

"THE GOOD PORTION"

I. Introduction

- A. Like much of the material in this section of Luke, this brief story is unique to the third Gospel.
1. It is also a passage that has sometimes been misunderstood.
 2. Some have seen it as a call for those who are especially devoted to Christ to withdraw from ordinary society and pursue a solitary life of quiet contemplation.
 3. As you may be aware, that was the mindset behind the monastic movement.
 4. More recently, some have treated this passage as a sort of personality test.
 5. This view encourages us to consider whether we are more like Martha or Mary, and then it urges us to strive for the proper balance between a life of active service and a life of quiet reflection.
- B. The problem with these interpretations is that neither one finds support in the text itself.
1. On the one hand, there is absolutely no indication that Mary withdrew from the world and lived a life of solitude.
 2. This was a special occasion.
 3. The Messiah was a visitor in Martha's home.
 4. Mary sat at his feet because she wanted to make the most of this opportunity.

5. On the other hand, the text does not call our attention to the supposed personality difference between these two women but to the difference in their priorities.
6. On this particular occasion, Martha had the wrong priorities and Mary had the right ones.
7. As we study this passage today, we will see how it sets a contrast between being anxious about many things and choosing the one thing that is necessary.

II. Being Anxious about Many Things

- A. At some point while Jesus was traveling and teaching throughout towns and villages with his face set toward Jerusalem, he was welcomed into the home of Martha, the sister of Mary and Lazarus.
 1. These dear friends of Jesus lived in Bethany, which was located about two miles outside Jerusalem.
 2. It must have been a relief for our Lord to have an opportunity to get away from the crowds and from his enemies and be in the company of friends.
 3. While such occasions are refreshing, they also require a bit of work.
 4. Jesus would not have been alone when Martha welcomed him into her home.
 5. He would have brought the twelve along with him, and perhaps some of his other followers as well.
 6. Naturally, Martha wanted to be a good host.
 7. There is nothing inherently wrong with that.
 8. Being hospitable, generous, and attentive is a way of honoring our guests.

9. Nevertheless, Martha let herself lose focus on the thing that was of the utmost importance.
 10. This is made evident by the terms that are used to describe her in this text.
 11. She was distracted, anxious, and troubled.
- B. Martha's mistake was that she went beyond what was necessary in this situation.
1. She may very well have been acting out of good motives, wanting to provide an especially enjoyable meal for Jesus as he took this rare break from the crowds.
 2. But in placing so much emphasis on this, Martha deprived herself of the opportunity that was afforded by Christ's visit.
 3. We should not miss the irony here.
 4. Martha was so anxious about extending a warm welcome to Jesus that she failed to take the time to sit and listen to him.
 5. On top of that, she got irritated and upset with her sister for being so eager to receive Jesus's instruction, which resulted in Martha having to do all of the work.
 6. Martha's priorities were misplaced in this instance.
 7. Her zeal for things temporal made her lose sight of things eternal.
 8. She let the cares of the world keep her from the One who has the words of eternal life.
 9. How often do you and I do the very same thing?
 10. We need to remind ourselves that while material things are important, they will one day fade away.

11. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4, "For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." (v. 18)
- C. Another aspect of Martha's misplaced priorities is that she lost sight of the fact that the first thing is not our serving Christ but our need to be served by him.
1. When Martha welcomed Jesus into her home, the only thing she could think about was what she could do for him.
 2. She was so busy taking care of all that had to be done that she failed to take the time to sit down and receive what Jesus had to offer.
 3. The problem with this is that it is an inversion of the proper order for the Christian life.
 4. Our ability to do good works as Christians does not come from within ourselves but from the working of the Spirit of Christ in our hearts.
 5. The only acceptable service that believers can offer to Christ is that which comes as the fruit of the service that he has rendered to us.
 6. Our service should flow out of the ongoing fellowship that we are cultivating with Christ.
 7. But if we busy ourselves with serving Christ while neglecting communion with Christ, we are trying to serve him out of our own strength rather than in reliance upon his Spirit.
 8. We need to remember what Jesus said in John 15: we can only produce good fruit if we abide in him and have his words abiding in us.

