



*To Know Christ . . .  
and to Make Him Known*

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### **Duty or Devotion? Luke 10:38-42**

It's a short, simple story that Luke gives us here, told with sparse detail.

As Jesus and His disciples were traveling around, they came to the village where Martha and her sister Mary lived. Martha gladly welcomed them into her home. Being a conscientious hostess and knowing all the rules of hospitality in the ancient Mediterranean world, she busied herself preparing supper for this entourage of probably twenty people or more, which had apparently dropped in unexpectedly.

Meanwhile, as Martha was busy with the duties of hospitality, Mary sat at Jesus' feet, hanging on every word He spoke. She was so interested in hearing Him that, as far as she was concerned, supper could wait.

By this time, Martha was not only busy; she was beginning to boil. She was hurrying and scurrying here and there, not satisfied with a simple meal of one or two dishes. This was Jesus, and He had a crowd with Him! Everything had to be just right! Yet every time she turned around to do something else, there was Mary, sitting at the Lord's feet, doing nothing but *listening to Him*.

If we could get inside Martha's head we'd probably hear something like, "Doesn't she know she ought to be in here helping me? And doesn't she know that a rabbi isn't supposed to have a woman sitting at his feet among his disciples? Why, everybody knows a woman can't be a disciple! Why doesn't she get over here and help me?"

Finally, she just couldn't stand it any longer. She went over to Jesus and said, "**Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!**" (10:40).<sup>1</sup>

With tenderness in His eyes, Jesus looked up at her with her forehead wrinkled with frustration and worry and her eyes flashing with aggravation and anger at her sister, and said to her, "**Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted about many things. Really, only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken from her.**"<sup>2</sup>

While Martha was worried about fulfilling her *duty* of hospitality by preparing several dishes and having everything *just right*, Mary was sharing in the one "dish" that was really needed—as the great fourth and fifth century pastor and theologian Augustine put it, she was partaking of the Bread of Life!<sup>3</sup>

#### ***Doing our duty***

Now it wasn't that Martha didn't love Jesus. She may have loved Him every bit as much as Mary did. And because she did, she felt an incredibly strong sense of *duty* to provide Him with

the best hospitality she possibly could. Martha felt it was *her duty* to fulfill the strict laws of hospitality, and more. In a real sense, her relationship with Christ was being governed by *duty*, wasn't it?

I don't know about you, but for me, it's easy for that to happen. Duty is, after all, *not* a bad thing. There's a lot to be said for doing something because that's what you ought to do, because it's your duty to do it. And as followers of Jesus, we do have certain duties.

But there are dangers when duty is our *primary* motivation in our relationship with Christ. When duty governs the relationship, the emphasis falls on *doing*. Our chief concern becomes *doing* what we think we're *supposed to do*. We often feel, as Martha no doubt did, that the better we do it, the more pleased Jesus will be.

Now doing something because it's what we ought to do can be a very noble thing. But is it healthy for *all* the emphasis in our relationship with God to fall on doing?

I mean, could it be possible to *do* great things for God without really *doing God's will*?

Do you remember what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount? He said that at the Judgment, many will say to Him, **"Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?"** But He will say to them, **"I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!"** (Matthew 7:22-23).

Indeed, it *is* possible to do great things for God without really doing God's will.

Beyond that, what if we're *doing the right thing*, doing God's will, but doing it *for the wrong reason*? When duty governs our relationship with Christ, it's easy for our doing to be motivated out of a feeling that we *have* to do something, whether we want to or not. Now that kind of obedience is not altogether a bad thing; there's a lot to be said for doing the right thing, even when it may not be what we want to do. But acting out of a sense of *necessity* rather than *loving, joyful obedience* to our Lord can lead to a host of other problems.

Think about it. *It distracts us from our fellowship with Christ*. Martha was so distracted by her many tasks, literally her **"much serving,"** that she couldn't simply be in Jesus' presence and listen to Him and enjoy being with Him. When we get so bound up in doing our duty, we run the risk of missing out on enjoying Jesus' presence and we become distracted from hearing Him speak to us.

This attitude of doing things mainly because we have to *can rob us of the joy of serving Christ*. Martha wanted to do what was right, but her effort was bringing her no joy. When we serve solely out of duty, it soon becomes a burden to us, as it did to her. Drudgery replaces the excitement of sharing in the work of God's kingdom, of being His instrument in His work in this world.

When that happens, it can affect *our attitude toward other believers*. I've had to fight the temptation, as maybe you have, to look around at other Christians and compare what I was doing to what they were doing. When duty governs our relationship with Christ, that's almost inevitable. And when we see others who aren't doing as much as we're doing, we soon have the same kinds of feelings Martha had toward Mary—and toward Jesus. "She's not doing her part! She's left me to do it all by myself! Lord, don't You care? Then tell her to help me!" We start looking down on those who in our eyes are not "doing their duty," pulling their part of the load.

