

All The Other Voices

by Ron R. Ritchie

In reading the gospels this year I have repeatedly run across a little passage, Luke 10:38-- 42, which intrigues me because the setting is so different from most of the places where the Lord spent his time. It literally takes place between a kitchen and a dining room. It is such a simple little story that you seem just to read it and keep going. We all want to move right along and get to the prayer section in the next chapter. We want to be like the disciples: "Lord, teach us to pray. Let's get on with the important things." But Luke sees that this small conversation between the Lord Jesus Christ and two women is important enough to record, for in it appears the pivot, the very essence of the Christian life.

Now as they were traveling along, He entered a certain village; and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who moreover was listening to the Lord's word, seated at His feet. But Martha was distracted with all her preparations, and she came up to Him, and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me. " But the Lord answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things, but only a few things are necessary. really only one: for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her. "

Just prior to this, about six months before his crucifixion, our Lord had been up north in Galilee with his disciples. He had sent out the disciples, some seventy by now, and they had come back and reported fantastic spiritual and physical victories. They rejoiced and said, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name." But he encouraged them rather to rejoice that their names were recorded in heaven.

Then the Lord left Galilee and started toward Jerusalem, toward his death. As he walked among the hills of Galilee and along the shores of the lake where he had begun his ministry, he realized that until he rose from the dead he would not see these parts again. I am sure this caused him a heavy heart, but at the same time I am sure he was delighted with his disciples, delighted with some of the things they had learned. As they walked toward Jerusalem he started sharing his life with them and teaching them in parables. In one of the Samaritan towns along the way the people rejected him, Then he healed a blind man, worked with some people who were demon possessed, and eventually arrived at the town of Bethany.

A Warm Welcome At Bethany

... and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home.

Bethany was about two miles from Jerusalem. This is the place where the Lord decided to rest. There is no mention in the Scriptures, prior to this meeting, that Jesus knew Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. When I was in Jerusalem I visited Bethany. Our guide pointed to what is claimed to be the actual foundation of their home.

Nearby there is also the reputed grave of Lazarus-- the first one -- but he isn't there now. He was buried someplace else after his second death. So this family not only made an impression in their own time with the people who followed the Lord, but they are still influencing us, still teaching us through their lives. At this moment in our story, the Lord is welcomed by Martha into her home. Apparently the other disciples went on into Jerusalem, for there is no mention of them here.

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at his feet. But Martha was distracted with all her preparation....

If you have a home, as I do, you know the great privilege of inviting guests into your home. There is great satisfaction in providing hospitality for one another. When we invite people over for dinner, we first prepare our home and then have some hors d'oeuvres ready. When the guests come in we ask them to sit down, and usually there is some small talk-- "How are you?" etc. Then my wife will excuse herself, go into the kitchen and check on the last-minute details of the meal, and then come back in and rejoin the group. Then after more conversation my wife, who has that inward sixth sense which says, "It is now time!" goes back into the kitchen, places the food in the various serving dishes, brings it to the table and says, "Dinner is served." We all sit down and continue to fellowship.

But it was during this process that Martha somehow was distracted-- something went wrong. You see, both Mary and Martha were listening to the word of the Lord-- we'll see this as the passage develops-- and they both were serving; both were working in the kitchen. You can see Martha checking the meat, saying to Mary, the younger sister, "Would you set the table?" Meanwhile the Lord is conversing with the women, and the talk goes back and forth: "Where have you been, Lord and what's been happening? Share with us!" And Martha is busy telling Mary what to do, and Mary says, "Okay," and she gets the forks and napkins and dishes out. But suddenly Martha fades out on what the Lord is saying, steps into the kitchen, and stays there. Maybe the pot roast is getting too well done, or the potatoes need to be mashed.

It is important to notice at this point that nothing is out of order, that Martha's heart is right, her motives are right, and that there is a love relationship here. That is why she welcomed him. She knew who he is. She was excited to have him into her home. She was the one who went out and welcomed him, so you know her heart was right.

