

One Thing Is Necessary (Luke 10:38–42)

We Are Starving our Souls to Death

In Deuteronomy 8, as Israel stood in the plains of Moab, beyond the Jordan, poised to the cross the river, to conquer the peoples of Caanan, and to receive their promised inheritance, Moses, who would not lead them into the Promised Land, addressed the congregation of Israel in three sermons (Deuteronomy 1–4, 5–26, 27–30) before making his final preparations for his succession (Deuteronomy 31), declaring a final song of praise (Deuteronomy 32), pronouncing a final benediction upon Israel (Deuteronomy 33), and departing from the congregation to die (Deuteronomy 34). Deuteronomy is Moses’ swan song, his last opportunity to exhort the people to covenant obedience and to warn them against covenant disobedience. Final words are fraught with significance, particularly if the one speaking knows they will be his last, as Moses did.

In the midst of these parting words, Moses spoke to Israel about the centrality and the necessity of the Scriptures. In Deuteronomy 8, Moses reminded them about the daily provision of manna—the bread that fell from heaven every morning, “a fine, flake-like thing, fine as frost on the ground” (Ex 16:14), “like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey” (Ex 16:31). Moses pointed the people to the manna, which still fell every morning and would continue until they crossed the Jordan River and ate the produce of the land (Jos 5:12), and he made a fascinating pronouncement:

“And [the LORD] humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.” (Dt 8:3)

Let that sink in for a moment... The LORD led Israel out into the desert where there was no food, and let them feel the gnawing pain of hunger, in order to humble them, in order to teach them that they were not self-sufficient, that they were not self-existent, that they could not keep themselves alive. Then, the LORD fed them with manna, in order that they might know that they lived by God’s pleasure and power and provision alone. And, although the text does not highlight

this, I suspect that the LORD fed them daily and specifically prohibited stockpiling manna (it would melt in the heat and would rot overnight [Ex 16:19–21]) in order that they would not be tempted to turn the LORD’s gracious provision into an instrument of self-reliance (cf. Dt 8:17).

All of that would be an interesting and important lesson; that would be a sermon in and of itself. But Moses did not stop there; Moses connected the manna to the word of God. He could simply mean that it was by God’s command that the manna fell from heaven, that in this way the people lived by the word of God. But I think Moses was pointing to something more fundamental. Peter Craigie, in his commentary on Deuteronomy, comments that “the provision of manna was not simply a miracle, but it was designed to teach the Israelites a fundamental principle of their existence as the covenant people of God. The basic source of life was God and the words of God to his people; every utterance of the mouth of the Lord (v. 3) was more basic to Israelite existence than was food.”¹ Ultimately, it is not the presence of abundant water, or fertile soil, or ready supplies of food that determines whether we eat and whether we live; *we live by God’s pleasure, by God’s power, and by God’s provision*. By relating manna to the word of God, Moses was pointing to the truth that as we are body *and* soul, that we need nourishment for our bodies *and* for our souls, and that God is the provider of both—bread for the body *and* His word for the soul. Just as the people of Israel were meant to feed upon the daily provision of manna for the life of their bodies, so they were to feed daily upon the word of God for the life of their souls. Anything other than daily feeding upon the Word of God brings eventual death (cf. 1 Pt 2:2–3; Heb 5:12–14). We live in covenant with God by living in faithful, daily obedience to His word.

But, by and large, we do not believe this, as evidenced by the way many of us approach the word of God. We do not approach the word of God as the life-sustaining food of our soul, but rather like a doctor’s appointment—something we make when we are sick and need treatment, or perhaps a regular check-up that we don’t really want and put off too long. We do not treat the word of God as food, as necessary spiritual nourishment apart from which our soul will atrophy, wither, and eventually die. And it shows. It shows in the weakness of our faith; it shows in the weakness of our joy; it shows in the weakness of our worship. We are starving our souls to death.

¹ Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 185. Craigie continues, “This principle did not mean that the Israelites were to expect at all times the miraculous provision of food, as in the instance when God provided manna. Normal circumstances would involve normal acquisition of food supplies. But if the command of God directed the people to do something or go somewhere, the command should be obeyed: shortage of food or water, lack of strength, or any other excuse would be insufficient, for the command of God contained within it the provision of God”; Ibid.