All this can lead to *anxiety and a troubled spirit*. Try as we might, we simply never can do enough. We never fully "do our duty." We always come up short, and that, coupled with these other problems that can arise out of a relationship governed by duty causes us great anxiety.

But the problems don't stop there. When duty is our primary attitude and concern in our relationship with Jesus, we don't just worry about what *He* thinks, do we? We fall into the trap of

worrying about what *others* who are watching us might think, the temptation of doing our duty *to look good in the eyes of others*. Like Martha, we want everybody to know just how conscientious we are about what we're supposed to do. Jesus said something about that as well—that those who do things to be seen by humans already have their reward (Matthew 6:1-18)!

You see, serving Christ primarily out of duty can lead to *legalism*, living by the rules, keeping score. We rely on our own dutiful obedience and works rather than God's grace. We end up *majoring on the minors*, missing what's really most important in our relationship with Jesus.

Now please don't misunderstand me. I'm not in any way denigrating duty. Duty is important, and doing our duty is right. But like the old saying about tradition, it's a wonderful servant but a harsh taskmaster. Duty has its rightful place in our relationship with God, and helps us know what we should do. But as Paul would say, there is **a still more excellent way** (1 Corinthians 12:31, NRSV).

### ***Living out of devotion***

Mary shows us that way. Her relationship with Jesus was far different. It was governed by love and devotion.

The person who is living out of devotion to Christ knows the relationship involves far more than just doing. More than anything else, the relationship is about *being*.

Isn't that what it was like for Mary? She simply wanted to *be* with Jesus, her Lord. Sitting at His feet as His disciple (something any other Jewish rabbi of that day would *never* have permitted), she hung on His every word. Supper could wait; Jesus was talking!

It wasn't that she felt like it was her *duty* to listen; she really *wanted* to be with Jesus and hear His word. She wasn't avoiding her duties of hospitality; she just knew what was most important, and was acting accordingly.

When devotion governs our relationship with Jesus, won't the same be true for us? Will we not *want* to worship Him, both personally and corporately? Won't we earnestly *desire* to be with Him, to enjoy His presence, and to learn all we can from Him and about Him?

But make no mistake about this—*being leads to doing*.

In his Gospel account, John also tells us about Jesus' eating a meal at Martha's house. While their brother Lazarus was at the table with Jesus for the meal, and Martha served, Mary performed an act of *extravagant devotion*, lovingly anointing Jesus' feet with a very costly ointment worth a year's wages, wiping His feet with her hair. Her doing arose out of her being. Martha served as duty directed; Mary adored Him as devotion demanded.

You see, a relationship with Jesus that's governed by devotion keeps being and doing in the proper tension. They're no good without each other. They must be kept in balance. Devotion discerns what's important at the time, and chooses **the good portion** (RSV) just as Mary did. It discerns what is of eternal value, what won't be taken away. In other words, *devotion majors on the majors*. It doesn't downplay duty, and realizes that faithful service often takes place in the mundane duties of life. Devotion helps maintain the proper rhythm of worship and work.

What we do out of devotion is *ultimately motivated by love*. We serve Jesus *because we love Him*, not because we feel like we *have* to serve Him lest some awful thing happen to us. We worship, we serve, we spend time with Him in secret and with His people, we give to His work, study His word, accept responsibilities, and help others in His name *not* because we *have* to, but because *we want to*, because we *love* Him!

Which of these, after all, do you think *He* wants?

## *Loving God*

Ultimately, it's a matter of loving God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. If you look at the broader passage, this text is related to what goes before it in the story of the good Samaritan. **An expert in the law** asks Jesus, **"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"** Jesus replies, **"What is written in the law?"** The lawyer answers with what Jesus elsewhere described as the two greatest commandments:—love God with everything you are, and your neighbor as yourself. As Charles Talbert observes in his commentary on Luke, the parable of the good Samaritan shows what it means to love your neighbor as yourself, while this story shows what it means to love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind.<sup>4</sup>

You see, when it's all said and done, *Jesus calls us to a relationship with Him governed by devotion rather than duty.*

Alice Gray tells the story of a weary mother who came home after a long, hard day at work. Her little girl greeted her outside with excitement: "Mommy, Mommy, wait 'til I tell you what happened today." After listening a few seconds, the mother told her little girl that the rest could wait because she needed to get dinner started. Then there was a phone call during dinner, and other family members' stories were louder and longer than the little girl's. She tried again after everything was cleaned up after dinner and her brother's homework was done.

But then it was time for bed. Her mom came to tuck her in and listened quickly to her prayers. As her mother, exhausted from her labors of the day and night, bent over to kiss her little girl good night, the child looked up at her and said, "Mommy, do you really love me even if you don't have time to listen to me?"<sup>5</sup>

Duty, or devotion?

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version® (2011 edition).

<sup>2</sup> My translation.

<sup>3</sup> "Luke," *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, NT III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 182.

<sup>4</sup> Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke*, rev. ed. (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 127-132.

<sup>5</sup> Alice Gray, "Act of Love" in *Stories for the Heart* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah), 144.