

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
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## **A TALE OF TWO SISTERS**

**Luke 10:38-42**

### **INTRODUCTION: FAMOUS SISTERS**

If the category on the TV game show *Jeopardy!* were “Famous Sisters,” some of the answers you might expect are tennis players Venus and Serena Williams, former child actors Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen, and advice columnists Ann Landers and Abigail (*Dear Abby*) Van Buren.

Sisters Sasha and Mahlia Obama currently reside with their parents in The White House. Before them were the Bush twins, Barbara and Jenna. Back in the 1960s, The White House was home to LBJ’s daughters, Lynda Bird Johnson Robb and Luci Baines Johnson, who were followed by the Nixon sisters, Tricia Nixon Cox and Julie Nixon Eisenhower.

In the literary world, perhaps the most famous writing sisters are the Brontes – Charlotte, Emily, and Anne. The March sisters – Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy – are the main characters in Louisa May Alcott’s famous 19<sup>th</sup> century novel, *Little Women*.

Brothers are more prominent than sisters in the Bible. In the Old Testament, we find Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, the twelve sons of Jacob, Moses and Aaron (along with their sister Miriam), among others. In the New Testament, particularly in the Gospels, we have two sets of brothers who became disciples of Jesus: James and John (the sons of Zebedee); and Simon Peter and Andrew, who brought his brother Peter to meet Jesus (John 1:42).

The most famous pair of sisters in the Old Testament are Rachel and Leah, daughters of Jacob’s Uncle Laban, both of whom became Jacob’s wives (Genesis 29). In the New Testament, the most prominent pair of sisters are Martha and Mary, whom we meet here at the end of Luke 10, as well as in John 11 and 12.

### **MARTHA AND MARY**

Here is what we know about Martha and Mary. We know they had a brother named Lazarus. We know that they were friends of Jesus and opened their home to Him when He came to Bethany, the village where they lived, which was just two miles from Jerusalem (John 11:18). We know that Jesus loved them because the Bible says so explicitly in John 11:5: “Jesus loved Martha and her sister (Mary) and Lazarus.”

John 11 has the account of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, bringing him back to life after Lazarus had fallen sick and died. When Jesus received word that Lazarus was sick, He intentionally delayed His departure for Bethany for two days (11:6), during which Lazarus died. Jesus did that not because He didn’t care about the well being of His friend, but because

He intended to use the situation to increase His disciples' faith in Him and to manifest the glory of God in the raising of Lazarus from the dead (11:4, 15).

By the time Jesus arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had already been dead for four days (11:17). Lots of friends had come to grieve with Martha and Mary, and to comfort them in their loss (11:19). There is a great conversation between Jesus and Martha in John 11:21-27, which shows both the reality of Martha's faith in Jesus and the limitations of her faith.

“Lord,” she said to Jesus, “if only you had been here, my brother would not have died.” There is probably a veiled complaint in this. What she really meant may be something like this: “What took you so long to get here? Why didn't you come sooner? If you had gotten here in time, you could have healed my brother.” I have a feeling that this is what Martha was really thinking. But then she said: “But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

Jesus responded by saying: “Your brother will rise again.” It wasn't clear to Martha – and I don't think it would have been clear to you or me – that Jesus meant He was going to raise Lazarus from the dead today. Right here and now.

Martha responded to Jesus with a strong and clear statement of faith in the doctrine of the resurrection. She said: “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” She had not yet gotten a grip on the power of Jesus to raise the dead right now. But she did believe there would be a day of resurrection at the end of history.

Jesus wanted to take her a step further in her faith, a huge step further. So He made another of His attention-arresting “I am” statements. Elsewhere, He had said:

- I am the bread of life (John 6:35).
- I am the light of the world (John 8:12).
- I am the door (gate) for the sheep (John 10:7, 9).
- I am the good shepherd (who) lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:11, 14).
- I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:6).
- I am the true vine (John 15:1, 5).

And perhaps most astonishing of all, declaring both His existence from eternity past and His identity as the one true God, now in the flesh:

- Before Abraham was born, I am! (John 8:58).

Here, in John 11, Jesus said to Martha: “I am the resurrection and the life. If you believe in me [not just in some intellectual proposition or theological doctrine], you will live, even though you die. And whoever lives and believes in me will never die.”

“The resurrection and the life” in flesh and blood, the One who had power over death in His person, standing right there, carrying on a conversation with Martha. It was not simply an

academic statement Jesus was making to Martha. It was an invitation to faith. It was a declaration that requires a response. So Jesus said: “Martha, do you believe this?”