III. Choosing the One Thing That Is Necessary

- A. Martha's misplaced priorities stand in sharp contrast to Mary's rightly ordered priorities.
1. Luke tells us that Mary sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching.
 2. She was hanging on Jesus's every word, drinking in all that he had to say.
 3. This is the proper posture for a disciple.
 4. A disciple submits himself or herself to the teaching of the Lord.
 5. Discipleship is not about giving priority to our own understanding when it comes to how we should live our lives.
 6. Discipleship is about letting the Lord's wisdom and will govern all our actions.
 7. As John Calvin once wrote, "For the plague of submitting to our own rule leads us straight to ruin, but the surest way to safety is neither to know nor want anything on our own, but simply to follow the leading of the Lord." [*A Little Book on the Christian Life*, 23]
 8. This is why we need to come to God's Word regularly, reverently, and expectantly.
 9. As far as it depends on us, we should not let anything keep us from sitting at Christ's feet.
- B. One area where this can be applied is in our use of the Lord's Day.
1. The Lord's Day is the day that God has appointed for setting aside the "many things" that are the focus of so much of our attention during the rest of the week so that we can sit at the feet of our Lord.

2. We should consider how well we use the Lord's Day for this purpose.
 3. What is Sunday about for you?
 4. Is it just another work day?
 5. Is it simply the second half of the weekend?
 6. Is it the last day to get things done around the house before the start of a new work week?
 7. Is it a day for family gatherings?
 8. Is it a day that is centered around professional football?
 9. Or is it the day when you set aside the cares and distractions of the world so that you can sit at Jesus's feet?
- C. I do not compose my sermons in order to send veiled messages to specific individuals in our congregation, but there are times when I am preparing a sermon and I can't help but think that this is just the message that a particular brother or sister needs to hear.
1. And unfortunately, it often happens that when I look out on the congregation as I am delivering that sermon, I notice that that brother or sister is not present.
 2. Whenever that happens, I find myself thinking that that person missed out on something, something that really could have helped him or her.
 3. In fact, I can think of people who need to hear what I am saying right now but who are not here today.
 4. Perhaps some of them have been providentially hindered from being here, but some of them may be neglecting the one thing that is necessary because they are distracted by many things.

5. So with that in mind, I want to offer those of you who are here a word of encouragement.
 6. When you make it your regular habit to be present at the public worship services that our elders call for the spiritual edification of this flock, you are choosing the good portion, and the blessings that you receive will not be taken away from you.
- D. Jesus responds to Martha's complaint about Mary by telling her that while she was troubled about many things only "one thing is necessary."
1. Now this does not mean that things like cooking and serving and cleaning are unnecessary.
 2. Jesus expressed his point this way in order to get our attention.
 3. He wants us to say, 'Yes, Lord, what is this one thing that you declare to be necessary for me?'
 4. And his answer is right here in this text.
 5. It is seen in what Mary is doing.
 6. The one thing necessary is to sit at Jesus's feet.
 7. Our Lord wants us to put our communion with him above everything else in life.
 8. He wants us to long to be in his presence and be taught by him more than we want anything else.
- E. It is interesting that Jesus used the word "portion" to describe Mary's choice.
1. This tells us that Jesus's words are the portion that is given to feed and nourish our soul.
 2. Only Jesus has the words of eternal life.

3. There is nowhere else we can go to find true spiritual sustenance.
4. We might paraphrase Jesus's point this way: 'Martha, Martha, you have placed all of your focus on the secondary courses, but Mary has given the main course its proper place.'
5. Imagine going to an upscale steakhouse and ordering a filet mignon and then eating so much bread and salad that you don't have any room left when your steak arrives.
6. That is what we are doing when we let the cares of life keep us from communion with Christ.
7. We are neglecting the thing that matters most.
8. Nothing in this world will stand the test of time.
9. But when you choose Christ as the good portion, you receive something that will satisfy you for all eternity.
10. Listen to these words from J.C. Ryle: "The true Christian's possession shall never be taken from him. He alone, of all mankind, shall never be stripped of his inheritance. Kings must one day leave their palaces. Rich men must one day leave their money and lands. They only hold them until they die. But the poorest saint on earth has a treasure of which he will never be deprived. The grace of God, and the favor of Christ, are riches which no man can take from him. They will go with him to the grave when he dies. They will rise with him in the resurrection morning, and be his to all eternity."
11. When the Lord is your chosen portion, you have a beautiful inheritance that will never be taken away from you.

IV. Conclusion

- A. There will always be things in this life that call for your attention, but if you are a Christian you need to remember that there is something much

more important and permanent that has laid hold of your soul.

- B. You need bread, but you do not live by bread alone.
- C. You live by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.
- D. Don't let the cares and worries of this life keep you from feasting upon God's Word.
- E. "Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him! Oh, fear the LORD, you his saints, for those who fear him have no lack! The young lions suffer want and hunger; but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing. Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD." (Ps. 34:8-11)
- F. The more you sit at Jesus's feet and listen to his Word, the more will the cares and worries and distractions of this life lose their hold on you.