

HOW CAN WE GAIN CONTROL OVER OUR DISTRACTED LIFESTYLE?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

by Ron Ritchie

Each year I'm sure most of us look forward to the Easter Season with little memory of the physical, emotional and at times spiritual toll the many family activities and Christian services took on us the previous year. As the week of Passover began most of us were planning how we were going to invite family and friends to dinners, picnics, egg hunts, and a variety of spiritual activities. For example, our family began to get on a roll at Thursday noon, when we joined many of you at the Price Club shopping for food for all the Easter activities coming up. Then, already late, we were off to the doctor for an appointment, followed by a quick stop to pick up a candied ham. The candied ham turned out to be the wrong one, so we had to go back and exchange it. Then I dropped by a friend's house to pick up his daughter and arrived at PBC's "Christ and the Passover" service just in time to be the MC. Early Friday Anne Marie and I joined our son Ron and his wife Sylvia to help them move into a home in San Carlos, while many of you attended Good Friday services here or somewhere else within our community. Friday night our family began the preparation of our home and a meal we were going to serve some 30 people on Saturday, when Ron and Sylvia dedicated their firstborn son Rene Charles to the Lord in the presence of family and friends.

That evening I finished working on an Easter message I was going to give at our sunrise service, while many of you came to PBC to pick up your teenagers who were returning from their ministry in Mexico. Sunday Anne Marie and I left our home in Half Moon Bay at 5:30 AM in order to arrive at Stanford by 6:30 to join the team of men and women some of whom had been there setting up the night before and had then slept overnight on the grass, and some of whom had arrived in the dark at 4:00 AM to finish the setup for the sunrise service. After preaching at the sunrise service we were invited to join some folks at a breakfast in Menlo Park, and then we rushed off to join many of you who had already arrived to participate in the Easter service at Shoreline. After that service it was back home to get an Easter dinner prepared for our family, and suddenly it was Monday and back to work, and boy, was I glad! I sat down, reviewed our Passover week, and said to myself and anyone else willing to listen, "One of these days I'm going to get control of my distracted lifestyle." For in my weariness I thought, I'm not sure the Lord Jesus intended me or my family and friends to live such a fast-paced and distracted life.

That is the subject we're going to address this morning as we turn in our Bibles to Luke 10: 38-42 and look together at a story about two sisters named Martha and Mary. This is a story about how the gift of hospitality almost fell to pieces when Martha became distracted with too many activities. As we study this story we may need to ask ourselves the question, "How can we gain control over our distracted lifestyle?"

1. Allow the Lord to Evaluate our Present Lifestyle

Luke 10:38-42:

Now as they were traveling along, He entered a certain village; and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. And she had a sister called Mary, who moreover was listening to the Lord's word, seated at His feet. But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up to Him, and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me." But the Lord answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only a few things are necessary, really only one, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her."

Now, the context for this story was that Jesus had set his face to go to Jerusalem in order to die on the cross of Calvary for the sins of mankind. This was a heavy burden on his heart as he waited on the Lord God for direction and the right timing. In Luke's account we are now some six months away from the final Passover feast. It was now October 15, and the Lord was in Bethany, two miles outside of Jerusalem, where he was going to celebrate with the nation of Israel the Feast of Booths, a seven-day feast in which the Jews were to remember the days when they lived in booths in the desert for forty years some 1500 years earlier.

Now the Lord and his men had just arrived at this small village located in the hill country of Judea. It appears that a couple of the 70 disciples that he had sent out before him had already preached in Bethany about the kingdom of God and the fact that Messiah was going to visit that town, because later these women would call him their Messiah in John 11-12. Now, as he entered Bethany, "a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home," along with the 12 disciples.

From all we can gather out of this passage and John 11-12, Martha lived with her sister Mary and their later to become famous brother Lazarus (who is not mentioned in this passage). It appears that Martha may have been widowed for she is manager of the household. Later we will find that Martha was a woman of faith who would confess in John 11:27: "I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world." Mary appeared to be a younger single adult living under the same roof. Whereas Martha was a very activity-oriented person, her sister appeared to have more of a meditative nature. If you have time to read John 11-12, you will find a picture of a godly Jewish family, each member of which was in their own way seeking to please God in this small village.

Now it is obvious that Martha had a loving and open heart toward strangers, for she opened her home to Jesus and his disciples, and then she was willing to offer them a meal. It seems that after Martha invited them into her home she introduced them to her sister Mary, and then both of them began to prepare a large meal. As they went about their task, it appears that they both were conversing with the Lord as well as listening to him, but in time there was something about the words of Jesus that drew Mary away, and she listened intently and then just quietly sat at the feet of Jesus, eager to hear every word that he spoke.

I had that happen to me once at singles' Bible study. After the study was over a few people came up to me to ask questions. A couple of the young women sat down at my feet, and all of a sudden I thought, so that was what Jesus felt like. It was a very nice feeling. There was food to eat, but they had spiritual food needs. One of those women was the former Blythe Swanson, who is now the wife of Dorman Followwill, pastor of our college ministry, and the mother of four daughters.