What is Jesus were to say to you: “( \_\_\_\_\_, do *you* believe this?” Do you? Do you believe *in Him*? It is a question you cannot escape. It is meant for every one of us.

I love Martha’s response to Jesus. She said: “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.” Like Peter in his great confession of faith (Matthew 16:16), she affirmed her belief that Jesus is the promised Messiah sent from God to bring salvation to His people, that He is truly the Son of God, the One whose coming was foretold and promised in the Old Testament Scriptures.

Not everything had come into clear focus for Martha yet. She did not understand all the implications of the Messiah-ship of Jesus. Nor did she recognize His power over death itself in the immediacy of that moment. But the seeds of true faith were definitely there.

After this conversation with Jesus, Martha went back to the house where Mary was. She called her sister aside and whispered to her that Jesus had come, and wanted to see her. Mary was weeping when she came to Jesus and fell down at His feet (11:32-33). The Bible tells us that Jesus was moved so deeply by her sobbing, by the depth of her grief, that He Himself broke down in tears. Many of you know John 11:35. It is the shortest verse in the Bible. Just two words: “Jesus wept.” It tells us that Jesus understands and enters into our grief and pain. If Jesus wept for Mary and Martha in their loss, I believe it means He weeps with us as well.

Some of His critics, though, weren’t impressed by this display of emotion. They said: “If he cares so much, if he loved Lazarus so deeply, why didn’t he do something to keep him from dying? After all, he opened the eyes of a blind man, didn’t he?” (11:37). People continue to criticize God today, don’t they? For all kinds of reasons. But the sovereign and gracious purposes of God are sometimes hidden from us. Many times we can only see what God is doing, or why He is doing it, in the rear view mirror of life. Only after the fact does it become clear to us. Or, as is sometimes the case, it remains a mystery to us and calls for a deeper kind of faith.

The critics believed Jesus could have kept Lazarus from dying. They believed He could have healed Lazarus. If only He had been there. But they did not believe Jesus could bring him back to life. That was the last thing any of them expected. Including both Martha and Mary.

The story comes to a climax as Jesus comes to the tomb where the body of Lazarus has been placed. Jesus gives the order to roll away the stone covering the entrance to the tomb, and who is it that tries to dissuade Him? Martha. She says: “Jesus, don’t you realize it is going to smell bad? He has already been in there four days!” (11:39). She still doesn’t get it. But we would probably be just like her.

Jesus was not dissuaded. He had the stone taken away, and, with a loud voice, He called Lazarus to come out. Out came Lazarus, alive, this (previously) dead man, now walking (11:43-44). As a result, the Scripture says, many of the friends who had come out to be with

Mary (and Martha) in their loss, seeing what Jesus did in raising Lazarus from the dead, did the only thing that really makes sense. They put their faith in Jesus. They put their trust in Him (11:45).

It was a turning point for Mary and Martha, and for many others as well.

What we have recorded in Luke 10 took place prior to the events of John 11 and the raising of Lazarus. What we can see from this short story in the Gospel of Luke is that Martha and Mary were not wired the same way. They had different temperaments, different personalities, different priorities. Mary was the more contemplative of the two. She was more laid back than her sister. Martha was more of an activist. She was probably the first-born in the family, and she had the classic tendency of the first-born to take charge, and to try to tell others what to do. For some of you, this probably tracks with your experience – either as the first-born in your family, or *with* the first-born in your family.

When Jesus came to visit, Martha took charge and “opened her home to Him” (10:38). Mary wanted to *be with Jesus*. Martha wanted to *do something special for Jesus*. As someone (Joanna Weaver, *Having a Mary Heart in a Martha World*) has said, she wanted to give Jesus a banquet fit for a messiah. For *the* Messiah.

Martha had a heart for serving. She had the gift of hospitality, which is not a gift to be minimized. It is a tremendous gift. For Martha, life was about serving. It was about doing.

Mary, on the other hand, had the tender heart of a worshiper and the inquiring mind of a learner. She wanted nothing more than to sit at the feet of Jesus and to take in every word He spoke. For her, life was about being with the Master. It was about spending time with Him. Which is what she did on this occasion when Jesus came to visit.

Meanwhile, Martha was occupied – or pre-occupied – with all the stuff she wanted to do for Jesus. But it was all piling up on her. There was so much to do, and so little time.

