

One Necessary Thing

Passage: Luke 10:38-42 | From the series: Luke

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In the movie *City Slickers*, Mitch, a New York sales executive, goes on a two-week cattle drive from New Mexico to Colorado to shake off a midlife crisis. He encounters Curly, an old cowboy, who asks him, “Do you know what the secret of life is?”

Curly holds up one finger and Mitch says, “Your finger?”

Curly: “One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that and the rest don’t mean [anything].”

Mitch: “That’s great, but what’s the one thing?”

Curly: “That’s what you’ve got to figure out.”

Like Curly, and long before Curly, Jesus said “one thing is necessary.” What is it? Let’s see if we can find out.

Jesus enters a village

Luke 10:38a:

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village.

As Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem, he sent messengers, who “entered a village” of the Samaritans to prepare for him. The people in that village, however, did not receive him (Luke 9:52-53). Moreover, Jesus told a would-be follower, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Luke 9:58).

Once again, Jesus, the Son of Man, enters a village. Will he find a place to lay his head?

Martha welcomes; Mary listens

Luke 10:38b-39:

And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching.

Yes! A woman in the village welcomes him. Moreover, as we’ll see, Martha also serves Jesus. In the narrative, Martha upstages the people in the Samaritan village who turned him away. Furthermore, she turns her house into something like a synagogue in which a rabbi, the Lord, teaches.

Martha's sister, Mary, assumes the posture of a disciple, sitting at the feet of a rabbi, in this case the Lord, to listen literally to "his word" (Acts 22:3).

When Jesus was transfigured before three of his disciples, they heard a voice from a cloud saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!" (Luke 9:35). Mary didn't hear the voice from the cloud. She listens as a learner to Jesus, God's Son.

Jesus has just told his disciples: "For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it" (Luke 10:24). Mary didn't need to hear those words to desire to see and hear Jesus.

Martha, though, is not pleased with her sister.

Distracted with much serving

Luke 10:40:

But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me."

Martha is "serving": good. Martha is doing "much serving": good. Martha is "distracted" with much serving: not good.

Martha is distracted by Mary, who is listening to Jesus instead of helping her. Martha feels that Mary has deserted her, leaving her to serve alone. However, instead of speaking to Mary, or even gesturing to her, Martha speaks to Jesus, asking him to intervene. If Mary is listening to Jesus, Martha has some advice for Jesus concerning what he should say to her.

Later in the gospel, when a man asks Jesus to intervene in a matter concerning his brother, Jesus refuses (Luke 12:13-14). Will he intervene in this case?

One thing is necessary

Luke 10:41-42a:

But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary."

Martha wanted the Lord to speak to Mary. Instead, he speaks to Martha. Elsewhere in Luke's writings, when Jesus repeats a name, he appeals to a person (or a city) with a certain urgency (Luke 13:34, 22:31; Acts 9:4, 22:7, 26:14). Jesus has an important and especially personal message for Martha. Mary was listening to Jesus. Now Jesus answers Martha so that she will listen to him.

Jesus tells Martha, who was distracted with "much" serving, that she is anxious and troubled about "many" things. The adjective translated "much" in verse 40 is translated "many" in verse 41.

Martha's distraction originates not in Mary's supposed desertion of her. Indeed, Martha is anxious

and troubled about many things, not just Mary's supposed desertion of her. She is distracted in this case, and presumably other cases also, because she is anxious and troubled about many things.

In contrast to the many things about which Martha is anxious and troubled, Jesus tells her that "one thing is necessary."

What then is the one necessary thing?

The good portion

Luke 10:42b:

"Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."

Wait, did Jesus tell Martha what the one necessary thing is? To be honest, when I came to this text again a few weeks ago, in preparation for preaching it, I felt a little like Mitch in City Slickers. He wanted to know what the one thing was, but Curly told him, "That's what you've got to figure out." So, I tried to find out. I sat with the text a little longer and I followed where it led me.

Literally, Jesus begins his sentence with the word "for": "For Mary has chosen the good portion." The "good portion" that Mary has chosen, then, is related to the "one thing" that is necessary. But what is the good portion?

