

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, December 3, 2017**

FORGIVE US OUR CHRISTMASES

Luke 10:38-42

Please turn with me to the Gospel of Luke this morning as the Word of God comes to us from Luke 10:38-42. At first glance, this passage may not seem to have anything to do with Christmas or the Advent season, but I hope the connection will be clear to you.

Let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

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Christmas was approaching, and it had been a particularly hurried, harried, hectic, and, on the whole, stressful day in one household. Mom was anxiously running from one task to another, becoming increasingly impatient each time she was interrupted by her little girl. Dad was preoccupied as well by a list of last-minute Christmas-y jobs, and he had no time for his little girl. She kept getting in their way until she was finally hustled off to bed. All the activities and stresses of the day had gotten to her, too. She was so rattled that when she knelt beside her bed to pray the Lord's Prayer, she said: "Forgive us our Christmases, as we forgive those who Christmas against us."

I wonder if that might be a fitting prayer for many of us to pray as another Christmas approaches.

For many of us, Christmas – or Advent, the period of preparation and anticipation leading up to Christmas – “'tis the season to be busy.” Some of us thrive in the busy-ness of the season. The adrenaline kicks in, and we revel in all the cultural accoutrements of Christmas. For others of us, as much as we want to enjoy it, all the expectations that come with Christmas wear us down, wear us out, and leave us feeling anything but joyful. And that is not good.

You've got to put up the tree and decorate it, just like you always do. You've got to decorate your house or apartment. Maybe you always put up lights and other decorations outside, too. You've got gifts to buy for the special people in your life, and sometimes finding the right gift can be a headache. You've got baking to do, dinners to prepare, and gatherings to attend. Maybe you do Christmas cards, or an annual Christmas letter, that you've got to get out to family and friends. In the midst of it all, it isn't hard to feel overwhelmed at times. And weary. Whether you revel in it or not, it is not difficult, or unusual, for the busy-ness of the season to distract us from focusing on Jesus and the real reason Christmas matters so much.

Here is where Martha and Mary come in. These two sisters, along with their brother Lazarus (who is not mentioned in this brief passage), enjoyed a close friendship with Jesus. They lived about two miles from Jerusalem (John 11:18) in the village of Bethany (11:1). Luke tells us that as Jesus and His disciples are passing through, Martha welcomes Jesus and opens her home to Him. It is obvious that Martha wants to do something special for Jesus. She

takes hospitality seriously. She wants to make His visit enjoyable and restful. She wants to minister to Him. And the way she wants to do it – the way that makes the most sense to her – is by preparing an elaborate, delicious meal in His honor. For that desire, Martha is to be commended. It is a good thing that she desires to do.

The problem is that sometimes our good intentions can blind us from seeing and hinder us from receiving something far better. Sometimes the good gets in the way of the best. Martha, in her desire to do something special *for* Jesus, misses out on the opportunity to be *with* Jesus. She becomes “distracted with much serving” (10:40, ESV), “distracted by all the preparations that had to be made” (NIV) in order to make the meal just right. In the process, she gets really upset with her sister Mary, who, instead of helping her in the kitchen, is in the family room with Jesus, sitting at His feet – the posture of a disciple – “hanging on every word He (says)” (10:39, MSG).

Martha gets so worked up about the unfairness of the situation that she interrupts Jesus to complain about Mary’s lack of help. But Mary is not the only one she is upset with. She is upset with Jesus, too, for allowing, even encouraging Mary to just sit there and listen to Him while there is so much work to be done. “Lord, don’t you care,” she says, “that my sister has left me to do [all] the work by myself? Tell her to help me” (10:40). “It’s not fair, Lord! There is so much work to do, and Mary just sits there with you, which means I have to do it all.”

Martha, I think, expects Jesus to take her side. She expects Jesus to agree with her. She expects Him to tell Mary to get busy and help her sister. But that is not what Jesus does. There is no question that Jesus appreciates the motive of Martha’s heart to do something special for Him as an expression of her esteem and love. But He gets to the real heart of the matter when He lovingly confronts her about “fretting and fussing” (10:41, NEB) over so many things. She is so consumed, so distracted, so frazzled about making the meal just perfect that she is missing out on the opportunity to spend time with Jesus. She is missing out on the blessing of being with Him. Mary, as Jesus says in verse 42, “has chosen the good portion,” and it “will not be taken away from her” (ESV).

The “good portion” is time spent in the presence of Jesus. The “good portion” is time spent at the feet of Jesus, listening and learning from Him. The “good portion” is quiet time spent in God’s Word. The “good portion” for us, as we embark on another journey through Advent, is time spent meditating on the message and meaning of Christmas – on the entry into this world of the eternal Son of God, who took on our flesh and blood and bone; who became like us in every way, except that He was without sin; who was born to die for us, taking all our sin and shame upon Himself in order to reconcile us to God and to give us the gift of eternal life. The “good portion” is to quietly reflect on the coming of Jesus to us at Christmas and the difference it has made – the difference *He* has made – in your life and in the world. The “good portion” is to think about why Jesus came in the first place and the fact that He is coming again.