In today's text, the Lord Jesus essentially takes Deuteronomy 8:3 and applies it to Himself and His disciples. Many things in this life are important—marriage, parenting, ministry, job, home, finances, etc. But only one thing is necessary—being in the presence of Christ and feeding on the word of Christ. If we do all of the important things in life, but neglect the one necessary thing, our entire life will be wasted and we will have nothing to show but wood, hay, and stubble. But if we have the one necessary thing—if we daily sit at the feet of Christ listening to the word of Christ—everything else in life will fall into its proper place. We live, not by family or ministry or job or anything else; we live by the word of Christ. The main point of this morning's sermon may be stated as follows: *The highest privilege and greatest need of the Christian life is regular communion with Christ—hearing the word of Christ in the presence of Christ; therefore, we must prioritize communion with Christ above all else.* The central phrase of this passage is found in v. 42— “but one thing is necessary.” Let's examine this “one thing” by asking and answering four questions:

- What is this “one thing?”
- Why is this “one thing” necessary?
- How do we attain this “one thing?”
- What hinders us from attaining this “one thing?”

Who? Where? When?

Before we can begin, however, there is a contextual problem that need to be resolved. This is the first time either Martha or Mary has appeared in the Gospel of Luke. And that would not be a problem if it weren't for the fact that two women named Martha and Mary are central characters in John 11–12, along with their brother Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead. And in John 11, they are said to live in Bethany, which was a village about two miles southeast of Jerusalem (Jn 11:18). But in Luke's Gospel, Jesus does not enter Bethany until Luke 19:29; in Luke 10, Jesus is still on that long, 130-mile trek from Caesarea Philippi to Jerusalem, evidently nowhere near Bethany. What gives? There are, as I see it, three possible solutions.

- Luke could be in error, having confused names, places, and stories. But not only would this deny the essential doctrine of inspiration (and its logical and necessary corollaries of inerrancy and infallibility), but it does not accord with Luke's own

testimony of having carefully examined and cross-referenced many eyewitness testimonies of the accounts he chose to record (1:1–4).

- This could be a different Martha and Mary than the family from Bethany described in John’s Gospel. That may seem far-fetched, until we recognize that Mary was the most common female name in Hellenistic Judaism, and Martha the fourth most common name.² In other words, Jesus would have known many Marthas and many Marys. But to have a Martha and Mary in the same family, in the same home, and bearing the same characteristics we find in John 12:1–8 and the anointing at Bethany in which Martha is said to have “served” (διηκόνει) Jesus while Mary worshiped Jesus, this is probably not the best solution. These appear to be the same two women as in John’s Gospel.
- So I suggest a third solution, which is that Luke is not following a strict chronology, as we have already seen in his placement of Jesus’ sermon at Nazareth at the beginning of Jesus’ Galilean ministry (Lk 4:16–30), while Matthew (13:54–58) and Mark (6:1–6) place it halfway through Jesus’ Galilean ministry. At times in his Gospel, Luke organized material thematically rather than chronologically, and that appears to be the case here.³ What might that theme be? Jesus is the Christ of God (9:20), the Chosen One to whom God commands His disciples to listen (9:35), the one the disciples are blessed to see and hear (10:23–24), the one in whom sinners may inherit eternal life (10:25). What is the conclusion of what the last two chapters have

² James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 325. Edwards cites Richard Bauckham, who notes that “literary evidence in the time period 330 B.C.–A.D. 200 shows Mary to have been the most common female name (70 records), followed by Salome (58), Shelamzion (24), and Martha (20), with Joanna (12) and Sapphira (12) tied for the fifth most common name”; Ibid., 325n131, citing R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 89.

