

Mary & Martha - Distractions & Gender Roles

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Julian Doorey - Sermon - Cavy Bap - 24-9-17

(Luke 10:38-42, Matt 4:1-4, Deut 8:3, 1 Tim 2:11-12)

2

Luke 10:38-42: Jesus at the home of Martha and Mary

³⁸ As Jesus and his disciples were on their way (*to Jerusalem*), 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!' ⁴¹ 'Martha, Martha,' the Lord answered, 'you are worried and upset about many things, ⁴² but few things are needed - or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.'" (NIV)

Prayer**Introduction**

Over the last 6 months we've looked at 'encounters people had with Jesus'. I've found them fascinating because you never know what's going to happen. What was your own encounter like? Jesus' encounter with Mary and Martha, seems like a simple, short, story. How could we spend much time on this? Please discuss in small groups, what you think this story is about (2 mins)...

- How many people think it is about distractions preventing us from following Jesus?
- How many people think it's about challenging gender roles?
- Other responses? - Images www - contextualised. Every painting tells a story / 1000 words.

3

I used to dislike this story. It seemed unfair. Why should Martha doing all the work (eg: food preparation etc for 13+ people) get told off, while Mary lazing around gets complemented? Biblical interpretation can be tricky. We can only read what Luke chose to write. A group of people together for several hours would say a lot more than a few sentences. Luke may have assumed that later readers would know the culture, so kept it brief. There's obviously some more going on here.

Context

We know from preceding chapters that Jesus is on a mission with his disciples (and others?), heading towards Jerusalem. This story only occurs in Luke's gospel, which raises a red flag. Luke's focus is often to show God's bias for the poor, needy, marginalised and underdog. This is shown in the preceding story, The Parable of the Good Samaritan. In that story, Jesus challenged religious people to '*help the person in need*'... like the Samaritan did (social and religious outsider). Perhaps, the Mary and Martha story includes some of Luke's concern for the marginalised. Later...

4

Who was Martha & what was she like?

Martha also appears 2x in John: (i) John 11 'The death and resurrection of Lazarus' story: Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus live in Martha's house in Bethany. (ii) John 12 'Jesus anointed at Bethany' story: Jesus and his disciples were having dinner with Mary, Martha and Lazarus. We're told 'Martha served, while others reclining at the table with Jesus.'

In both stories, when Jesus and his disciples stay over at Martha and Mary's house, it's Martha who does all the work. Hospitality in the Middle East is a very big deal. Assuming there's a meal and sleep-over, there's lots to do. **Martha knew her place in society, and fulfilled her expected cultural role (as a woman), performing domestic duties.**

Who was Mary and what was she like?

This is where things get complicated. There's 6 Mary's in the New Testament, with 3 of them in the gospels. Luke 10 tells us Mary is Martha's sister. In John 12 'Jesus anointed at Bethany' story, we're told that Mary poured expensive perfume on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. Then, depending which gospel you're reading (the anointing story is in all 4, but quite different), people complain about what Mary did. In John 12, Judas complains about the waste of expensive perfume, which could have been sold and the money given to the poor. While, in Luke 7, a Pharisee (religious expert) complains that if Jesus was a prophet he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is - that she is a sinner! Jesus answered, that a 'person who has been forgiven much, responds with much love.' Is this 'Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha', or is it 'Mary Magdalene' considered in church tradition to be a former prostitute? Not sure...

In both stories, when Jesus and his disciples stay over at Martha and Mary's house, while Martha does all the work, Mary seems to take it easy. But is she? When 'Mary sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said' and again when 'Mary poured expensive perfume on Jesus feet and wiped his feet with her hair', she is showing the highest form of respect, honour and worship. Touching or cleaning or caring for someone's feet is usually about honour. We experienced feet touching many times in Bangladesh. [Mary ignored society expectations, and crossed cultural boundaries \(as a women\), shocking both male and female onlookers.](#) With this background of Martha and Mary, let's look at 2 interpretations of the story.

1. We're easily distracted

5 Martha did everything right in the eyes of her culture! She opened her home to Jesus and his disciples (13+) people. We presume this involved food and maybe accommodation (doesn't say). We're told 'Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She asked Jesus, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!' Jesus responds 'Dear Martha, you are worried and upset about many things. Only one thing is needed and Mary has chosen it.' The 'thing' is listening to Jesus. This fits another Jesus story...

[Matt 4:1-4: Jesus is tested in the wilderness / People can't live on bread alone](#)

¹ Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ The tempter came to him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.' ⁴ Jesus answered, 'It is written: 'People do not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.' (Quote Deut 8:3) (TNIV)

Despite Jesus experiencing real physical hunger, he knew that we humans need to listen to our creator's word. It seems that Mary (whether she knew it not) was doing the right thing for her - *at that time*. I don't think Jesus was telling Martha off. Martha was also doing the right thing, but she needed to give space for Mary to do what was right for her. Hopefully next time, Mary will help out in the kitchen, enabling Martha to sit at the feet of Jesus, listening to God's word.

Application

6 This story is about distractions from listening to and following Jesus. Is it time you sat at the feet of Jesus, listening to God's word, being discipled, refreshed and equipped for local or overseas mission? Bible college anyone? Church attendance in NZ (including Baptists) is declining. NZ people have decided that 'listening to God's word' (and all that entails) is not crucial to thriving as human beings. But there's another trend. Our Christian lives are so full with competing options and demands, that church attendance among Christians has dropped. For some, Church attendance now means 2 or 3 times per month, rather than 3 or 4 times month. As a church we have a lot of strengths and great opportunities in front of us. But we're also easily distracted from committed church community involvement, just as Martha was distracted from listening to Jesus. Church involvement as part of following Jesus, is going to become more and more challenging. Saying 'yes' to following Jesus is exciting, challenging, scary and radical. But, which thing / event /

distraction will we say 'no' to, in order to free up some space and time to 'continuing the work of Jesus in the world', as per our church by-line? What could this look like for you? Come and talk...

