

Pastor Steven J. Cole  
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship  
123 S. Beaver Street  
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001

## THE ONE THING NECESSARY

Luke 10:38-42

By

Steven J. Cole

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Luke Lesson 52

## The One Thing Necessary Luke 10:38-42

In their book, *First Things First* [Simon & Schuster, p. 32], Stephen Covey and Roger and Rebecca Merrill ask this penetrating question: "What is the one activity that you know if you did superbly well and consistently would have significant positive results in your personal life?" They repeat the question with regard to your professional or work life and then ask, "If you know these things would make such a significant difference, why are you not doing them now?" They go on to discuss how we often wrongly let the urgent take priority over that which is truly important.

Let's direct those questions toward our walk with God: "What is the one activity that you know if you did superbly well and consistently would have significant positive results in your walk with God?" Then, "If you know this would make such a significant difference, why did you not do it this past week?" I believe that that one significant activity is spending time alone with the Lord in His Word and in prayer. In the language of our text:

Sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to His Word is  
the one thing necessary in life.

That is the main message of this little story that gives us a glimpse into an incident in the life of Jesus and two sisters who hosted Him for dinner. The story is amazingly concise and yet packed with punch. Luke seems to put it here both to contrast it with the preceding incident and to elaborate upon part of it. In that story, a lawyer *challenged* Jesus by putting a test question to Him. In this story, Martha *welcomed* Jesus into her home. There's a big difference between challenging someone and welcoming Him. Luke wants us to ask ourselves, "*Do I put Jesus to the test or do I welcome Him into my life?*" In the first story, the lawyer cites the two great commandments, to love God and to love our neighbor, but the emphasis, through the parable of the Good Samaritan, is on love for our neighbor. In this story, we see an example of what it means to love God, as Mary sits at Jesus' feet. If we only had the story of the Good Samaritan, we might allow service for God to

take precedence over devotion to God. But the story of Mary shows us that devotion to God must be the basis of all our service for Him. Worship must undergird our work.

It's significant that every time we encounter Mary of Bethany in the gospels, she is at Jesus' feet: here; when her brother, Lazarus dies (John 11:32); and, when she anointed Jesus before His death (John 12:3). It's also significant that Jesus visited these women and was willing to teach them about spiritual matters. In that culture, many rabbis thought that teaching women was a waste of time. But Jesus took the time to evangelize and teach women, thus showing the value that God puts on every person. And through these women, especially Mary, the Lord teaches us a vital lesson about *the* main priority that we need to hold on to in the midst of our busy schedules, namely, that of sitting at His feet, which Jesus calls the one necessary thing, the good part.

Probably most of you agree with me, at least theoretically, that consistently spending time sitting at Jesus' feet *ought* to be our main priority. But I would guess, based on my own struggles and on my years of pastoral experience, that most of you struggle with doing it consistently. I hope to motivate you by showing you why sitting at Jesus' feet is the one necessary thing. Then I want to analyze some of the common hindrances we have to overcome if we want to do it consistently. And, I want to show you how to get started.

#### WHY IS SITTING AT JESUS' FEET THE ONE NECESSARY THING?

Many of you have tried to get into God's Word and spend time with the Lord in prayer, but you lost your motivation. Maybe you jumped into Genesis with gusto, you hung on through Exodus, but you got lost and died somewhere in Leviticus. Maybe you didn't get much out of it and so you quit. But whatever happened to kill your motivation, the fact that Jesus calls Mary's action of sitting at His feet and listening to His word "the necessary thing" ought to be sufficient reason to commit yourself to it. But let me give four reasons why you should make sitting at the Lord's feet the main priority in your life:

1. The Word provides us with the very wisdom of God that we need for all of life's decisions and direction.

The best Greek manuscripts use the title “the Lord” (rather than “Jesus”) throughout this story. Luke is making the point that Jesus is none other than the Lord God, so that His word is God’s word. You may think, “It must have been wonderful to sit and hear Jesus speak as Mary did. I wish I could go back to that time and place and join her.” But the fact is, we all have the inspired Word of God available to us every day, and yet we often neglect it!

God has given us “everything pertaining to life and godliness” (2 Pet. 1:3) in His Word. The Scriptures “are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:15-17). 1 Peter 2:2 tells us, like newborn babes, to “long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation.”

As we’ve seen (Luke 4:1-12), Jesus overcame Satan’s temptations by quoting from Scripture that He knew by heart. As the psalmist proclaimed, “Your Word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You” (Ps. 119:11). God’s Word gives us knowledge about how to love God and to love one another (Luke 10:27). And yet so many Christians are defeated by sin and their relationships are strained, but they seldom get into the Bible to search for answers. It’s as if we were dying from cancer and we had a cure for cancer sitting on our shelf, yet we don’t take it off the shelf and use it!

Not only does God’s Word give us the wisdom that leads to salvation and the understanding we need to grow in godliness, it gives us the perspective we need to face life’s trials, including death. The Word promises us hope in the midst of our trials and hope beyond the grave. So is it any wonder that when Mary sat listening to the word of the Lord, Jesus said that she was doing the one thing necessary?