³ Edwards, 324–26. What might that theme be? “Jesus does not direct Martha or readers to Torah, but to *himself*. In so doing, he has given a definitive and final answer to the question of the lawyer in vv. 25–26. Not in fulfilling the two greatest commandments—whether love of God or love of neighbor—is eternal life inherited, but in sitting at Jesus’ feet and hearing his word”; Ibid., 329. Similarly, Garland writes, “Luke appears to be deliberately ambiguous about the name of their village, ‘a certain village,’ because he knows that it is chronologically out of place. Jesus has barely started his long journey to Jerusalem, and it would disrupt the journey motif if Jesus were to arrive so soon at the outskirts of Jerusalem. Luke has apparently moved up an incident associated with Bethany for a purpose, as he did the Nazareth episode”; David E. Garland, *Luke*, ECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2011), 450. See Garland’s explanation for why Luke moved this event up in the chronology of Jesus’ final trek to Jerusalem; Ibid., 450–51. This is also the view of Leon Morris; Leon Morris, *Luke*, TNTC (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1988), 209–10. Morris suggests that Luke “may have placed [this story] immediately after the preceding parable as a safeguard against any of his readers coming under the misapprehension that salvation is by works. He makes the point that waiting quietly on the Lord is more important than bustling busy-ness”; Ibid.

revealed about Jesus? There is one thing necessary—to be in His presence and hear His word.

So I conclude that this Martha and Mary are Martha and Mary of Bethany, the sisters of Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead in John 11. This event, therefore, took place in Bethany, about two miles from Jerusalem, at some other point in Jesus’ ministry, either on one of His many trips to Jerusalem, or during the visit just prior to His passion during which Mary anointed Him with oil for His burial, as recorded in John 12.

With that problem resolved, let’s read the text, and then we will ask and answer those four questions.

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. 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. 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.” But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.” (10:38–42)

The Identity of the “One Thing”

The first question that must be answered is, What is the “one thing” that is necessary? What is the “good portion” that Mary had chosen? The answer is found in v. 39:

And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching. (10:39)

The “one thing” that is necessary is to sit at the Lord’s feet and listen to His teaching—what I am calling today, and what the Reformed tradition before me has called “communion with Christ.” Notice that there are two essential components to communion with Christ—there is being in the presence of Christ (Mary “sat at the Lord’s feet”) and listening to the word of Christ (Mary “listened to his teaching”). I wish to emphasize both of those elements today, so as to avoid two opposing dangers.

On the one hand, there is the danger of seeking the presence of Christ apart from listening to the word of Christ. There are many today who are seeking a numinous sense of the divine presence, who are seeking communion with God, in ways that are entirely or almost entirely divorced from the word of God. Three ways come to mind that I see as particularly prevalent in American Christianity.

- Some seek communion with God through *mysticism*. Mystical approaches to communion with God generally seek to achieve a heightened, transcendent spiritual state by emptying the mind, whether through meditation or the repetition of mantras (“breath prayers”) or practicing “mindfulness” (“centering prayers”). The underlying goal of these various mystical approaches is to block out the noise and quiet the mind, in order that you may “hear God” and “sense His presence” and “be enveloped in divine love.” The problem with such approaches is that when you empty your mind and listen for the voice of God, what you will inevitably hear is your own voice disguised as God’s voice... and in some cases, you may hear something far worse. Mystical approaches, while attempting to elevate and open your soul to God, rather than bringing you outward and lifting you upward, actually drive you inward. But what will you find in there, other than a heart that is “deceitful above all things and desperately wicked” (Jer 17:9 [KJV])? Communion with God is not found by looking within, but by looking to Christ; communion with God is not found by emptying the mind, but by filling it with the word of Christ.
- Some seek communion with God through *aesthetics*. There are evangelicals that are flocking in droves to high-church Anglicanism, or to Eastern Orthodoxy, or to Roman Catholicism. Why? Usually, it is not the doctrine that draws them. It is the aesthetics and the architecture, the pageantry and the ceremony, that evokes within them a sense of reverence and awe. Now, there is nothing inherently wrong with a well-designed liturgy or with beautiful architecture that evokes a sense of reverential wonder, so long as that reverential wonder is not confused with communion with God. If you have ever walked into one of the world’s great cathedrals, you probably felt something stir within you. The high, vaulted ceilings, the light refracting through the stained glass, the exquisite detail on the carvings of stone and wood, the otherworldly acoustics... It would be inhuman not to feel *anything*. But what you are feeling is *not*

communion with God; you are simply enjoying beauty, which you are capable of doing because you are created in the image of God who is the source of all that is good, true, and beautiful.