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the word translated "portion" was used of food, land, and, most significantly, the Lord (Psalm 73:26, 142:5). Listen to David: "The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup" (Psalm 16:5). What is good? Listen to Jesus from later in Luke: "No one is good except God alone" (Luke 18:19).

If the Lord is David's "chosen portion" and Jesus says only God is "good," what is "the good portion" that Mary has "chosen"? The Lord! She's chosen Jesus, who is called "Lord" in Luke 10:38-42. She has chosen to be a disciple, to sit at Jesus' feet and listen to his word.

Just recently in the narrative, Jesus has challenged three would-be followers to put him first, before home and family (Luke 9:57-62). Indeed, he is the one necessary thing. The Lord Jesus Christ: He is the one necessary thing; he is the good portion.

Jesus tells Martha that the one necessary thing, the good portion that Mary has chosen, "will not be taken away from her." Martha had said that Mary had left her to serve alone. She then asked Jesus to tell Mary to leave Jesus and help her. Leave Jesus? Leave the one necessary thing? Leave the good portion that Mary has chosen? No, Jesus will not tell Mary to leave him. He will not be taken away from her.

Note that Jesus does not say that Martha has not chosen the good portion, that she has not chosen Jesus. We know nothing about Martha from Luke other than what we read in Luke 10:38-42. In this text, what does she do? She welcomes Jesus. She gives him a place to teach. Although she's distracted with much serving, she serves. Who does she serve? Jesus! Martha calls him "Lord."

Moreover, John depicts Martha as a woman of faith in Jesus, as one who has chosen to follow him, just as Mary has chosen to follow him (John 11:1-12:8). If Jesus is the good portion, then Martha also has chosen the good portion.

Consider Jesus

In this text, Jesus is not favoring contemplation over action, as if he's contrasting listening to him and serving him. I would like to tell you that he is, because I'm more of a thinker than a doer, more contemplative than active. But I do not believe that is what Jesus is doing in this text.

In the previous narrative sequence, Jesus elevated a Samaritan, who did many things, over a priest and a Levite, who did nothing other than walk past a half-dead man. The Samaritan came to where the wounded man was, saw him, had compassion, went to him, bound up his wounds, poured oil and wine on his wounds, set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, took care of him, took out two denarii, gave the money to the innkeeper, spoke to the innkeeper, left presumably to take care of other business, and promised to return. The Samaritan was one busy man!

Although he was serving much, there is no indication that he was distracted with much serving. There is no mention that he was distracted by those who didn't stop or by the possibility that he too might be stripped, beaten, and left for dead.

Brother Lawrence, the 16th century monk who served his order in France as a cook for more than thirty years, was able to serve God and listen to God at the same time. When he went to work, he would pray, "O my God, since Thou art with me, and I must now, in obedience to Thy commands, apply my mind to these outward things, I beseech Thee to grant me the grace to continue in Thy presence; and to this end do Thou prosper me with Thy assistance, receive all my works, and possess all of my affections."

One friend said of Brother Lawrence, "As he proceeded in his work, he continued his familiar conversation with his Maker, imploring His grace, and offering to Him all his actions." Such conversation was not immediately easy for him, however. At first he did so with diligence, but then he found that the love of God inwardly excited him so that he conversed with God without difficulty: "The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer, and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the blessed sacrament."¹

Martha's problem is not that she's too busy; her problem is that she's "distracted" because she's "anxious and troubled about many things." Jesus doesn't chide Martha for hustling and bustling but for fretting and fussing. For those of us who fret and fuss because we're anxious and troubled, Jesus will have some helpful words for us in Luke 12:22-31, beginning with, "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on."

¹ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, (Uhrichsville, Ohio: Barbour and Co., 1993), 15-16, 18, 32-34.

For now, consider “the one thing” that is necessary; consider “the good portion.” Consider Jesus.

Jesus is in the house

A new and eternal creation is coming. You can’t live in it without Jesus. If you don’t have him, it doesn’t matter what else you have: you won’t live forever in the coming new creation, and forever won’t be good. Indeed, he is the one necessary thing.

Perhaps you have not yet chosen Jesus. Perhaps you’ve been sampling money or power or sex or success or some of the other contemporary gods that are on offer. If so, how satisfied are you? How about choosing Jesus, the good portion?

