SM038 In the Home of Martha and Mary

When Jesus told the story of the Man Left for Dead, the story we commonly call The Good Samaritan, he may have been very close to the road in that story. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was 17 miles and was a notorious site for robbers which is why people usually travelled in groups. And when Jesus finished telling this great story that has so profoundly impacted the world, he started walking up the road back toward Jerusalem. He had been there only weeks before. He had stated many things about himself that all the world needed to hear – he was the light of the world, he was the giver of the water of life, he was Door to life, he was the good shepherd.

And in his story about the man left for dead, he turned the values of the world upside by making a hated Samaritan the hero of his story and by telling all people that the real question in life was not who was their neighbor but who were they a neighbor to.

But the story was now finished and Jesus and his men trudged up the long pathway ascending over 3600 feet in those miles. Their destination, however, was not Jerusalem. The place Jesus had in mind was Bethany, a small village between 1 ½ and 2 miles to the east of Jerusalem. Here Jesus would stay with his disciples and would have an encounter with two sisters that would never be forgotten.

Bethany was an important town in Israel. According to the Temple Scroll, one of the documents discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Jews designated three places east of Jerusalem to care for the sick. And one of these was Bethany. In their purity rules, the Jews established a perimeter around Jerusalem saying that nothing unclean should come within that boundary. Jerusalem, above all, must remain a holy city. But the sick did need to be cared for and Bethany was an ideal location for it was close to Jerusalem but outside the perimeter established by the religious leaders. It was to the southeast of the Mount of Olives and could therefore not be seen from anywhere in Jerusalem. Because it was out of sight and was a suitable place to care for the sick.

Bethany was also a favorite site for pilgrims travelling from the north in Galilee. In order not to come into contact with the hated Samaritans, the Jews would bypass Samaria to the east of the Jordan River, come to Jericho, and then traverse up the steep road and lodge in Bethany, the final stop before coming to Jerusalem.

Hospitality to travelers and care for the sick, Bethany was indeed a special village and in it lived a man and his two sisters. Their names were Lazarus, Martha, and Mary.

When Jesus entered into the village, Martha, the older of the two sisters welcomed Jesus. We don't know why Lazarus was not there to welcome him. Perhaps he was away on business or perhaps he was not yet a follower of Jesus while his sisters Mary and Martha were. Whichever the case, Martha took it upon herself to greet Jesus as he entered the village and to invite him to her home where her brother and sister lived and Jesus accepted her invitation to hospitality.

Copyright © 2013 Stories of the Master is a ministry of Word of God, *Speak!*
Contact us at WGS ♦ PO Box 90047 ♦ San Antonio, TX 78209 ♦ USA
Web – www.WGSpeak.org email – Jonathan@WGSpeak.org

Hospitality in the ancient world, and in many parts of our world today, was a blessed gift to travelers. And among the Jewish people its virtue was extolled. Hosts would often go out to greet a traveler and escort a traveler back to the house.

And a faithful Jewish household would eagerly look forward to entertaining people. In Jerusalem, no man was to count his house as his own, and this attitude certainly spilled over to the surrounding villages such as Bethany. During the feasts when the population of Jerusalem would swell, there was room for all. Owners of homes would hang curtains at their front door to show travelers that room was available. And this hospitality was especially seen in Bethany.

"Let your house be wide open, and let the poor be the children of your house," went one saying among the people. Some said there should be four doors to every house to welcome guests from every direction.

And the rabbis, the teachers of the people had many things to say about the importance of hospitality. Some said that hospitality involved as great a merit as attendance at an academy of learning in Jerusalem. Some said that to entertain a wise man and to send him away with presents was as meritorious as the daily sacrifices in the temple.

The receiving and entertainment of strangers is as great as receiving the glory of God. One rabbi read Psalm 109:31 – "God shall stand at the right hand of the poor," and said, "Whenever a poor man stands at your door, the Holy One, blessed be his name, stands at his right hand. Give him alms, knowing that you shall receive a reward from him who stands at his right hand."