- Some seek communion with God through *emotionalism*. Confusing a heightened emotional state with communion with the divine presence, people will seek such emotional experiences through a variety of means, often through musical worship. Again, there is nothing inherently wrong with emotions—as faith without works is dead (Jas 2:17), so faith without emotions is dead (1 Cor 16:22). But there are innumerable ways to stir our emotions that have nothing to do with the gospel, with the word of Christ, or with the truth of God. The right chord progression, a well-timed key change, the right lighting ambiance (aesthetics aren't only for high-church Christians), these can all elevate our emotions—in fact, they are designed to elevate our emotions. There is nothing particularly wrong with that... it just isn't the same thing as communion with God. Heightened emotions are the *result* of communion with God, not the *means* of communion with God.

On the other hand, there is a danger of reading or hearing the word of Christ without spiritually engaging with the word of Christ. But that is merely data input, and will not keep your soul alive, either. We need to hear the word of Christ as in the presence of Christ—that is, we must receive the word with faith as from His throne, with prayer for understanding and affection, with meditation upon its meaning and application, and we must respond to the word with worship and obedience. “Man does not live by bread alone, but . . . by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (Dt 8:3). But just as food that remains in your hand or in your mouth does not nourish your body without being chewed upon, swallowed, and digested, so the word of God does not nourish our soul unless we do the same—chew on it (meditation), swallow it (faith), and digest it (obedience). You will not enjoy communion with Christ by merely reading the word of Christ, but by engaging with the word of Christ. I will return to this theme of engagement with the word of Christ, of listening to the word of Christ in the presence of Christ, in a few moments.

But before we move on to the next point, I want to make one further clarification. I have been using “communion with God” and “communion with Christ” interchangeably. In reality, both phrases are theological shorthand for “communion with God through Christ.” And that

brings me to a crucial point that I do not want to assume everyone here already knows. There can be no communion with God apart from Christ. It may be that there is someone here this morning who is a stranger to the church, unacquainted with Christianity, ignorant of the biblical gospel. Let me take a moment and explain why communion with God matters, and why such communion is only possible through explicit, conscious repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

We were created for communion with God; we were created for fellowship with our Creator. We were created to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. The first man and woman whom God created enjoyed this fellowship in the Garden of Eden, which was like heaven on earth, where God dwelt in the midst of His people. But that first man and woman rebelled against God; and when they did, their communion with Him was severed, their fellowship with Him destroyed. As a consequence of their sin, God withdrew His presence from the earth, placing all mankind, all of their descendents, and all creation under a curse of corruption and death. Thus, every man and every woman is born into this world condemned to death and judgment and corrupted by sin, alienated from God and under His wrath.

But in His mercy, God promised from the beginning to send a Redeemer into the world who would restore man's fellowship with God by dealing once and for all with the sin that destroyed that communion. In the fullness of time, God fulfilled His promise, sending the eternal Son of God to be born of a virgin by the power of the Holy Spirit, such that He is true God and true man in one person, the Lord Jesus Christ. Being the eternal Son of God incarnate through the virgin by the power of the Spirit, Jesus did not share in the condemnation and corruption that we all inherit by nature, but was holy and righteous in the sight of God. In His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus became the sinless substitute, the righteous representative, of sinful men. His righteous life fulfilled the demands of God's law; His atoning death satisfied the penalty of God's wrath; His glorious resurrection defeated death and brought life and immortality to light. He then ascended to the right hand of the throne of God, from whence He shall return to save those who trust Him as Savior and swear allegiance to Him as Lord and King, and to bring judgment and destruction upon those who refuse and rebel. There is but one way for sinners to be restored to communion with God, and that is through repentance and faith in Christ. You cannot have communion with God until you receive the forgiveness of sins, and you cannot receive the forgiveness of sins apart from repentance and faith in Christ. If you remain alienated from God this morning, start here. Call upon the name of Christ, and trust Him to reconcile you to God.

