how I got in this predicament, what pushed me over the edge, how I could recover and move forward, and how I could prevent it from happening again.

I'm not sure all of those questions have been answered completely, but I have learned a lot. The Lord has clarified a number of things, and some plans and procedures have been implemented that I'm convinced will provide some corrective measures.

This morning I want to address one big thing—perhaps the single biggest contributor to my spiritual and emotional burnout. It's pretty simple, really, and it is something to which

all dedicated servants of Christ are susceptible, especially in our present culture. I've seen it happen frequently to other pastors and Christian leaders, and so I should have known how vulnerable I was. Nevertheless, it usually happens very gradually so that the victim is not even aware it is happening.

Turn to **Luke 10:38-40**. ³⁸ *As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him.* ³⁹ *She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said.* ⁴⁰ *But 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!"*

This is real life, isn't it? Can't you just picture this scene? Can't you feel the tension? I know you can, because most of us have personally experienced this very same conflict. Maybe not in the kitchen, but maybe at the farm, or in the office, or when we've been working on a project with someone. We're doing all the work, and the other person, the slacker, is having all the fun, going along for the ride. And it's irritating, because it's not fair. It's rude and inconsiderate. And when it goes on for too long you build up resentment and feel like you're about to explode, and you say something like, "Hey c'mon! Get up! Get with it! Give me a hand!"

That's a legitimate reaction, right? Because this is "righteous" irritation, is it not?

But look how Jesus responds: ⁴¹ *"Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things,* ⁴² *but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her"* (NIV).

Once again, just like in almost every story about Jesus, His response is unexpected, and we are left scratching our heads. Martha, and most of us, expected Jesus to support her and sympathize with her. "So sorry, Martha. I guess we got carried away and forgot there's so much to do. Mary, why don't you get up and go help your sister and we'll continue this conversation after supper when she can join us. Oh, and thanks, Martha, for bringing this to our attention."

But Jesus actually makes a comment that shows that not only did He *not* sympathize with her, He defended Mary. He actually took *Mary's* side. ⁴¹ *"Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things,* ⁴² *but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her"* (NIV).

In other words, Mary made the good choice and Martha...not so much. We can all see that in the text. But here's a question for you: Do you really agree with the Lord's assessment?

Most of us, if we were honest, have a secret sympathy for Martha, and a bit of disdain for Mary. I must confess that Martha is my kind of woman. She's conscientious, she's realistic, she's a go-getter, she's a take-charge, roll-up-her-sleeves, "get 'er done" kind of person.

I like that. My mom was like that. I married a woman like that. And because of that, I've always been well taken care of all my life. I've never missed a meal. I've never had to fend for myself in the kitchen if either one of them were present.

Martha, on this occasion, had at least fifteen people in her home, because it wasn't just Jesus who came that day. He brought His disciples with Him—all twelve of them. And hosting people in those days meant that you fed them—it was expected. And it was solely the responsibility of women to do it. And remember, we're not talking about going down to the corner Chinese restaurant and getting take out, or calling up Dominos and having some

pizzas delivered, or sticking some pre-packaged lasagna from Costco in the microwave for a few minutes. We're talking about a full blown meal made from scratch. A meal that required at least two or three or four hours of preparation.

But this wasn't just any ordinary meal, because these were not ordinary guests. This was *Jesus* and His friends. This was the guy who was making front page headlines in the *Jerusalem Post* almost every day. This was the One Martha was convinced was God's promised Messiah—the One that all the Old Testament prophets had been predicting. But this was also one of her best friends—someone who stayed with her and her sister and brother whenever He came to town.

No, this was no ordinary meal. Jesus and His disciples were present, and she wanted everything to be just so. She wanted to go all out and prepare a sumptuous meal that would please and impress her special guests.

And, in this story, that's the rub for Martha. A meal like this doesn't just make itself. Someone has to peel the potatoes and knead the dough and baste the lamb and chop the onions and make the sauce and toss the salad and set the table and...There's a lot of work that goes into it, and the timing has to be just right for everything to be ready at the same time.