An Explosion From The Kitchen

Mary, however, has been drawn to sit at the feet of Jesus. Suddenly, in the midst of this calm, Martha comes up to Jesus and says,

"Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me. "

Now, the Lord does not get angry, or criticise Martha's activity. This is not the issue, in the Lord's eyes, at this moment. He is not concerned about her activity. You see, both were working. But quietly, without realizing it, Mary sat down, drawn to the very feet of Jesus. Something about his character, something about his teaching, something about his gentleness draws her. And she is hungry -- but not for food. She is hungry for spiritual things, spiritual food. When I was in Africa there was no teaching of the Word available there. But I had a trans -- oceanic radio, and every Sunday night I would turn on my radio in my hunger, and from New York would hear the words, "Greetings! This is the Hour of Decision." And Billy Graham's message was the only feeding I received each week for about a year. It would come faintly through the static, but I would be refreshed. I would be fed from the Word. Mary was starving - two miles from Jerusalem she was starving for spiritual insight, hungering for the truth. So she sat at the feet of Jesus and listened.

Now, Martha was listening too, but she was distracted She saw the necessity of not allowing the meal to burn. She also seemed out of touch with what was happening in the living room. She was out of touch with Mary's spiritual need. She was not sensitive that Mary needed something more important than the meal at hand. So she explodes! She rushes in and says, "Lord, don't you care that I'm alone in the kitchen? It's just me and the meat and potatoes. Lord, tell Mary to join me." She isn't even going to assume responsibility for telling Mary herself.

You know, we're all this way. We love to serve We love to be the host, but we want the credit. We want credit that we are working away in the kitchen. I know this is true, because when I advised you earlier that Discovery Publishing needs additional people to staple the printed messages I thought to myself, "I would go and staple too if I could just devise a way in which everyone would know that I had done it!" I would have a stapler which would emboss each copy with the words "Ron stapled here!" Once I got the credit, then I could be at

peace. But to sit in the stapling room alone... I would have to say to Jesus, " Don't you care about me? I, only I am left!"

Martha's Mistakes

You see, everything was fine with Martha up to the point when she made two mistakes. The first was when she crossed the red line from gracious hostess to critical spirit. Everything was fine until she permitted herself all this resentment and jealousy, and then the meal became of first importance. She did not see her sister's need. She was blinded to what was really going on in the other room. Her second mistake was that she tried to involve Jesus in the whole affair: "You tell Mary to come out into the kitchen Lord. That'll do it. She'll come out quick, if you'll tell her!"

Don't we do that? We are always trying to manipulate people. Last night our family experienced an example of this. Getting our boys to bed is like rounding up horses! We got our youngest in bed, tied him down, and what happened? I got up to make sure all the lights were out and the water was not running on the lawn, and I thought I had everything under control. I just happened to look in my older boy's room, and there was my little guy watching TV with his older brother I said, "Wait a minute -- I thought you were in bed half an hour ago!" You should have seen the look on his face "I can't believe I'm caught!" So he went back to his room, and I said to my older son, "Son, what's the idea of inviting him to come into your room and watch TV?" He said, "Wait a minute, Daddy. He told me you said he could come and watch TV! So I said, "Well, if Daddy said you could come in and watch TV, you can watch it all night!" The little guy had manipulated the situation.

And Jesus was being manipulated by Martha. If the Lord had listened to her it would have caused a tremendous problem. So it is at this point that Jesus gently but firmly rebukes Martha - not because of her activity, her serving, her hospitality, but because of her critical spirit, her poor sense of timing, and her false sense of values.

There are many who side with Martha. They say, "Wait a minute, you're being a little hard on her." One man who felt that preachers were very hard on Martha was named Kipling In 1907 he wrote a poem in defense of poor Martha. Here, in part, is what he wrote. It is called, " The Sons of Martha."

The sons of Mary seldom bother,
for they have inherited that good part;
But the sons of Martha favor their mother
of the careful soul and the troubled heart.
And because she lost her temper once,
and because she was rude to the Lord her Guest,
Her sons must wait upon Mary's sons,
world without end, reprieve, or rest.

And the sons of Mary smile and are blessed --
they know the angels are on their side.
They know in them is the grace confessed,
and for them are the mercies multiplied.
They sit at the Feet- they hear the Word- -
they see how truly the promise runs.
They have cast their burden upon the Lord,
and- the Lord, he lays it on Martha's sons.