The Necessity of the “One Thing”

The second question to ask this morning is, Why is communion with Christ necessary? This is precisely what Jesus said with regard to Mary’s choice to sit at His feet and listen to His teaching, despite the demands of service and the displeasure of her sister, Martha:

But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.” (10:41–42)

Why is communion with Christ necessary? Indeed, why is communion with Christ the “one thing [that] is necessary,” taking preeminence over all else, even many good things like preparing and serving dinner for Jesus and His disciples? I can think of two interrelated reasons.

First, communion with Christ is the life of the soul. If I am correct, and Jesus’ statement to Martha that “one thing [hearing the word of Christ in the presence of Christ] is necessary” means essentially the same thing that Moses meant in Deuteronomy 8:3 when he said that “man does not live by bread alone, but . . . by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD,” then it should be obvious that communion with Christ is the life of the soul. Our bodies can live without food, but our souls cannot live without the word of Christ received in the presence and power of Christ. This seems to be the point behind Jesus’ statement to the crowds in John 6:

“Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.” (Jn 6:27)

But these crowds did not want the food that Jesus offered; they rejected the word that He spoke.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, “Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is of no help at

all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe.” (Jn 6:60–64a)

These were Jesus’ “disciples” —part of that larger crowd that followed Him around, witnessing His miracles and listening to His teaching. They heard the word of Christ, but not in communion with Christ, not by the power of the Spirit of Christ, not as those who receive the word with faith, with prayer, with meditation, and responding to the word with worship and obedience. But the twelve were different; they received the word of Christ in communion with Christ, and in so doing they received the life of Christ.

After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.” (Jn 6:66–69)

The twelve (or eleven plus Judas [6:70–71]) had tasted the word of Christ, they had fed on the word of Christ for the life of their soul, and it was therefore unthinkable that they should turn away from Christ. They couldn’t, for Jesus had the words of eternal life; He had their soul-food. To turn away from Jesus (or to turn away from His word, which is one and the same thing) would be to starve their souls. How many times do the psalmists speak of the word of God “reviving” (giving life to) the soul?

*The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul. (Ps 19:7a)*

*My soul clings to the dust;
give me life according to your word! (Ps 119:25)*

*This is my comfort in my affliction,
that your promise gives me life. (Ps 119:50)*

I am severely afflicted;

give me life, O LORD, according to your word! (Ps 119:107)

The psalmists had learned to feed upon the word for the life of their soul. That was what Mary was doing, and Jesus commended her as having chosen “the good portion” (τὴν ἀγαθὴν μερίδα), of having chosen the “one thing necessary” that takes preeminence over the “many things” that clamor for our attention.

Second, only a living soul can serve God effectively. What do you notice about Martha’s service? Was it joyful? Was it gracious? Was it an act of love to her Lord? No. It was bitter and begrudging. Why? Because it was not rooted in communion with Christ. I do not want to be too harsh on Martha. I do not think Jesus was harsh toward Martha. I do not hear a condemning tone in His words, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things.” Rather, I hear a tone of concern and gentle correction. I do not doubt Martha’s motive—I think her service began out of love for Christ (she “welcomed [ὑπεδέξατο] him into her house” [v. 38]). Neither do I doubt that Martha’s service was good and necessary—hospitality is a virtue frequently commended in Scripture (Rom 12:13; 1 Pt 4:9–10), and Jesus and His disciples needed to eat. But sin was crouching at her door (Gn 4:7), and she was not prepared to resist it. Why? Her service was not rooted in communion with Christ. For when she saw her sister Mary, whom she thought ought to be helping her to serve, sitting with the rest of the disciples (“who [*also*] sat at the Lord’s feet” [(ἡ) καὶ παρακαθесθεῖσα πρὸς τοὺς πόδας τοῦ κυρίου]⁴) and listening to His teaching, sin overtook her. Philip Ryken writes, “Unfortunately, this heartwarming scene of gracious hospitality and theological instruction was soon disturbed by the storm that was building in Martha’s heart. As Jesus went on teaching, Martha became increasingly agitated, until finally the storm cloud burst and the angry words came pouring out: “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.”⁵ What sin? Ryken identifies three:

- First was *distraction*. The word Luke used (περιεσπᾶτο) means to get dragged away.

