

“One Thing is Necessary”

Luke 10:38-42

In Leviticus 23:29 to 43, God instructed the children of Israel to observe the “Feast of Tabernacles.” This feast was held immediately after the autumn harvest and was one of the three annual feasts when all males were required to appear before the LORD in the place He chose.

The Feast of Tabernacles is also called the “Feast of Booths.” The primary purpose of this feast was to remind the children of Israel how they lived in tents, in temporary dwellings during their wilderness wanderings. To remember this time the Jews built small tabernacles or booths with walls of intertwined branches and thatched roofs as God instructed them. For seven days they were to live in these booths as a vivid reminder of the days in the wilderness living in tents. During those 40 years, they had a very simple lifestyle, but God supplied all their needs!

Jewish people today fulfill the commandment, by constructing a booth. It must be made of something that grew from the ground and was cut off, such as tree branches, corn stalks, bamboo reeds, sticks, or two-by-fours and constructed so it will not blow away in the wind.

The roof of this booth must be left loose, not tied together or tied down. The covering must be placed sparsely enough that rain can get in, and preferably sparsely enough that the stars can be seen, but not so sparsely that more than ten inches is open at any point or that there is more light than shade. Compared to a house, even one of the New Testament times, the booth was a very primitive accommodation.

I share this information with you is because it has a direct bearing on the text we will consider today. In the last five verses of Luke chapter ten, we have the account of Jesus visiting in the home of Martha and Mary. This visit takes place during the Feast of Tabernacles. As we examine this portion of Scripture, you will see how the purpose and themes of this feast highlight and enhance the teaching of Jesus. I’ve titled our study “One Thing is Necessary.”

Let’s turn now to the text, **Luke 10:38 to 42**. (Repeat) Here is the Word of God to us.

The CHOICES of the three characters in this text show us how to choose the one thing that is necessary in light of eternity.

The First CHOICE is,

Martha's Extravagant Accommodation

In the opening verse of the text (verse 38) we learn that Jesus is continuing his journey toward Jerusalem and he enters a "certain village." We know from later events that the village is Bethany. Since Bethany was located near Jerusalem, many travelers to the Holy City would pass through the village. It was only common courtesy to offer hospitality to those pilgrims if and when they approached the head of the household with such a request. As we know, Jesus and the Twelve were among the pilgrims going to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles.

In this village, Jesus is welcomed kindly by a certain woman, named Martha. Based on later details of the text, it seems that Martha was a woman of some wealth and position. And like the women mentioned in Luke 8:2, she used her possessions to minister to Jesus.

If you recall, the opening of this chapter records the mission of the Seventy. It is quite probable that some of those Kingdom Ambassadors, who were sent out "into every city and place where Jesus himself would come," found lodging in this worthy home. So then, when Jesus arrived, His person and character were not totally unknown to his hostess.

It seems from the language of the text, that this is the first meeting between Jesus, Martha, and Mary. Later on, this household became a special place for Jesus, and He had a close relationship with these sisters and their brother, Lazarus. Notice that Lazarus is not even mentioned. Why not? Remember, all Jewish adult males were required to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for this feast. So Lazarus was most likely fulfilling his obligation under the Law.

The narrative now informs us that Mary, Martha's sister, sits at the feet of Jesus, listening to the things He was saying. Since this was during the Feast, most likely this conversation was being held in one of the booths built for its observance. We will focus on Mary's choice later, but it fills an important place in the narrative now. It places Martha's choice in bold relief.

The observance of the Feast of Tabernacles was designed by God to be a happy celebration and a time of joy and rejoicing. But as we will see, for Martha, it turned into a high-stress occasion!

Verse 40 informs us that Martha was distracted by the details of serving. Distracted from what? She was distracted from truly honoring this most honorable of guests! It becomes clear

from the rebuke of Jesus, later in the narrative, that the preparations she was making were much more elaborate than was necessary.

So picture Martha, in the course of her preparations, hurrying back and forth past the booth where Jesus and Mary were. Each time she passes the booth, and thinks about all the things that need to be done to complete her preparations, her resentment toward Mary grows. In her mind, Mary was a slacker. Some of you have felt that way about others, haven't you?

Finally, she can't take it any longer. She interrupts her busyness to complain to Jesus. *"Master, are you not caring that my sister has neglected me, and left me to serve all alone? Tell her, then, to help me!"* Martha's statement implies that prior to Jesus' arrival Mary had been helping her with the preparations. But now, she had left off helping to sit at the feet of Jesus. How could she be so thoughtless, so uncaring?

It is our nature, when we are offended, to seek others who will agree with us in our hurt. Martha appealed to Jesus' sense of fairness, but Jesus, as usual, saw the root of the problem in Martha's heart. So instead of addressing Mary, as Martha hoped He would, Jesus addressed Martha and her need. He spoke to Martha about her choices.

Note the tenderness of Jesus' response; *"Martha, Martha."* He went on to say *"...you are anxious and agitated because of your elaborate preparations..."* Jesus had a deep love for Martha. He has a deep love for ALL Martha types; the ones who place more emphasis on atmosphere, decorations, and variety of food than on fellowship and a spirit of contentment.

"The Lord's priorities are not the same as ours. Jesus isn't as concerned about our lace tablecloths and clean kitchens as we are. He's concerned with the state of our heart. He's more interested in the time we spend at his feet, reflecting on his words and resting in his presence."