Martha, you see, had room in her house for Jesus. She made room for Him to be a guest in her house. But because her life was ruled by her “to-do” list, there was a flashing neon sign over the door of her heart that said: ‘No Vacancy.’

Is there any danger of that happening in your life? It can happen to anyone. And not just as Christmas approaches. It may not be an issue for you, but I’m pretty sure it *is* an issue for a lot of us.

I want you to understand that this is not about whether you should be more like Martha or more like Mary in your life. It is not about one being good and the other being not good. It is, rather, to say that there is a time to be like Martha and a time to be like Mary. And Christmas, for many of us, is a prime time to be more like Mary than Martha.

A woman named Mayo Mathers confesses that hosting Christmas parties, preparing delicious buffets, and shopping for gifts all bring out the Martha in her. But one year, at her church’s annual Christmas pageant, she had a breakthrough moment. Sitting in the candlelit sanctuary absentmindedly listening to the peaceful strains of “Silent Night,” she wrestled mentally with her list of things still to be done. When everyone stood to sing carols, her lips moved, but her brain was mulling over menu options for her annual Christmas Eve buffet.

The usual parade of bathrobe-clad children marched down the aisle. Mary and Joseph shook their heads in dismay as the innkeeper turned them away. Having watched so many similar renditions of the Christmas story, she realized it had all become too familiar to her. Feeling a stab of guilt, she bowed her head and prayed: “Father, let me see the story through Your eyes tonight.” Suddenly, she says, it was as if she had been transported back in time to the stable in Bethlehem where Jesus was born. Listening to Mary singing a lullaby to her newborn baby, a sense of wonder and immense gratitude settled on her. Into her heart God whispered: “If ever there was a time to worship me, it’s now! This season is about Me, but each year you crowd Me out with the inconsequential!”

Then she writes: “Beautiful, delicious dinners are nice. ‘Just right’ gifts are delightful. But I’m learning that only one thing really matters. While I tend to be more like Martha, at Christmas, ‘tis the season to be Mary!”

(Mayo Mathers, *‘Tis the Season to Be Mary*, kyria.com, 2004)

This is not some deep theological message that unwraps the mystery of the incarnation. It is not a theological explanation of the reasons why “the Word became flesh and blood, and moved into (our) neighborhood,” as it says in John 1:14 (MSG). It is not an exposition on the theological implications of Christmas, profound as they are. It is, rather, a simple plea for all of us not to allow the Christmas rush, the expectations that others have of us, or the expectations or pressures we put on ourselves, to prevent us from spending time with Jesus Himself, as Martha’s sister Mary did, and pondering, as His mother Mary did (Luke 2:19), in our hearts the meaning of all these things.

It is a plea to not allow your familiarity with the Christmas story to dull your response to the message of Christmas and its meaning. It is good to be familiar with the story of Christmas – with the miracle of the birth, of the coming to us of Jesus our Savior, the Son of God who became a man to enable us to become children of God. It is good to be familiar with the gospel message that God loved the world so much that He gave His only Son (John 3:16) to live among us and to die for us. But, as Paul Tripp points out, familiarity can do bad things to us. Too often, when we become familiar with things, we begin to take them for granted. We quit noticing them. We tend to not celebrate them as we once did. We are no longer moved by them as we once were (Paul David Tripp, *Come, Let Us Adore Him*, 10-11).

Please do not let this happen to you. If it has happened to you, let this Advent season be the time when you recover, or rediscover, your sense of Christmas wonder at the world-changing good news of the love of God for you and the coming of Jesus to save you from the hell you – and I – deserve.

Please do not allow the busy-ness of this season to distract you from spending time at the feet of Jesus. Set aside time every day to be with Him. Busy-ness, as I have said before, is not a spiritual gift. In our culture, the busier you are, the more important other people think you are. You may think that your value or worth as a person is dependent on how busy or in demand you are. That is not how God looks at you. There is a time to be busy, yes. There is a time to serve. But there is also a time to be still and know that the Lord is God (Psalm 46:10). There is a time to step back from all the duties and demands of life, from all the activities and opportunities and expectations of the Christmas season, in order to simply enjoy fellowship with your Savior and Lord.

Christmas is not a contest. It is not a competition to see whose decorations are the best or most elaborate, whose spread is the most fancy, who makes the best Christmas cookies (or other desserts), or who can spend the most on Christmas gifts. What Christmas is, is a miracle. And it is an opportunity. Make sure there is room in your life this Advent, this Christmas, for Jesus. Make sure there is room in your Christmas for Him. Don't allow anything, however good, to crowd Him out or take His place. Make sure you take time to be like Mary. Then you will have no need to pray: "Father, forgive us our Christmases."

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.