The rabbis taught that when giving hospitality, they were imitating God who clothed the naked (for he clothed Adam and Eve). God also visited the sick (for he visited Abraham in the heat of the day). God comforted the mourners (for he blessed Isaac after his father Abraham's death), and God buried the dead (for he took care of the body of Moses when he died on Mt. Nebo.)

Thus, to be hospitable to others was to imitate God Himself who cared for people and when serving guests, a host was to look pleased at all times, to wait upon them himself, to promise them little but to give them much and the guest was expected to say, "At what trouble my host has gone, and all for my sake."

And so on this day when Jesus and his disciples had trudged up the long, weary road from Jericho to Bethany, a 15-mile walk, Martha welcomed them all into her home. And after the customary greetings when kisses would be exchanged, feet and hands washed, and oil given for anointing, the men would go to one area of the house where they could rest or talk about Scripture while the women would go into another part of the house and prepare a meal for the men.

Martha's heart was filled with joy! Jesus was in her home! She had heard so much about him! His miracles of healing, his teaching on the Scriptures of God's people, and especially his care for the poor and women. Although life in Israel for women far exceeded life in Gentile communities, she still believed that women were not given the respect or love that should be granted them as the daughters of the

Copyright © 2013 Stories of the Master is a ministry of Word of God, *Speak!*
Contact us at WGS ♦ PO Box 90047 ♦ San Antonio, TX 78209 ♦ USA
Web – www.WGSpeak.org email – Jonathan@WGSpeak.org

God of Israel. Perhaps Jesus would speak about that in her home today. And perhaps she could show how valuable she was. She would take special effort and care on this day to show Jesus her hospitality, to make him and his disciples the best meal, and provide a day for them they would not soon forget.

And so while Jesus went into the common area with the men to talk, Martha went to the cooking area and began to work. She organized her household servants into groups with specific assignments. Some were sent to the village to buy the necessary items for the meal. Others made sure Jesus and his disciples had the greatest of care and were comfortable.

Soon everything was in motion under Martha's supervision. And Martha also knew that her reputation as an honorable woman was dependent upon her ability to manage her household. How she wanted to do the best job possible. But soon, some problems began to emerge. One servant said, "I'm sorry ma'am, the market did not have everything we needed. That special spice to make the meal taste just right was not there." Another said, "Ma'am, the vegetables just didn't seem as fresh as we have come to expect. The pickings just weren't that good today." Another servant came in and confessed that she had broken some valuable pottery in the preparations. Another said that one of the fires must have been too hot because some of the food was burned.

Martha could not believe it. Why were all of these things going wrong on this day above all days when Jesus was in her house! She began to become frustrated and upset and thought, "I can't handle this." And then she looked around and realized someone was missing from the kitchen – Mary her sister was not there. Where was Mary?

Martha went into the courtyard and called out, "Mary, Mary, where are you?" But Mary was not there. Then she asked one of the servants, "Did Mary go with you into the village?" and the servant replied, "No, Mary has not been with me." Then, with some concern Martha asked several other servants and finally one of them sheepishly said, "I know where Mary is. She is with the men. She is sitting at Jesus' feet listening to him teach."

Sitting at Jesus' feet? Sitting in the room with the men? Martha could hardly believe her ears. Not only was this inappropriate, but Mary's place was by her side helping her to get everything ready for the men. No wonder things were going wrong. If Mary had been where she was supposed to be, there would not be this chaos going on.

Martha walked toward the room where the men were seated. As she approached she could hear their voices and then she heard Mary's voice asking Jesus a question about the kingdom of God. Martha could not believe it. She came to the doorway of the room, and there was Mary sitting right at Jesus feet and listening to everything he was saying to the men.

She tried to get Mary's attention discreetly. She made faces, she made hissing noises, she motioned to try to get her attention but Mary was completely focused on Jesus. Just at that moment another servant came up behind Martha and said, "I'm sorry to bother you ma'am, but your attention is really needed in the kitchen. You won't believe what has happened now."