Somewhere during all the preparation for the meal Martha somehow became distracted. You can almost see Martha checking the meat, and then asking Mary to set the table. As they busied themselves with the tasks of their hospitality, the Lord Jesus was conversing with both of these godly women. You can also hear them asking Jesus, "Lord, where have you been, and why are you here in Judah at this time? The last we heard from our friends you were ministering up in Galilee. Share with us!" Meanwhile Martha thinking that Mary was out in the dining room setting up the table, let her mind drift away from the conversation and back to the meal. Note that nothing was out of order at this moment. Martha's heart and motives were right, for it was she who invited Jesus into their home. Unfortunately, Martha's dinner preparations were slowly coming unglued, because she was becoming distracted by the many details of preparing that meal. She lost the main focus of the moment, for here before her, sitting in her home, was the Son of God, who was going to the cross, a man mighty in miracles and teaching. Here was the Messiah; here was Life! She was trying to listen to the words of Jesus, but she was having trouble listening and preparing the meal at the same time.

Now, we all have to admit that we have this same problem from time to time. In this society I have become a victim from time to time with the "tyranny of the urgent," just as you have. I want to be a faithful servant of Jesus Christ, but at the same time I become distracted by the many voices calling out to me to spend more time at work, with my wife, with my children, on sport activities or hobbies, etc. All of these are proper if we would spend time with the Lord first, asking him to take control of our distractions so that we might live a life pleasing to him in the midst of all these voices.

Then Martha fell to pieces. In order to remove some of the pressure of the moment Martha may have become jealous or resentful because Mary had left the rest of the preparation of the meal to her. Something about the

character and conversation of Jesus drew Mary to stop what she was doing. Our Lord may have been telling them about the coming events in his life, for soon the shadow of the cross that had been falling across his life and ministry would become a reality. Being so near Jerusalem and realizing that within six short months he would offer himself up as the final Passover Lamb, he may have spoken of his forthcoming death, burial, and then the hope of the resurrection and ascension. This conversation and perhaps the tone of his voice drew Mary to the point where she found herself sitting at the feet of Jesus. She was hungry, but not for the present meal. She was hungry for spiritual food, starving for some spiritual reality although she lived only two miles from the temple in Jerusalem. She wanted to hear the words of eternal life, and here he was in her home-who wants to eat! She was being fed, deeply.

Martha had not only allowed the preparation of the meal to distract her, but apparently she was so busy that she was also out of touch with Mary's spiritual needs. But rather than take the problem directly to her sister, she wanted Jesus to get on her side, so she said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me." To Martha's way of thinking, Mary was being selfish and irresponsible.

Everything had been going along fine with Martha up to this point, where she made two mistakes at once. The first mistake was when she crossed the line from being a gracious hostess to becoming a critical spirit. When she permitted herself all this resentment and jealousy, the meal became of first importance. Her second mistake was that she tried to involve Jesus in the whole affair, to manipulate him into taking her side. "Lord, you tell Mary to come back to the kitchen! She would come quickly if you told her!"

Then we see the Lord evaluate Martha's activity. It was at this moment that the guest was placed in a position where he had to challenge Martha's heart. He didn't rebuke her because of her hospitality or her preparations for the forthcoming meal, but because she became distracted, which in turn permitted her to have a critical spirit. "Martha, Martha..."-the repetition of the name was an expression of affection and concern. "...you are worried..." That is, she was anxious, going to pieces over all the things she imagined she had to do before everything would be ready. "...and bothered [upset, troubled] about so many things; but only a few things are necessary, really only one..."

Through the years ever since this story was told by Luke there have been many men and women who have sided with Martha, for they think that the Lord was a little hard on her. Rudyard Kipling felt that preachers in his day were very hard on Martha, so he wrote a poem in defense of this poor woman. Here is part of the poem entitled The Sons of Martha:

The sons of Mary seldom bother,
for they have inherited that good part;
But the sons of Martha favor their mother
of the careful soul and the troubled heart.

And because she lost her temper once,
and because she was rude to the Lord her Guest,
Her sons must wait upon Mary's sons
world without end, reprieve, or rest.

And the sons of Mary smile and are blessed---
they know the angels are on their side.
They know in them is the grace confessed
and for them are the mercies multiplied.

They sit at the Feet-they hear the Word---
they see how truly the promise runs
They have cast their burden upon the Lord,
and-the Lord, he lays it on Martha's sons.

What were the many things Martha was worried and bothered about? Well, she had what I call a "hidden agenda" for her guest. She had invited Jesus and his disciples to dinner in her home. But once he arrived and sat down, she had a predetermined meal, and never once in this passage does it tell us that she asked Jesus what he would like. Nor did she take into account where he was in relationship to the cross. Maybe he wanted only some fellowship and prayer because the coming events had erased his desire for physical food. Sometimes we get so excited that someone is in our home that we just wear them out with our hospitality, don't we?