Jesus continued; *"Only one thing is necessary; and Mary has chosen the best, which shall not be taken from her."* Ponder this statement with me. What was the one thing Jesus was referring to? Did He mean that a "one dish meal" was sufficient to meet the needs of the guests during this time of the Feast of Tabernacles? Possibly. Or was the "necessary thing" spending time in the presence of the Master, listening to what He had to say? Why couldn't it be both?

What Mary had chosen would not be taken from her. Our physical existence is only temporary. Martha's penchant for elaborate accommodations would end with the end of her

physical life. Mary's choice of relationship would last into and through eternity. That puts things in a different perspective, doesn't it? That contrast leads us to the next choice.

The Second CHOICE is,

Mary's Reverent Admiration

Author John Ortberg tells about asking a friend for some spiritual direction. Ortberg described the pace of his life, the rhythms of his family life, and the condition of his heart. He wanted to know what he could do in order to be spiritually healthy. After a long pause his mentor answered, "You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life." Ortberg wasn't satisfied with this answer so he asked what more he could do. "There is nothing else," the man said.

As he reflected on that advice later, Ortberg made this observation: "Hurry is the great enemy of the spiritual life in our day. Hurry can destroy our souls. Hurry can keep us from living well...For many of us the great danger is not that we will renounce our faith. It is that we will become so distracted and rushed and preoccupied that we will settle for a mediocre version of it."

It is interesting that Mary's place in this narrative is non-verbal. No spoken words of hers are recorded. But as the saying goes "Actions speak louder than words." The choice Mary made gave proof of what was in her heart. She chose to sit at Jesus' feet, listening to His words of life. In doing this, she communicated to Jesus her sense of devotion and dependence. There are few gifts in life that are greater than a careful and attentive listener!

This whole scene and Jesus' words are so rich when taken in the context of the feast. The Feast of Tabernacles commemorated God's covenant faithfulness to the children of Israel in the wilderness, on their way to the Promised Land. During that journey, God lived among them in the earthly Sanctuary, the Tabernacle, as it was moved from place to place. Now, unknown to Martha, but somehow sensed by Mary, the Master came in human form to "tabernacle" with them; to bring the presence of Jehovah among His people. Mary, like Jesus, had food to eat that Martha knew nothing about.

Instead of simply manna in the wilderness, to sustain physical life, here was the Living Bread to satisfy the deepest longings of the heart and bring those who received Him into the promised rest! Mary's reverent admiration, as she sat at the feet of Jesus, so clearly captures that picture of rest. Martha bustled about because her focus was on the outward, the physical, and the

temporal. In the final analysis her elaborate preparations would perish just as surely as the physical body decays.

That Mary knew how to serve is evident from the text. Martha told Jesus that Mary “had left her,” implying that prior to Jesus arrival she was helping with the preparations to entertain expected guests. But Mary understood the importance of choices. Jesus’ own ministry highlighted the value of relationship above rules and people above things. Mary evidently understood the importance of being as compared with doing. She made the choice to truly entertain the Master!

The Final CHOICE is,

Jesus’ Relevant Determination

Jesus’ answer to Martha’s complaint reminds us He could see beyond the outward circumstances to the condition of her heart. Because He sees and knows all things, His conclusions, His determinations are always relevant, always suitable to the occasion.

As the embodiment of truth, Jesus is surely qualified to make a relevant determination; not only in this case, but in every case. *“Only one thing is necessary; and Mary has chosen the best, which shall not be taken from her.”* What Martha was doing was good; she was meeting a physical need. What Mary chose to do was the best; that which would enliven her spirit eternally.

My friend, what would Jesus have to say about your choices and mine? Are you and I choosing the best; the things, the relationships, etcetera, that can never be taken from us? And how do we make those decisions?

It seems obvious that whatever is temporal, while necessary, is not to be considered the best. However, let’s not take that general principle too far. If you’re paying attention, you know the account of the Good Samaritan is given just prior to this text. There, the emphasis is on works springing out of a changed heart. In our text, Jesus shows how a changed heart determines what we value. And if we value time in His presence it will impact the choices we make and the ways we care for those around us.

As I reflect on this text, the words of Psalm 4:4 seem appropriate. *“Stand in awe, and do not sin: commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still.”* But most of us are so overloaded with things to do; we don’t have time for stillness. We live in “the land of the high-

achieving, multitasking speed-aholics. We're in perpetual motion, never resting, and never quite satisfied...our families are sucked into a vortex of activities and obligations. We pile on appointments, lessons, practices, games, performances, and clubs, and then shovel in fast food...our civilization's high-speed, fast-paced, goal-oriented life has propelled us into a state of [perpetual exhaustion]." Our choices prove we value the temporal above the eternal.

Many of us know our choices are not the best; that's why we don't like to be still. We don't take time to sit at Jesus' feet because we know what He will say. And though we deny it with our lips, our choices show we value the approval of others more than His approval.

So what will I do? What will you do? You've heard it said "We find time to do the things we really want to do." That's true. If we are to benefit at all from the teaching of Jesus in this text, we'll need to slow down and allocate time to sit at the feet of Jesus. Only when we do that will we be able to make a choice like Mary – of the one thing that is necessary.