A smooth wheel with an axis that is off-center is of little use. But even a rough wheel, with a centered axis, still functions. Much of what concerns us seems to be the rough edges around the fringes. And in trying to smooth out the edges, we neglect the center, which is the one necessary thing: Jesus.

When M. Craig Barnes, who is now president of Princeton Seminary, was a pastor, an irritated woman came up to him after a worship service and said, “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. Is that all you know?” Barnes reflects, “Had I been thinking clearly at the time, I would have said ‘It’s all I know that can be of help to you.’”²

Jesus, in speaking to Martha, echoes David, who writes:

*One thing have I asked of the Lord,
that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord
and to inquire in his temple. (Psalm 27:4)*

Mary had the “one thing” that David asked for: proximity to the Lord. The “one thing” that Mary had is what we have: proximity to the Lord. Those of us who believe in Jesus are the house of the Lord, both together and individually. The Spirit of the Lord dwells in us. You can’t get closer to the Lord than that.

In *City Slickers*, Mitch finally figures out that “the one thing” is a renewed appreciation for what he already has. Could that be what we need also: a renewed appreciation for what we already have? What do we have? What did Mary have? Jesus. What did Martha have? Yes, Martha had Jesus. She had Jesus in her house! She needed a renewed appreciation for what she already had. We have Jesus in our house!

² M. Craig Barnes, *Pastor as Minor Poet* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 93.

Now what?

Help yourself

When someone joins our staff at the church, we throw a little party to make introductions and pray for the new person. The party typically begins with an ice-breaker question that everyone answers. The question Monday was, “What do you always say yes to?”

As we went around the room, most people answered with some type of food: e.g., “I always say yes to cheesecake.” I harkened back to my single days said that one of my adages was, “The words ‘free food’ mean ‘I’ll be there.’”

How about saying yes to Jesus? “For all the promises of God find their Yes in him [Christ]” (1 Corinthians 1:20). If Jesus says yes to us, say yes to him.

If Jesus is here, and he is the good portion, then help yourself. Help yourself to the bread of life and living water and new wine. Help yourself to the way, the truth, and the life. Help yourself to justice and mercy and grace. Help yourself to salvation and redemption and freedom. Help yourself to courage and power and hope. Help yourself to love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control. Help yourself to every spiritual blessing. Help yourself to Jesus.

Listen to Jesus, as Mary did, and taste and see that the Lord is good.

Do you worry that you will lose what you value? Are you anxious and troubled because of such concern? Choose Jesus. He will not be taken away from you. And he is the one necessary thing, the good portion.

The Teacher is here

Mary chose Jesus, the good portion.

In the gospel of John, when Martha and Mary sent word to Jesus concerning the illness of Lazarus, their brother, Jesus remained where he was. Jesus delayed but finally made his way to Bethany, the village of Martha and Mary. But, by the time he arrived, however, Lazarus had already died. Martha, after going out to meet Jesus, returned to Mary and told her that Jesus wanted to see her.

Martha didn’t identify Jesus by name but by the title “Teacher,” or “Rabbi”: “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” There are, of course, more significant titles for Jesus, such as “Lord,” the title Martha uses in Luke. Martha, though, may have believed that the title Teacher carried special significance for Mary. When Mary heard that the Teacher was calling for her, she got up quickly and raced to meet Jesus. Once she got to Jesus, she fell at his feet and lamented. (John 11:1-44)

Martha and Mary appear in one other scene in the gospels. In John, after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, Martha once again is serving, and Mary is once again at Jesus' feet. However, this time there is no indication that Martha is distracted by Mary. Perhaps she learned from Jesus' instructions in Luke 10. Neither is there any indication that she should be at Jesus' feet, where Mary is. Martha, like Mary, has chosen the good portion, Jesus. Mary took a pound of expensive perfume, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair, whereupon the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume (John 12:1-8).

Mary appears in three scenes in the gospels, and in all three scenes, she's depicted at the feet of Jesus. In one scene, she listens. In another, she laments. In another, she worships.

Ah, Jesus is the one necessary thing! Ah, Jesus is the good portion! Where is he? He's right here. The Teacher is here and is calling for you.