What did Jesus mean, "only a few things are necessary, really only one"? In light of Jesus' forthcoming death, David Gooding in his book *According to Luke* said:

In those circumstances there is no doubt what Christ would have preferred. He would have preferred Martha's fellowship to her service. But Martha's idea of what had to be done was different from Christ's, and as we can now see, it was false. She meant well, she loved the Lord, and she thought she was serving him, but her sense of proportion with regard to what was necessary was in fact depriving the Lord of what he most wished for and depriving her of what was most necessary. And it had come about precisely because she had not first sat at his feet and listened to him long enough to find out what he regarded as the paramount necessity.

You'd think I'd learn, but just last week I almost made this classic mistake again. A friend from Los Altos was on her way to the beach and remember that I lived across the street from where she had parked. She knocked on the door and was invited inside by my son. Within a moment I drove up, walked into the house and greeted her and then proceeded to ask her if she would like something to drink, or could I get her a sandwich or some fruit. I became so distracted trying to meet what I supposed was a physical need that it took the Lord to say to me, "Look at her eyes closely, Ron. Listen to her-what is she trying to say? She is not here for physical food; she wants to talk to you about a spiritual issue." So I said, "Oh!" to the Lord, and then to the woman I said, "Are you okay?" She replied, "Well, not exactly..." So I asked her, "Would you like to talk to me before you go to the beach?" The biggest smile came over her face as she responded, "Oh, yes! I really need someone to talk to for a moment." She poured it all out, and it turned out she was frightened about her family situation. We prayed, and she thanked me and went walking off toward the beach.

How can we gain control over our distracted lifestyle? We can allow the Lord to evaluate our present lifestyle. We can also...

II. Allow the Lord to help us Choose the Good Part

Luke 11:42b

"For Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her."

Then the Lord in speaking to Martha evaluated the choice that her sister Mary made by leaving the kitchen and the preparation of the meal and listening to the Lord's words, seated at his feet as a disciple listening to the words of her Lord and Master. She was drinking in every word he has to say. It was a "teachable moment," and she wasn't going to miss it. For from his lips were coming the words of eternal life as he spoke of his forthcoming death, the importance of his death as the final Passover Lamb, his burial, his resurrection and his ascension. Surely she was thinking of the implications all these events would have for herself as well as her beloved family and her world. We will meet Mary two more times in the Scriptures, and each time she will be found at the feet of Jesus. In John 11 we find that Mary's brother Lazarus had died and she was at home weeping when Martha came in and told her that Jesus wanted to see her. She arose quickly and was coming to him. "Therefore, when Mary came where Jesus was, she saw Him, and fell at His feet..."

On a third occasion just six days before the Lord's final Passover, Jesus came to Bethany and "they made Him a supper there, and Martha was serving; but Lazarus [now risen from the grave] was one of those reclining at the table with Him. Mary therefore took a pound of very costly perfume of pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." (John 12:2-3.)

Our Lord then said to Martha, "...but only a few things are necessary, really only one, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her." What did Jesus mean, "the good part"? Was he speaking about food or her choice of sitting at his feet and listening to words of eternal life? I believe Jesus was speaking of Mary's choice to sit at our Lord's feet in order to learn the secret of how he was able to handle his present reality. For he was able to see Mary's heart, a heart that longed to know him, and in knowing him she would learn the secret of how to handle her own present reality. He was surrounded by activity, pressure, demands, distractions, crowds, and suffering humanity, and Mary was willing to sit at his feet to learn his secret the same way he was willing to sit at the feet of his heavenly Father before dealing with his present reality: the shadow of the cross. The reason Jesus so respected Mary in this episode was that she was living out what he wants all of us to live out, because it was what he was living out. It was the fact that in order not to lose the focus of his life and ministry, he would constantly turn to his Father before he did anything, before he said anything and before he went anywhere, for he told his disciples, "I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me." (John 6:38.) "For I did not speak on my own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent me has given Me commandment, what to say and what to speak." (John 12:49.) That was "the good part."

Now, Mary was a beautiful example of the type of relationship our Lord wants all men and women to have with him. It is a lifestyle of submission to the will of the Father. We cannot understand the will of the Lord unless we are willing to take time to "sit at the feet of Jesus" and listen to him when he speaks the words of eternal life. His words will enable us to discern the difference between what is urgent and what is important. They help us discern the difference between what is of the flesh and what is of the Spirit, what is good and what is evil, what is of God and what is of the world.

How can we gain control over our distracted lifestyle?

First (1) Allow the Lord to evaluate our present lifestyle.

Then (2) Allow the Lord to teach us how to choose the best part.

The "best part" is learning how to find the time to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to what he has to say to us by way of encouragement about himself and what he can give us to deal with our present reality if we will just take the time to listen. He is willing to give us his life, his peace, his joy, his wholesomeness, his wisdom, his discernment, his patience. He is the only one who can set us free from the "tyranny of the urgent" so we won't get so distracted by the many voices of this age.

We need to sit quietly and wait on him to teach us through his word and his Spirit; to guide our day and our thoughts; to give us the wisdom, knowledge, patience, and love that are necessary for this day. Then he will be able to say of us, "You have chosen the best part."

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