Copyright © 2013 Stories of the Master is a ministry of Word of God, *Speak!*
Contact us at WGS ♦ PO Box 90047 ♦ San Antonio, TX 78209 ♦ USA
Web – www.WGSpeak.org email – Jonathan@WGSpeak.org

And then Martha burst into tears and came forward to Jesus and said, “Oh Jesus, I am so sorry to disturb your gathering with these men. I have been so busy preparing the meal and nothing is going right, and my sister, she is supposed to help me. If she had been with the women, if she had been where she was supposed to have been I would have had everything ready by now.” And Martha burst into tears again while Jesus remained silent and Mary continued to sit at his feet.

Finally, Martha said, “Lord, don’t you care? Don’t you care that my sister has left me to do all this serving alone?”

And Jesus said, “Martha, I do care for you.”

And Martha replied, “Then, tell her to help me.”

And Jesus said, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things. But only one thing is necessary. And Mary has chosen this one thing. She has chosen the good part. And I will not allow it to be taken away from her.”

Martha stood there speechless, humbled in the presence of the men, and when we come back we will learn more of her true problem, how Jesus solved it for her, and the lessons for all of us.

Interlude

The story of Martha and Mary tells us that Martha was distracted. She did not begin with anger. She began Jesus’s visit with joy. She had welcomed him into their home. She had wanted to do her best for him. All of this was commendable.

But we receive our first clue from the story that something had gone wrong when it tells us that Martha was distracted with all her preparations. The word distracted literally means that she allowed her attention to wander. This may imply that she also wanted to hear from the Lord. Women were taught in synagogues. When Jesus preached in villages women were in attendance. Women received healing from him. And Martha probably looked forward to spending time with Jesus and hearing him. But somewhere along the way she became distracted. After a few minutes the preparations took precedence over listening to Jesus and she began to focus more on things than the Lord. The Greek word used in the text says she was “dragged away with her many services.” How interesting that service to the Lord can drag one away from the Lord!

Second, the story tells us that Martha became worried. Jesus said, “Martha, Martha, you are worried about so many things.”

The original language also give us an interesting picture. The word “worry” originally meant to be pulled in two. At first, Martha was just distracted, there were many things that were vying for her attention and then once she began to pay more attention to them, it is as if they sunk their hooks into her, drag her, and pull her away from Jesus.

Copyright © 2013 Stories of the Master is a ministry of Word of God, *Speak!*
Contact us at WGS ♦ PO Box 90047 ♦ San Antonio, TX 78209 ♦ USA
Web – www.WGSpeak.org email – Jonathan@WGSpeak.org

Again, she wanted to hear the Lord, but she wanted to make this a grand occasion for him and she couldn't be in two places at one time and so she did neither well. Distraction grew into the bondage of worry and her heart was pulled apart.

Third, the story tells us that she was bothered. Jesus said, "Martha, Martha you are worried and bothered about so many things."

The word "bothered" literally means a "tumult, a bustle." It refers to external agitation. Her mental distraction became emotional worry which then began to affect her face, her body movements, and the pace and noise of her service. Don't we all know what that is like? Don't we know the difference between a cupboard door closing and a cupboard door being closed a little too hard a few too many times and the pots and pans on the stove clanging around more than normal?

Martha's distraction turned into worry which caused her to bustle about the house in her service. She was in a tumult.

Fourth, Martha questioned the Lord's love. Martha went to Jesus and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone?" I love the first five words of her question, "Lord, do you not care?" I have found one other story in the Gospels where this exact phrase was used. When Jesus was in a boat with his disciples a great storm came upon them but Jesus was resting. The disciples were bailing water out as Jesus slept on. Finally, some of his disciples came to him at the height of the storm and said, "Jesus, do you not care that we are perishing?"

Martha used the same words. It's almost as if she is blaming God for her problems. I wonder, if, after she could not get Mary to respond to her efforts to get her attention, she began to look at Jesus with a "don't you care about what is happening? Don't you see what is going on?" type of face.

And I wonder, how many times we have said those things to the Lord or we have felt that way. Believing that no one cares or that God doesn't care that we are perishing.

There is one more step that Martha took in her spiral downward from joy to distress. She became demanding. After Martha asked Jesus if he cared, he probably replied, "Yes, I do care" to which Martha replied, "Then, tell her to help me." Martha thought she had the solution to her problem. Her solution was to drag Mary away from Jesus into her world of problems.