It's hard enough for *two* people to pull off a lavish dinner like this for sixteen. It's stressful enough when the chief cook has an experienced assistant to help her.

But Mary wasn't in the kitchen, leaving Martha to do it all by herself. And what's worse, by the looks of it Mary had no intention of helping her at all. There she is, sitting at Jesus' feet, mesmerized by what He's saying, and oblivious to everything Martha is doing. She's not wondering, like Martha, if the Savior is hungry or thirsty and what she can do about it. She's wondering about His personality. She's reflecting upon His character. She's contemplating the words that are coming from His mouth. And she is so engrossed in what she's hearing that she can hardly move. She's just sitting there, and, according to the text, *listening*. And she sits...and listens; and sits...and listens. And pretty soon an hour has gone by, and then two, and she's just sitting there. Soaking it all in.

She's completely unaware of the sound of pots and pans banging around in the kitchen. She doesn't notice when Martha hurries by with her arms full of groceries. She's oblivious when Martha tries to get her attention by clearing her throat or sighing deeply. She's just sitting there. Without a care in the world.

C'mon, you sympathize with Martha, don't you? And you're a little irritated with Mary's lack of sensitivity, her carelessness.

Rudyard Kipling spoke for many of us years ago when he wrote a poem called "The Sons of Mary," the last two lines of which go like this: *"The sons of Mary sit at the feet and hear the word and know how the promise runs. They cast their burden on the Lord. And he takes their burden and puts it on Martha's sons."*

We all know that without the Marthas of this world we'd all be in trouble. Life would be a lot less enjoyable, a lot more chaotic, and a lot less satisfying.

By the way, Jesus knew that, too. And so I want to be very clear that Jesus wasn't condemning Martha for her service. He wasn't belittling her personality (which was undoubtedly Type A), her organization skills, her work ethic, or her efficiency. Jesus made her that way and gave her those gifts, and I'm sure He appreciated how thoughtful and capable and meticulous she was.

No, Jesus isn't faulting Martha for going all out in her service. I know that because of

the context of this passage. Jesus has just finished telling the parable of the Good Samaritan, which defines what it means to love one's neighbor, the second greatest command. In that story the basic lesson is that your neighbor is anyone whose need you see, whose need you are in a position to meet. It is making sure those needs are met, even if it's costly or inconvenient or time consuming.

Martha was loving her neighbor in this story. She saw a need—thirteen hungry men—and she was in a position to meet that need. She was loving her neighbor by making this meal.

Jesus was not criticizing Martha's service; He was criticizing the attitude of resentment and self-righteousness that had crept in *while* she was serving, an attitude that had spoiled her service. Do you see that in the story? She had built resentment toward her sister for what she perceived to be her insensitivity, irresponsibility, and laziness. I think she may also have been resentful because Mary was enjoying Jesus' undivided attention and she wasn't.

But she was self-righteous in that she was convinced this wasn't the right time for either one of them to enjoy Jesus' presence. The right time was *after* supper, preferably when the dishes were done. And Mary should have known that. This is not a time to relax, for crying out loud, this is time to get busy and make things happen.

Martha's resentment and self-righteousness turned into anger, as it almost always does. Martha was angry because she thought she was doing what was best. I mean, what could be better than serving their guests and meeting their needs?

And Jesus says. **Verses 41-42.** ⁴¹ *“Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things,* ⁴² *but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”*

Earlier in the passage Luke makes an editorial comment. He says, *“Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made”* (40a).

That raises a question. Distracted from *what*? When you read the story you get the sense that Martha was staying right on task. She was a woman on a mission—she had a huge meal to prepare for a lot of guests, and she was dialed in, focused, pre-occupied with all the details. What was Luke referring to when he said she was distracted?

I believe he was referring to her being distracted from the Lord Jesus. From her guest, from her friend, from the very One she was so busy trying to serve. She was distracted from being *with* Jesus, by doing *for* Jesus.

That's a big deal. And it is this very thing that has proved to be my undoing for the last couple of years. I've been distracted by all the things I've been doing *for* Jesus. They're good things, important things, eternally consequential things. But I've become so preoccupied with doing those things *for* Jesus that I've been distracted from being *with* Jesus.