In other words, Martha lost herself in her service. She lost sight of what was

⁴ See Edwards, 326.

⁵ Philip Ryken, *Luke, Volume 1: Luke 1–12*, REC (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2009), 555. While I abbreviated it, Ryken quotes the entirety of v. 40 in his commentary.

transpiring in her house—the Lord of glory was breaking the bread of life. Food and service could (and should) wait.⁶ Ryken writes,

How easy it is for us to get distracted, even when we are serving the Lord. We begin serving because we are attracted to Jesus and want to show him our love. So we get involved in helping children, or reaching out to the poor, or teaching the Bible, or some other form of Christian service. Our motivation is to honor God by loving our neighbors. But soon we get distracted by the problems we have in ministry, or even by the work of ministry itself. We have discipline problems in the classroom, and we forget why we ever wanted to work with children in the first place. Or we get so caught up in getting ready to teach others that we fail to listen to what God is saying to us in his Word. Sometimes we even forget to pray for God’s blessing, without which our service can accomplish nothing.⁷

- Next came *self-pity*. Rather than sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to His word, Martha was up on her feet and thinking about how much work there was to be done (she was distracted with “much service” [πολλὴν διακονίαν]), and how she was the only one working. Ryken writes, “We know the feeling, because like Martha, we start sulking whenever we feel that we are the ones doing all of the work. We think more and more about how hard we are working; little by little, our feelings of self-pity take over. Soon we have stopped serving Jesus at all. We are serving ourselves, and thinking only about what our ministry is or is not doing for us.”⁸
- Finally, self-pity turned to *resentment*. Her growing anger boiled over, not only onto Mary... but onto Jesus Himself. She marched up to Jesus and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me” (v. 40). I’m not sure we get just how shocking a scene this is. As Ryken notes, Martha turns from serving the Lord Jesus to scolding the Lord Jesus.⁹

⁶ Ryken, 555–56.

⁷ Ryken, 556.

⁸ Ryken, 556–57.

⁹ Ryken, 557–59. “She had stopped serving and started scolding”; Ibid., 558.

And what was the source of all this sin and ugliness in an otherwise lovely and faithful woman? It came from a heart that failed to prioritize communion with Christ. Again, Ryken writes,

It may not seem all that serious to neglect the Word of God. At first we can hardly tell the difference it makes not to read our Bibles or to pray. But soon a subtle self-pity creeps in. Rather than rejoicing in the promises of God, we feel sorry for ourselves because of the difficulties we are facing. We are increasingly critical, finding fault with others for what they are doing or not doing for us. Before long we will be trying to tell God his business. This will all happen when in our service *for* Jesus we get distracted *from* Jesus.¹⁰

The Attainment of the “One Thing”

So how do we, like Mary, choose the “good portion?” How do we pursue the “one thing [that] is necessary?” The Lord Jesus is not coming to our house tomorrow morning, that we may sit at His feet and listen to His word. So how do we commune with Christ when He has ascended to the right hand of the Father? The theological answer is that we commune *with* God, *in* Christ, *by* the Spirit, *through* the word of God and prayer. The word and prayer are the means of communion with Christ; that is how we sit at Jesus’ feet and listen to His teaching in this present age, as we await the age to come when we will gather before His throne and commune with Him face to face.