So there has been great misunderstanding about what has been happening here. The Lord answers and says,

"Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things.... "

He says it not with anger but with a sigh. It is, "Martha, Martha, you don't understand, do you? The things-- the forks and knives and the food- there is nothing wrong with them, nothing wrong Martha. What is wrong is that you are bothered and filled with worry about them. That's what's wrong." And I might read into this,

"Apparently you weren't at the Mount when I gave my message. (We would have had a copy for you, but there weren't enough people willing to do the stapling!) In the Sermon on the Mount I was trying to teach the people, 'Don't be anxious for your life, as to what you should eat or what you should drink, nor for your body, what you should put on. Is not life more than food? But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and I will take care of food and clothing and shelter.' The issue is the righteousness of God. The issue of life is the kingdom of God. And Martha, you are bothered about things which aren't necessary."

"... but only a few things are necessary; really only one. for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her. "

"You see, Martha, your mistake lies in the fact that you are too prepared, you're too busy. Your activity has blinded you to the real issues of life." She had forgotten the guest, but she hadn't forgotten the food- great food, but people were so upset they couldn't eat it! Not that the Lord was upset here -- there was a gentleness about him. But we do this, don't we? We get upset sometimes-- we can't eat that which was so well prepared. Peace of mind has a lot to do with how you enjoy your meal. The Lord has come to rest; he is on his way to his death. But suddenly this meal has become a monster! It is overwhelming the whole issue. It is out of hand, destroying the whole reason for even coming into the home. Jesus says that one thing is important, one dish is important. It is the dish of fellowship, the dish of communication, the dish of relationship. For Mary has chosen the good part. She has chosen to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen.

The idea of sitting at the feet is that of resting, of being at rest. The idea of sitting at the feet has behind it the idea of the faithful servant whose eye is on the master, and who moves only when he receives from the master the directions as to where to go. Mary sat at the feet of Jesus, Mary-- quiet, sensitive, restful, listening, learning about the importance of this time in the life of Jesus, the importance of the cross, and what it would mean for her and her sister and her brother.

All The Voices

I have often asked the question, "Why did Jesus say that Mary had chosen the good part I believe that Jesus saw Mary's attitude as one after his own heart. He was surrounded by activity, pressure, demand, distractions, crowds, needs. But the key to the Lord's life was that he had learned obedience to the Father. In the midst of all the voices he heard only one-- the voice of the Father. All the activity, all the pressure -- and yet he knew the difference between the Father's voice and man's voice.

A passage in Mark 1 has always intrigued me. Jesus heals, sets people free from their sins, does all these beautiful things in Capernaum. Then he goes out the next morning to pray for the next day's work, goes to the Father to ask, "Where do we go from here?" Peter finds him praying, interrupts him, says, "Everybody's looking for you!" We would say, "Aha! That constitutes a call to move toward that need." The Lord answers, "Peter, I appreciate your concern. I've just talked to the Father. He says he knows everybody's looking for me, but I have to go to another town." You can imagine Peter saying, "Wait a minute! You don't understand, Lord. It's everybody who is looking for you -- not just a corporal's guard! The pressure is on!" And the Lord said, "I just talked to the Father, Peter; we're to go on to the other cities."

He heard his Father's voice from the beginning. Remember when Mary and Joseph found him in the temple area. They asked, "Where have you been?" He answered, "Don't you know I must be about my Father's business?" That is, "Don't you know that his is the voice I listen to?" As a man he said, "I have come down from heaven, not to do my will, but the will of him who sent me," and, "For I have not spoken on my own authority; the Father who sent me has himself given me commandment what to say and what to speak." That is, "I speak just as the Father has told me. I speak no other thing but what the Father has told me."

I think Mary is a forerunner, so to speak, of a new form of relationship man would take toward God. As Jesus had given us the example of how he submitted himself to the Father, so you and I now know, through Mary's example, how to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to his words before we move out into our world of activity. So hers was the good part because it would enable her to discern the difference between what is urgent and what is important. It would help her discern the difference between what is flesh and what is spirit. It would help her to discern what is good and what is evil. It would help her to discern what is of God and what is of

man.