2. Jesus challenges gender roles

7 Mary did everything wrong in the eyes of her culture! It's almost impossible for modern Westerners to understand the cultural ramification of Mary's actions. She was living in a traditional society, where her prescribed gender role was to host and feed the men. She ignored the traditional gender role, leaving the kitchen, and sat with the disciples (men) to listen to religious teaching. Jesus affirmed her, turning expected gender roles upside down. It's utterly scandalous. The modern name for this is 'gender equality', a social movement very evident over the last 200 years in the West. It's an issue which makes some Christians nervous, while others embrace it as a movement towards God's intended justice and equality for all. A huge debate has raged in the world-wide church regarding the relationship between men, women, God and church. We need to wrestle with scripture, reason, tradition, experience and mission ideas to make a Christian response to gender. However, we have no time today. I'd love to in another sermon. Now, I'm just going to make a few brief comments relevant to us.

Gender roles (not the rolls around my waste)

8 Gender roles are socially, culturally or religiously determined ways of thinking or acting - for both males and females. For example, 50 years ago, males were assumed to be 'bread winners' with jobs and careers outside the home. Females were assumed to be 'home makers' supporting husbands (and family if any) by domestic duties. These roles affected every aspect of boys and girls growing up, for example different educational opportunities for boys compared with girls. Gender roles are not bad things, unless they deny freedom for people to reach their God-given potential. Gender roles change over time. Apart from biological differences (eg: only females can have babies and breastfeed), I doubt there are any gender roles prescribed by God.

9 We've seen many changes in Western society. Last Tuesday, we celebrated the 124th anniversary of NZ being the first nation in the world to give women the vote - 19 Sep 1893. Switzerland took until the 1970s! However, any woman in high profile political leadership is harshly evaluated in terms of physical appearance and femininity eg: Helen Clark in NZ and Julia Gillard in Aussie suffered hugely.

What about the church?

The world-wide church has traditionally been male lead and managed, but this is changing. Some church denominations have hugely changed. My sister-in-law is a Presbyterian minister. Alternatively, some churches (old and new), do not permit women to be an Elder, preach / teach unless to a women's group, or lead worship if it involves sharing Biblical text. On the other hand, very few women wear head coverings these days. Change is occurring.

10 What about us, at Cavy Baptist in the NZ Baptist denomination? Referring to the 'Caversham Baptist Church - Centenary - Souvenir & Programme 1873~1973', we read mostly of the faithful work of Godly 'men / males', not females. For example in 1882 the record shows: '*Sincere desire to obtain a Christian man who would devote the whole of his time to the work of the Lord in Caversham.*' The minister had to be male. In 1972 the record shows: '*Women given the opportunity for door steward duty and assisting with taking up the offering.*' I doubt any of us would disagree with that change in gender role. Now at Cavy Baptist, I'm not aware of any role restricted by gender eg: preaching / teaching, elders, ministry leaders, worship leading, staffing (youth, pastoral care, outreach) - include male and female.

11 What of the future? Our Search Committee is tasked to find and recommend a new Senior Minister for the Church to decide on. The Search Committee (of which I'm a member) is guided by:

[Pastoral Search Church Handbook for a Pastoral Search Team - BUNZ - Apr 2015](#)

‘As God calls both men and women to a life of faith, so both are called by God to positions of leadership within the church. It is important that your team and church be open to receive the names of all candidates whose gifts and skills match the needs of your church. In openness to the Spirit's direction you will want to give equal consideration to all viable candidates without regard to age, race, gender, physical handicap or marital status.’

12

‘It is important that your new pastor be a person who has knowledge of and commitment to the family of New Zealand Baptist Churches and the mission for which they and your church exist. There are a number of practices and protocols of Baptist church life that we have agreed to as a movement of churches eg: women in leadership, sexuality, treaty affirmations etc. Information on these protocols can also be obtained from your RML or the National Centre.’

13

The lament of Carey Baptist College, the NZ Baptist theological and pastoral training college, based in Auckland, is that they have trained a lot of women for ministerial work (still far less than men), but most churches haven't considered a female for the role of minister. Their recent add for a new Principal said:

‘With a commitment to the equality of women in leadership and to further advancing our bicultural journey, our new Principal will encourage all our staff and students to achieve excellence and to lead in ministry and mission.’

In presenting the above Baptist Union commitment to gender equality in leadership, I'm not presenting an official Search Committee view. Please here that. Rather, I'm presenting a practical application for us of the Mary and Martha story, which challenges gender roles. I have no preference for either a male or female Senior Minister. Please here that. Rather, I'm raising the situation in advance of the Search Committee seeking applicants for the job. As a Baptist church we have almost complete autonomy, and it will be up to you and I as church members to decide.

14

One last thing... what about Paul's restrictions on women? For example:

[1 Tim 2:11-12: Instructions for Worship](#)

¹¹ A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. ¹² I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. (TNIV)

Many Biblical scholars understand this (and some other similar verses) to be a 'specific response to a specific problem, in a specific church at a specific time.' This was not intended to be normative for all time. As I said, I'd love to address a Biblical response to gender equality in another sermon.

15

Conclusion

I think the Mary and Martha story reminds us of 2 things:

1. We're easily distracted: Saying 'yes' to listening to and following Jesus, means saying 'no' to some other things. What do you and I need to say 'yes' to or 'no' to?
2. Jesus challenges gender roles: Are we going to be a church committed to the equality of men and women in all aspects of ministry and leadership?

Something to chat about over morning tea.

End