2. The Word puts us in communion with the living Lord of heaven and earth.

Mary’s sitting at Jesus’ feet and listening to His Word implies a communion or fellowship of her spirit with that of the Lord. Like

the two men on the Emmaus Road (Luke 24:32), Mary's heart must have burned within her as she listened to Jesus explaining the Scriptures. Through her time communing with the Lord at His feet, Mary developed a sensitivity that enabled her to anoint Him for His burial, an action that Jesus said would be remembered wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world (Matt. 26:13).

We need to remember that the point of spending time in the Word and in prayer is not so that we can check it off on our Goals Chart. The point is to meet with the Lord, to commune with Him as Mary did, as we sit at His feet, listening to His word.

3. The Word puts all of life's pressures in proper perspective.

Martha was stressed out by the pressure of preparing the meal for her honored guest. She probably had worried about it for days since she heard that He was coming. She wanted everything to be right for the occasion. But because of her focus on these pressures, she ended up worried and bothered about so many things. She even blurts out an accusation against her Lord and against her sister, thus violating the two great commandments! If she had just taken the time to join her sister at Jesus' feet, all of these pressures would have fallen into proper perspective.

This applies to us. It is so easy to allow the pressures of life to crowd in on us and get our focus in the wrong place. We can even think, "If I take the time to spend with the Lord, all the demands on my time will only stack up higher!" But a few minutes spent in the Word and in prayer can lift the burden and give us the Lord's calm, clear perspective, even though our circumstances have not changed.

4. The Word is the good part, which cannot be taken from you.

Mary chose the good portion, to dine at Jesus' feet, listening to His Word. She would still have that long after the meal was forgotten. Mary was practicing the words of Deuteronomy 8:3, that "man does not live by bread alone, but ... by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord."

You can lose just about everything in life, but you won't lose the time you spend communing with the Lord. You can lose your job, your money, your possessions, and even friendships. But as Paul says at the climax of Romans 8, nothing—tribulation, distress,

persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword, not even death itself or demonic powers—can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord!

If spending time sitting at our Lord's feet and listening to His word is so wonderful, then ...

#### WHY DON'T WE SIT AT JESUS' FEET MORE OFTEN?

There are more reasons than I have time to list, but here are a few that come out of our text:

1. We're too busy with urgent demands.

Martha was "distracted with all her preparations." She was "worried and bothered about so many things." There were all of the urgent demands of getting the meal prepared: setting the table, baking the bread, roasting the meat, fixing the vegetables, and coordinating everything so that it all got done at the same time. We don't know if Jesus was alone or if the twelve were with Him, but if they were, it was a big production. Even if they weren't, there was a lot to do and it was urgent.

Our modern world, with all its time-saving devices, has not eased the problem of time pressure. We all feel it. We all face deadlines, whether it is preparing the evening meal, getting a report done for school, or preparing for some important event at work. Many urgent things are good causes, even necessary. But often they are not important in the sense of really making a difference in our lives over the long haul.

You may recall the illustration I shared in the church newsletter last fall (from *First Things First*, pp. 88-89):

A time management expert was speaking to a group of business students. He pulled out a one gallon, wide-mouthed jar and set it on a table in front of him. Then he took about a dozen fist-sized rocks and carefully placed them, one at a time, into the jar. When no more rocks would fit inside, he asked the class, "Is this jar full?"

Everyone answered, "Yes." He said, "Ahhh." He reached under the table and pulled out a bucket of gravel. He poured some in and shook the jar so that the gravel worked its way in between the larger rocks. Then he asked again, "Is the jar full?"

By this time the class was unto him, so they replied, "Probably not." "Good," he replied.

He reached under the table and brought out a bucket of sand. He dumped the sand in and it went into all the spaces left between the rocks and the gravel. Once more he asked, "Is the jar full?"

"No," the class shouted. "Good," he said again. Then he grabbed a pitcher of water and poured it in until the jar was full to the brim. Then he asked the class, "What was the point of the illustration?"

One eager beaver said, "The point is, no matter how full your schedule is, if you try really hard, you can always fit some more things into it."

"No," the speaker replied, "that's not the point. The point is this: If you don't put the big rocks in first, you'll never get them in at all."

Jesus is saying, "Time spent sitting at My feet and listening to My word is a big rock!" If we aren't careful, busyness will crowd out that essential time we need with the Lord. Even good things, like serving the Lord, can wrongly crowd out the necessary thing.

2. We get distracted by worries and cares.

This hindrance affects some personality types more than others. If you're more like Martha than Mary, you'll need to be on guard against it. Some people are prone to worry and fret over all sorts of things that others never even think about. Martha was probably thinking, "I wonder if Jesus will like the roast lamb? What will He think about the table setting? Have I made enough food? What is His favorite vegetable? And, look at Mary, sitting over there talking theology! Doesn't she know that there are some practical matters where I need some help?" Mary was the more contemplative, devotional type. I would guess that she had helped out before Jesus arrived. But once He got there, she became engrossed in His teaching and didn't even think about the many things that were bothering Martha.