At Lazarus' death it was Mary who fell at the feet of Jesus and declared that he had the power over life and death, while all the other voices clamored that Lazarus had been dead four days, and where had Jesus been, anyway? Six days before the Passover Mary was the only one who understood Jesus was going to die. So she decided to anoint his feet with burial ointment. All the other voices said she had wasted a year's salary and had forgotten about the poor. She did it anyway. Where did she get her insight? At the feet of Jesus. That is why hers was the good part.

Every day you and I are faced with urgent messages and events and problems. But we do not have the wisdom and the knowledge within us to determine what is urgent, and what is important. That can only come from the Father, from checking in with the Father, sitting at his feet, listening to his voice. It used to amaze me that in John 17 the Lord himself is the one who said, "Father, I thank you that I have finished the work." Finished the work? The place was overrun with slaves. There was no repeal on the slave issue at all; they were all still there. The Romans still ruled the world. Sickness and death and prostitution were running rampant. Yet he had the peace to say to the Father, "Father, I have finished the work you sent me to do." He didn't say, "Father, I can't go; it's not done." He said, "Father, you have laid out for me a plan for these three years of ministry. I have looked back over the plan, I have looked over my life, I have seen that I've checked in with you each time, and each time your plan has been accomplished. I can say to you at this moment that the work you have given me to do is finished." He checked in with the Father.

How do we do this? By constantly being aware of the necessity to sit at the feet of Jesus and to listen to him first, among so many voices. There are so many voices which tell us, "Listen, this is urgent!" And then there is the one voice which says, "My son, I know they are urgent, but this is important, because this is my will for your life right now." We learn this from reading the Word and meditating. We learn this by sitting at his feet. The Psalmist said in Psalm 130, verses 5 and 6,

**I wait for the Lord, my soul does wait,
And in his word do I hope.
My soul waits for the Lord....**

The Voice At The Beach

In my own life I have found, much to my chagrin, that I am a Martha. I love activity. I love to be busy. If I finish everything I have to do at my house, I'll call you up to see if you have anything to do at your house. I don't know what it is about my temperament, but I just love being busy. I struggle with this problem all the time.

But the Lord is so gracious in his ways. About five weeks ago I was to be ministering with a team of men at Cannon Beach, Oregon. When I got there about eight-- five people met me. But within twenty minute' they had all gone somewhere to minister, and suddenly I had this whole camp ground, as well as the entire beach, to myself-- all by myself. The Lord said, "Son, I want to talk to you, and I don't want any interruptions." So I looked for some people. I went to the store, and they wouldn't even talk to me-- just sold me a Coke and something to eat. I went down to the beach-- for sure I'd find somebody on the beach. I don't have any problem talking to people; I knew I could find someone there. There was no one on the beach! A mile-- and-- a-- half of beach, and no one there. It was Sunday night, and it was fabulously beautiful -- except that I was alone.

I was distressed, and was having an awfully difficult time with the Lord-- not angry or bitter but just not understanding what was going on. Some people had questioned my activity, and I thought they were questioning my spirituality. Did you ever notice how we equate one with the other? I started walking along the beach and realized that I couldn't even pray. The Lord had taken that away, told me just to say, "Abba." So I ended up sitting on a log, saying "Dada," I couldn't even speak. And he said, "Finally I've got your ear. I want to talk to you, Son. I want to tell you how important it is that you sit and talk to me, first. Let me direct your activity for my honor and my glory, and together we shall walk this life. Together."

I'm sure you struggle with that, as I struggle with it. It is so hard for some of us to sit at the feet of Jesus. So you Marys-- please pray for us Marthas. There are a lot of us. There are so many voices saying so many things which are urgent. So many voices, so many needs, and you and I are faced with them if we are going to be salt and light in our community. But the Lord is the only one who is able to tell us if something is merely urgent, or really important.

Our heavenly Father, thank you so much for this morning. Thank you for this beautiful little episode that took place in a kitchen, among three people whom you loved so dearly, Mary and Martha and your Son. Thank you for the gentle but firm rebuke. Thank you for the truth. And Lord, I pray for us who struggle in these areas of wanting so much to serve you that we don't listen to the proper voice. I pray that you will be with us and will teach us to sit at your feet and listen to your voice. And we'll praise you through eternity for it. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Ron R. Ritchie

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