But I have found it difficult in my twenty-plus years of following Christ to enjoy daily communion with Christ in a sustainable manner. Because of the coldness, the dullness, the sinfulness of my own heart, my prayers become stale and perfunctory and repetitive, and my Bible reading becomes mindless, heartless, and tedious. Mindless, muttered prayers is not communion with Christ. Mere Scriptural intake, in which I read passages I have read many times before and then close my Bible without another thought given to what I have read, is not communion with Christ. Merely going through the motions of a daily devotional time does not provide me with the “one thing [that] is necessary.” It does not feed and nourish my soul; it does not equip me to battle unbelief, nor empower me to fight indwelling sin. Scripture and prayer are not magical sacraments by which we receive automatic grace. In order to partake of the “one thing [that] is necessary,” I must *engage* with Christ in Scripture and *engage* with Christ in the

¹⁰ Ryken, 558–59.

prayer. And therein lies the difficulty. I have to fight for communion with Christ. How do I do it? How do I pray in such a way as to commune with Christ? How do I engage with the Scriptures in such a way as to commune with Christ?

There is much wisdom to be found in the Reformed and Puritan tradition regarding communion with Christ (the classic treatment on the subject is John Owen's *Communion with God* [1657]), and there are many good tools available today to help you engage with Christ in the word and prayer. And, of course, you don't *need* any supplement to your Bible, your prayer time, and the Holy Spirit. Perhaps daily communion with Christ is not a struggle for you as it is for me. But I want to recommend one in particular that I have found helpful, not as a *supplement* to the word and prayer, but rather as an *aid* to a more thoughtful, spiritual engagement with Christ in the word and prayer. There are other good resources available; this has simply proven helpful to me. I want to recommend *Be Thou My Vision: A Liturgy for Daily Worship* by Jonathan Gibson, a fascinating guy who was born and raised in Northern Ireland, educated at Cambridge, ministered in Australia, and is now the Senior Pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia and a professor of Old Testament at Westminster Theological Seminary. I don't remember how I first came across this daily liturgy, but I knew when I read the preface that I had found a kindred spirit who struggled in the same way that I do. Gibson writes,

In 2020, during the COVID-19 lockdowns, I reflected on my devotional life as I became increasingly dissatisfied with its content and structure. My basic format of reading and petitioning, with a few praise points thrown in, began to feel more like a bland time with God than a blessed time with God. Around the same time, my friend Mark Earngey informed me of a short liturgical guide that he had put together for the Sydney diocese to aid families and churches during the lockdown. It inspired me to think about how I might structure my own personal or family devotions more like a mini church service, with elements of a call to worship, adoration, confession, assurance, creed and catechism, [the] *Gloria Patri*, prayer for illumination, Bible reading, prayer of intercession, and the Lord's Prayer. As an experiment, I decided to include these liturgical elements in my devotional times. As a result, I experienced something of a renewal in my devotional life. I found my prayers helped by saints in the past, my knowledge of the Scriptures expanded with a set reading plan, my understanding of the Christian faith deepened through regular

instruction from the historic creeds and the church's catechisms. My devotional times became more praiseworthy rather than mainly petitionary. Overall, I found myself less distracted, more concentrated; less bored, more engaged. The flow of the liturgy was meaningful; the varied content of each element, enriching. My devotional life began to feel more like a delight than a duty.¹¹

So I gave it a try, and I have found the same to be true for me. This daily liturgy helps me to commune with God in Christ by the Spirit as I hear God's word, pray thoughtfully and passionately four separate times (prayers of adoration, confession, illumination, and intercession), confess my faith through creeds and catechisms, sing praise to God, and read two chapters of Scripture (one in the Old Testament, one in the New Testament) each day, all in about forty-five minutes. There are thirty-one daily liturgies in this book, and once you have worked through that two or three times, you will be pleased to learn that Gibson has written three more daily liturgies just like it—one for Advent, one for Easter, and one in the Psalms.¹² In other words, with one-hundred fifty total daily liturgies between the four books, there is plenty of variety. It's not for everyone. For instance, some people do not like to pray written prayers; John Bunyan didn't. But I find that when I pray them slowly, thoughtfully, passionately, making them my own, they keep my prayers from becoming stale and monotonous. So this resource may not be for you; but for right now, in this season of my life, it is helping me to commune with Christ daily. The important point to remember is that we commune *with* God, *in* Christ, *by* the Spirit, *through* the word of God and prayer. And we must remember that communion with Christ is not attained by the *mere* act of reading Scripture and uttering prayers; communion with Christ is attained as we *engage* with Christ in Scripture and prayer.