I'm convinced that both Martha and Mary loved the Lord. Certainly there is room for all personality types in the Lord's work. We need hard-working servants like Martha just as much as we

need sensitive learners like Mary. But, even so, the Lord here corrects Martha and commends Mary. Martha thought that the Lord would agree with her and, of course, we all think like that! But the Lord sided with Mary on this occasion. This means that those who are prone to be like Martha, worried and bothered about all the things to do, need to be on guard. It's so easy to let the good crowd out the best. They need to take the time to sit at Jesus' feet and listen to His word. *That* is the one thing necessary.

3. We're afraid of what family and friends will think of us.

Mary did not succumb to this hindrance of sitting at Jesus' feet, but she could have. She could have thought, "If I sit here listening to Jesus, Martha is going to get all hot and bothered, so I'd better go help her." But that would have been a mistake. It's not that we should sit around having our devotions when there is housework or preparations for meals that need to get done. It's not right to leave all the work to the servant types, while we spiritual types sit around not lifting a finger. The question is one of balance. Martha was overboard on her preparations and it was keeping her from this key moment of hearing Jesus teach on spiritual things.

I have observed that families have a way of hindering change. Even when there are severely unhealthy relationship patterns and some of the family members insist that they want the problem member to change, if he or she actually does change, it threatens everyone else because they can no longer blame the problem person for what's wrong in the family. So they do things to cause the changed member to fail and then they say, "See, he's no different than he ever was."

So if you decide that you're going to spend time each day alone with the Lord, and as a result of that time, you begin to change in your attitudes and behavior in the family, be on guard! Your new godly ways will expose their old sinful ways and convict them. Your change means that other family members can no longer blame you for their sinful ways, and they will attack you in an attempt to get things back to the old "normal." You've got to determine to hold firmly and graciously to sitting at Jesus' feet, no matter what other family members may say or do.

So, hopefully you are motivated to spend time consistently sitting at Jesus' feet. You're aware of the hindrances that need to be overcome and resisted in order to do it. Finally, ...

#### HOW CAN WE GET STARTED IN SITTING AT JESUS' FEET?

1. Stop blaming others, deal with your pride, and commit to change.

We are not told what Martha's response was, but it would not have been easy for her to change. The easy thing would be for her to break into tears at the Lord's rebuke, to go off in the other room and feel sorry for herself because no one understood how hard she had tried to put on a good meal! In order to change, Martha had to stop blaming the Lord for not caring, stop blaming Mary for not helping, and sit down with a teachable heart and listen to what the Lord was teaching without worrying about her roast in the kitchen. I hope that Martha did that, but it wouldn't have been easy!

If you're a Martha (male or female) and you want to become a Mary (male or female), you've got to stop blaming others for why you don't spend consistent time alone with the Lord. It's not your mate's fault, your kids' fault, your boss' fault, or your roommates' fault. It's not your impersonal schedule's fault! It's your fault! You've got to humble yourself by confessing your sin to God and you've got to put it in your schedule when you're going to spend time with Him. If you struggle with finding the time, I would suggest for starters that you locate the power off button on your TV remote control and use it!

2. Start simply and realistically and work up from there.

If you don't have a consistent time alone with God, don't begin with a goal of one hour per day, seven days per week! You'll fall short and get discouraged. Aim at 20 minutes per day, at least five days per week. Get a good study Bible in a reliable modern translation. If you've never read the Bible, start with the New Testament and perhaps also Psalms and Proverbs. Once you've read through those books a couple of times, tackle the Old Testament. The Daily Walk booklet is a good tool to help you understand and apply what you're reading. Keep a notebook where you jot down observations and ways that you need to apply the passage. The aim of your time is to meet with God through His Word and

in prayer and to apply it obediently to your life. I strongly urge you to write key verses on 3x5 cards and commit them to memory. Go over them repeatedly until they stick in your brain. God will use the memorized Word to deliver you from temptation and to change how you think, how you speak, and how you behave. If you're on the road a lot, get the New Testament on cassette and listen to it over and over. The aim is to change from conformity to this world to conformity to Jesus Christ through the renewing of your mind (Rom. 12:2).

### Conclusion

Note that sitting at Jesus' feet is something Mary *chose* to do. It won't happen accidentally, because there are too many other things, many of them good things, to crowd it out. It's not something you choose once for life and it's settled. You have to keep choosing it over and over again, day in and day out, by saying no to other things so that you can say yes to this one necessary thing.

So the bottom line is, Jesus says that sitting at His feet and listening to His word is the one necessary thing for those who follow Him. You know that if you did this well and consistently it would have significant positive results in your relationship with God and with others. Knowing that this would make such a significant difference, will you begin to do it today and will you do whatever it takes to do it consistently from now on? If you will, you are choosing the good part, which shall not be taken away from you.

### Discussion Questions

1. What is your biggest enemy in spending consistent time alone with God? How can you overcome it?
2. Someone says, "I tried doing that, but I didn't get anything out of it." Your reply?
3. Must a person be a reader to grow spiritually? Is it significant that God communicated to us in written form? How so?
4. How can we be consistent in the Word without falling into either a dry routine or legalism?

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