And when that becomes a pattern and a lifestyle it's not long before you dry up, spiritually, and start to shrivel. Or, to use another metaphor, it's not long before you run out of fuel.

That's why Jesus told Martha that Mary had chosen what is better. Because *it is better to be with Jesus than to do for Jesus.*

Why is it better? Bruce Wilkerson, in his book *Secrets of the Vine*, describes how he had come to a place of burnout in his ministry, a large, internationally renowned ministry. After some very intense soul searching and counsel, he writes that he finally discovered why his busy Christian life left such a bland taste in his mouth. He said, “I had become an expert in serving God, but somehow remained a novice at being his friend” (p. 101).

God sent His Son into this world to die on a cross for our sins ultimately and primarily so we could be His friends. The Bible says that He purchased us (with the blood of Jesus) for *Himself*. By the way, this is the God who doesn't need anything. He didn't redeem us because He needed more soldiers in His army, or because He needed more servants to do His bidding.

He doesn't need us, He *wants* us. He saved us so we could be His friends. Which is why being *with* Him is better than doing *for* Him. He doesn't want our *service* as much as He wants *us*.

Perhaps the biggest lesson I've learned in these months off is that I was spending most of my time *doing* for Jesus but precious little of my time *being* with Jesus. And by doing for Him without adequately being with Him I lost the love for Him which provides the motivation and the power and the energy and the joy of service. I became like the church at Ephesus in Revelation 2 which Jesus said was doing a lot of good things for Him, but had lost their first love, which led to their lamp ultimately being extinguished. Because love for Jesus is the fuel for that lamp.

That's why Mary had chosen what is better. Being with Jesus, spending ample time with Jesus is the most profitable, the most invigorating, the most empowering, the most energizing thing we can do. Because Jesus is the source of love and power and goodness, and the more we are with Him the more these things become part of us so that we are emanating His love and power and goodness.

"Mary has chosen what is better..."

Yes, Martha was serving, Martha was meeting needs, Martha was thinking about others. She was loving her neighbor, or at least she was trying to. But that's the *second* greatest commandment. The first is to love *God* with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. And there is significance in the order. The only way you can truly love your neighbor is by loving God first and foremost.

Which is why it is better to be *with* Jesus than to do *for* Jesus.

I love my job as a pastor, and I have strived to do my work with excellence. I have done my best to solve problems diligently, study and prepare thoroughly, preach skillfully, counsel competently, lead effectively, and care compassionately. Because that's what good pastors do.

But in trying to keep up with doing all these things, I inadvertently lost my connection to the One for whom these things are all about, and the One who supplies the motivation and strength and energy and joy and wisdom and love to do them. And I found out that when you lose that connection you're in trouble. To use Jesus' own metaphor of the Vine and the branches in John 15, if you don't stay attached to Him, the Vine, you can't do anything. You're just a dead branch that ends up withered and good for nothing.

Let me say it another way: If you don't stay connected to Jesus then what you do for Jesus has no power or permanence. It doesn't matter how hard you work or how much time you spend or how many people you reach. It is destined to be fruitless.

That's where I was headed. And I want to apologize to you, because *my* disconnection affects *you*. If I am simply doing for Jesus and not adequately being with Jesus I cannot shepherd you with the love and wisdom and joy and grace that Jesus wants to impart to you through me. Because I cannot impart what I do not possess.

I become like the driver of a tanker loaded with gasoline who runs out of gas himself and cannot deliver the goods.

There's a modern-day proverb that I've thought a lot about these past three months that goes like this: "What is this life if, full of care, we have no time to stand and stare?" (W.H. Davies).

We live in a world that is constantly on the go. From the time our feet hit the floor in the morning until the time our head hits the pillow at night it's go, go, go, hurry, hurry, hurry, rush to this meeting, complete that project, fulfill this assignment, finish that task, make that deadline.

Someone asks us how we're doing and all we can say is, "Busy."