Martha's solution is an example of how people can get trapped into thinking that their problems are because of other people. Martha thought her problems were because of her sister. But Martha's problems were because of Martha.

The Lord did care for Martha. He saw what was happening. He saw everything. And though he surely did not want the entire burden to fall on her, there was something far more important than Mary helping her … something far more important that needed to happen in Martha's life.

And so Jesus said, "only a few things are necessary, really only one and Mary has chosen the good part that will not be taken away from her." What did Martha need? She needed to learn to choose what was

Copyright © 2013 Stories of the Master is a ministry of Word of God, *Speak!*
Contact us at WGS ♦ PO Box 90047 ♦ San Antonio, TX 78209 ♦ USA
Web – www.WGSpeak.org email – Jonathan@WGSpeak.org

best. I don't believe that this story is teaching us to pursue a life of quiet contemplation in contrast to a life of deeds. I don't think the contrast is a life of devotion verses a life of activity. The issue is choosing what is best in life and what is best in each situation. The issue is continually choosing that which will last forever.

In this story, the best was to sit at Jesus' feet. There was no need for an elaborate meal with all kinds of preparations. Martha did right in welcoming him. Maybe a meal was in order. But these good things became wrong. She lost sight of the priority in her life and in her home … and that priority was listening to Jesus.

This is a picture of us who do good things, who do things we should do but who lose focus in our work and miss the most important part of life, loving God with all our heart. How interesting that Martha's slide began with being distracted, losing sight of what was most important.

Some of us may need to look at our life and ask, "What am I doing with my life? Am I caught up in activity after activity with no purpose and not developing my love relationship with the Lord? Would I characterize my life as distracted or focused on hearing God? Do I have a tendency to worry? Do I get bothered? Do I feel that God doesn't care? Do I blame others and become demanding thinking that I have the solution and only if other people see things my way then everything will be OK?

If you answer yes to any of these, you need to look at your life and ask God to show you what is really important.

It is possible to be busy and to be in the center of God's will. That's why I said I don't believe this story is about sitting at Jesus' feet vs. doing things. It's not the amount of activity or type of activity but it is if we are in the center of God's will that matters and our hearts are at rest. Jesus was so busy at times in his life that he did not even have time for a meal. The difference between him and Martha is that he was obeying. God calls us to obedience, not busy-ness. Martha's problem is not that she was busy but that she was busy with the wrong things. Mary was busy too – sitting at the Lord's feet.

And all of this teaches us that whatever we are doing, preparing a banquet or reading God's word, we need to learn to enjoy God and the people he puts into our lives, and the work he has given us while we are doing what is necessary. When Jesus was extremely busy he was enjoying the company of other people, and enjoying His Father in heaven and if we are not enjoying God that should be a caution that we need to take a break as soon as we can and get focused on what is most important.

It was quite possible that Martha could have listened to the Lord for a while, then quietly got up and made a few preparations with a calm heart and mind. She could have gone into the kitchen and prayed, "Lord God of Israel, I would really like to be in there for the whole thing, but I know that you are right here with me and as I make these preparations, I make them for you. And Lord, I'm glad that Mary can hear what Jesus is saying and I ask that you would bless her. Thank you for her example of devotion to you. And help me to follow that devotion." Then, she could have served the Lord with a sweet spirit and instead of hearing, "Martha, Martha you are worried and bothered about so much," she could have

Copyright © 2013 Stories of the Master is a ministry of Word of God, *Speak!*
Contact us at WGS ♦ PO Box 90047 ♦ San Antonio, TX 78209 ♦ USA
Web – www.WGSpeak.org email – Jonathan@WGSpeak.org

heard, “Martha, Martha, you have such peace and such sweetness as you go about your duties. You are truly an example of one who worships God with her service.”

And my friends, I ask you today, “What does Jesus say about you?”

Copyright © 2013 Stories of the Master is a ministry of Word of God, *Speak!*
Contact us at WGS ♦ PO Box 90047 ♦ San Antonio, TX 78209 ♦ USA
Web – www.WGSpeak.org email – Jonathan@WGSpeak.org