Say this for Martha: She was a remarkable woman. Aside from the fact that she wasn’t married (as far as we know), she was the New Testament version of the vigorous, industrious, much accomplished and greatly to be praised woman of Proverbs 31. Joanna Weaver says she was “the original Martha Stewart” (except for the part about going to jail). She was in perpetual motion, ever busy doing what she thought needed to be done. But busyness, we know, can be a blessing, or it can be a curse. What happened to Martha, and what happens to millions and millions of people today, including Christians, is that in all her busyness, in all her doing, in all her preparations to make it a special dinner for Jesus, she got distracted and lost sight of what was most important. She was so busy trying to serve Jesus that she ended up neglecting Jesus.

Distractions are everywhere. The world is full of them. Satan, our great adversary, the enemy of our souls, is an expert in the art of distractions. You can get distracted by all sorts of things which I’m not going to mention. Some of you may be distracted at this moment,

thinking about all the things you want to do and all the things you need to do instead of focusing on what God has to say to us today from His Word.

It is not only bad things that become distractions in our lives. Sometimes, like Martha, we get distracted by good things. Making a special dinner for Jesus is a good thing. But Martha allowed the good she wanted to do for Jesus to distract her from God's best on this occasion. Such admirable things as our sense of duty or our desire to serve God can actually distract us from what God Himself desires for us.

Not only was Martha distracted by all the things she was trying to do to honor Jesus, she was also becoming more and more resentful of her sister Mary with every passing moment, because Mary was just sitting there at the feet of Jesus while she (Martha) had to do everything herself.

Martha's frustration finally reached the boiling point, and she complained to Jesus about being abandoned by her sister. "Tell her to help me!" she implored Him (10:40). She wanted Jesus to get on Mary's case. But that is not what He did.

Instead of scolding Mary, Jesus gently corrected Martha. I think you can hear the tenderness and affection in the voice of Jesus as He spoke to Martha. "Martha, Martha," He said, "you are fretting and fussing about so many things" (New English Bible), "when only one thing is really necessary" (10:41-42a).

The one necessary thing was fellowship with Him. Time with Jesus. Which is what Mary chose. And Jesus would not take it away from her (10:42).

### **APPLICATION TO LIFE**

So, what are we to take away from this tale of two sisters? At least these three things.

*First*, there is the obvious point that spending time *with* Jesus, learning from His Word, and giving Him our love in adoration and worship, matter more than anything we could ever do *for* Jesus. The Lord wants each one of us to spend time with Him. How? By making and keeping a daily appointment with God to pray and to read and meditate on His Word. Like Mary, He wants us to desire to spend time with Him, and then to act on this God-honoring desire. If you don't have a daily appointment with God, build it into your schedule. It's okay to start small. Don't set the bar so high that you know you won't reach it. Start with ten minutes a day. Then go from there. If you don't have ten minutes in your day to spend with God, something in your life needs to go.

*Second*, beware of the spiritual danger of becoming so busy serving Jesus that you end up neglecting or ignoring Him. That is what happened to Martha. Her problem was not that she had too much to do, but that she tried to do more than was really necessary, and she allowed her work to distract her from being with Jesus.

Martha had a gift for serving. And she was diligent about using it. Obviously, there is nothing wrong with serving. So, as James Boice points out, the question is not: Should I or should I not serve? A better question is: Whom am I serving? And how? Am I using my gifts and energies to serve God? Or am I trying to make a reputation for myself? Is my mind on Jesus or on myself as I serve?

If, in your serving, you find yourself bothered and upset about many things, or if you feel neglected by others, it is a pretty good sign that your mind is really on yourself and not on the Lord Jesus. That is what happened to Martha.

*Third*, do not think that you have to make a choice between being like Martha or being like Mary. Living as a follower of Jesus is not an either/or. It is not that we are to embrace the devotional heart of Mary and reject the servant heart of Martha. God values both.

There is a time to be like Mary. And there is a time to be like Martha. If we are only like Mary, wanting to spend all of our time in personal devotions or worship services, and never like Martha, we are missing out on what God desires for us. If we are only like Martha, focused on all the ministry tasks on our plate, and never like Mary, we are likewise missing out.

I believe God wants us to be like both Mary and Martha. He wants us to be like Mary in her worship and devotion to the Lord Jesus. And He wants us to be like Martha in her heart for service to the Lord.

Some of us are naturally more like Mary. And some of us are more like Martha. Whatever the case in your life, ask the Lord to give you a heart for both worship and service. Not either/or, but both/and. Charles Wesley wrote:

Faithful to my Lord's commands,  
I still would choose the better part;  
Serve with careful Martha's hands,  
And loving Mary's heart.

Do not try to work for Christ without taking time to be with Christ. And do not let your desire to be with Christ become an excuse for neglecting the needs of people the Lord wants you to serve in His name.

Blessed are the balanced. May you know this blessing in your life. Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.