Busy is a word that describes many of us, isn't it? I'm not just talking about our work—which, for many of us, is upwards of fifty, sixty hours a week. I'm talking about the stuff besides work, too.

"The meetings—oh, man, those endless meetings. And there's rehearsal and homework and sports and those projects around the house that are taking a lot longer than I expected. There's that side-job I've committed to; and that appointment I've made. And then there's the family—oh yeah, the family. I forgot the kids have their game today and I'm supposed to provide the snack. And tomorrow there's practice and piano lessons, and, oh man, they've gotta be fed and I just remembered the fridge is empty so I've got to go to the supermarket."

"What is this life if, full of care, we have no time to stand and stare?" That proverb is a timely word for us. Because if we do not have the time *or* take the time to stand and stare—to stop and be still, we will miss what is most precious in this life. We will fail to grasp and appreciate what is truly important, what is essential, and what is best.

And what is best is what Mary did. Because being with Jesus, spending ample time with Jesus is the most profitable, the most invigorating, the most empowering, the most energizing thing we can do. He is the source of love and power and goodness, and the more we are with Him the more these things become part of us so that we get to emanate His love and power and goodness.

The greatest privilege we have is to know Jesus and love Jesus. But our knowledge of Him and our love for Him will never get below the surface until we stop and be still in His presence. Until we spend time—not sporadic seconds—but ample, generous time with Him.

That's not the only lesson I've learned in these last three months, but it's the biggest. And I've already implemented changes in my schedule and my priorities in order to do that.

I *had* to. Because it's not automatic. If we are truly going to spend sufficient time with Jesus we've got to make some choices. We must plan for it; we must be intentional or it won't happen.

For me, and perhaps for you, it means getting rid of some of the clutter and the distractions in our lives. Things that crowd our hearts and leave very little room for Jesus. It means prioritizing things, and perhaps forsaking things that are low on the priority list. It means learning how to say "no" to lesser things, even though they may be good things, so that we can spend our time on what is *better*.

It also means giving Jesus prime time. Not the left-overs or the scraps; not just the intermissions between my already scheduled activities; not the time when I'm so tired I can't think straight. But the time when I'm most alert, when I have the fewest interruptions, when I can give Him all my attention and sustain my focus.

I believe if we make that kind of attempt we are demonstrating what Jesus really means

to us. That He's not just another item in our schedule; He's not even an important item in our lives.

Rather, He *is* our life.

Congregational Song: "Spirit of God Descend Upon my Heart" #249

Spirit of God descend upon my heart,
Wean it from earth through all its pulses move.
Stoop to my weakness mighty as Thou art,
And make me love Thee as I ought to love

Hast Thou not bid us love Thee God and King
All, all Thine own soul, heart, and strength and mind?
I see Thy cross, there, teach my heart to cling.
O let me seek Thee and O let me find.

Teach me to feel that Thou art always nigh;
Teach me the struggles of the soul to bear—
To check the rising doubt the rebel sigh
Teach me the patience of unanswered prayer.

Teach me to love Thee as Thine angels love,
One holy passion filling all my frame.
The baptism of the heav'n descended Dove.
My heart an altar and Thy love the flame.

CHOOSING WHAT IS BEST Luke 10:38-42

Main Idea: It is better to be *with* Jesus than to do *for* Jesus

Two sisters' hospitality to Jesus (38-40)

Mary was sitting at the His feet (39)

She was listening to Him

She wasn't working

Martha was busy preparing a meal (40)

She was distracted

She was irritated with her sister

She was frustrated with Jesus

Jesus makes a value judgment (41-42)

He comments on Martha's harried state (41)

He asserts that Mary's activity is "better" (42)

Only one thing is needed

Mary's reward cannot be spoiled

Application

Jesus doesn't want our _____ as much as he wants _____

Being with Jesus, spending ample time with Jesus is the most profitable, the most invigorating, the most empowering, the most energizing thing we can do.

If you don't stay _____ to Jesus what you do for him has no _____ or _____

If we are truly going to spend sufficient _____ with Jesus we must _____ for it by:

Getting rid of _____ and _____

Giving Jesus _____ time