There is one more point to make before I move on. I have been focusing throughout this sermon on *daily, personal* communion with Christ. But I do not want to neglect the importance of *weekly, corporate* communion with Christ, which is in some ways *more* important than our

¹¹ Jonathan Gibson, *Be Thou My Vision: A Liturgy for Daily Worship* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2021), 17–18.

¹² Jonathan Gibson, *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel: A Liturgy for Daily Worship from Advent to Epiphany* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2023); Jonathan Gibson, *O Sacred Head, Now Wounded: A Liturgy for Daily Worship from Pascha to Pentecost* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2024); Jonathan Gibson, *Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing: A Liturgy for Daily Worship with the Psalms* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2026).

daily communion, though both are necessary, being interrelated. Ian Hamilton, in an essay on the Banner of Truth website on this topic, wrote,

This does not mean that communion with God is not deeply personal, even individual. It absolutely and undeniably is. But our communion with God transcends the individual and reaches its ordained heights as the church, together, draws near to the Lord on his Day, through his Son, under his Word, and by his Spirit. This is not saying that communion with God is reserved for the Lord's Day. It is saying that, contrary to the atomistic, incipiently selfish mind-set that has seeped its way into the church in the last 300 years, communion with God is at its richest and most profound when it is engaged in 'with all the saints.' . . . The kind of piety that reserves its best energies for 'closet communion,' and sees Lord's Day worship as a 'top-up' to that communion, will never rise to the choicest communion that God has ordained for his people.¹³

So while there is "one thing [that] is necessary," that one thing is in reality two interrelated and indivisible things—daily, personal communion and weekly, corporate communion. Both are essential to the nourishment of your soul.

The Hindrances to the "One Thing"

Before I close, I want to briefly address three hindrances to communion with Christ that we must watch for.

The first is, of course, *distraction*, which is at the forefront of this text. Martha was "distracted with much serving" (v. 40), which caused her to be "anxious and troubled about many things" (v. 41). Listen, there is *always* something to do—chores to be done, projects to be completed, people to be served.¹⁴ Therefore, we are *always* at risk of doing "many things" whilst neglecting the "one thing." But remember, you are inadequate to do the "many things" in a

¹³ Ian Hamilton, "John Owen: Communion with God," December 11, 2013; <https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2013/john-owen-communion-god/>.

¹⁴ Edwards notes, "Luke's objective in this story correlates closely with his objective in Acts 6:1–7, in which the apostles, through the establishment of the office of deacon, enable the ministry of food to continue without impeding the more important ministry of the word in preaching and prayer"; Edwards, 329.

manner that glorifies God unless you have given yourself first to the “one thing [that] is necessary.”

The second threat to communion with Christ is a lack of *discipline*. We may have the *desire* for communion with Christ, but we fail to *discipline* ourselves to make it happen. Time is precious, and therefore always at a premium. If you are going to prioritize the “one thing [that] is necessary,” you will have to sacrifice something that is unnecessary. Something will have to go, and it will probably be something in the late evening, therefore enabling you to get to sleep earlier, therefore enabling you to get up earlier. But I would be willing to bet that when you analyze what in the late evening you would have to give up, it is something that holds little value anyway... usually mindless scrolling on your phone. If communion with Christ is the “one thing [that] is necessary,” then you must carve out an unyielding, inviolable appointment with Christ in the word and prayer.

But there is one final hindrance to communion with Christ of which I must warn you. It may not be distraction or a lack of discipline hindering your communion with Christ, but a lack of desire. A lack of desire for communion with Christ is an unspeakably dangerous thing, for it may indicate the absence of spiritual life. The dead don’t desire; the spiritually dead don’t desire communion with Christ. So I ask, do you *desire* communion with Christ? Do you *desire* to sit at His feet and listen to His word? If not, cry out to God for the grace of repentance. But if you do *desire* the “one thing [that] is necessary,” then do whatever is necessary to attain that “one thing.” Choose the good portion; choose communion with Christ. For this will never be taken away from you.