

“THE ONE THING NEEDED”

Luke 10:38-42

Luke 10:38-42 is a familiar text; and its lesson is very clear. “Make time for the word of God, because God’s word is the one thing truly needed in life.” Why share this lesson in a worship service? Presumably those in attendance already know this lesson. Why else would they be in church? Or at the least, when quarantined at home, why else would they bother reading mailed sermons to loved ones?

And yet, “Martha, Martha” of today’s text also knew this lesson. Martha, like her sister Mary and brother Lazarus, was a devout Christian. Martha loved Jesus and recognized Him as her Lord and Savior. Martha welcomed Jesus into her home and desired to serve Him. When Lazarus unexpectedly died, Martha expressed trust in Jesus as her Savior and a confident hope in the resurrection of the dead, saying of Lazarus, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day,” John 11:24; and then saying of Jesus, “Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world,” John 11:27.

Martha was not a bad person. Martha was a distracted person; distracted from the word of God by dinner preparations. Her intentions were right. Her priorities were wrong. This is why Jesus lovingly told her, “**Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed,**” Luke 10:41-42. And this morning, the same Jesus says the same words to us: “**Only one thing is needed.**”

But do we really need such a reminder from Jesus? Without question. Like Martha, we are Christians. Like Martha, we love Jesus and recognize Him as our Savior. Like Martha, we welcome Jesus into our house; and on Sundays we visit His house. Like Martha, we want to serve Jesus. But also like Martha, we face daily distractions, worries, and pressures that threaten to steal our attention and misplace our priorities regarding the word of God.

What sort of distractions? All sorts. Distractions from without and distractions from within. Consider the coronavirus pandemic and all the distractions, anxieties, and regulations surrounding it. Handwashing. News-watching. Disinfecting. Social distancing. Faithfully checking the doh.sd.gov website to ensure no cases of Covid-19 in Perkins, County.

Or consider the human attention span. Did you realize that the average attention span of a human being is eight seconds? In only eight seconds, the human mind can flit like a butterfly from one topic, one problem, or one circumstance to the next. I'm under no illusions that I can hold anyone's attention throughout a sermon. In fact, how much has your mind wandered since this sermon began? Oh, never mind. It's best I don't know.

Along with internal distractions, there are countless external distractions. **“But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made,”** Luke 10:40. And we instantly criticize her, don't we? “Martha, Martha, how could you be distracted from the word of God with Jesus Christ sitting in your living room?” But isn't Jesus Christ with us today in this room? Aren't we often distracted in church, and in much the same way Martha was distracted—by all the preparations that had to be made?” Dinner preparations. Work preparations. Even church preparations.

Ironically, while sitting in these very pews, we can hear the Savior say, **“but only one thing needed,”** and yet find ourselves thinking: “Yep, one thing. Jesus is right. I only need one thing in my life. That reminds me, I have one thing I need to pick up from IGA on the way home from church. I have one thing I need to complete at work. I have one thing I need to say to my coworker at lunch. I have one thing I need to bring up at the May 24, 2020 voters meeting. And by the way, is the thermostat working? Is that a fly on the wall? Must be. It's moving.” Distractions, imperceptibly leading us away from “the one thing needed.”

Or what of all the distractions and interruptions of our electronic age—phone calls, text messages, emails, Facebook, Twitter, Skype, Snapchat, Youtube, Zoom; all the gadgets that ping and pong, beep and buzz day and night. Our modern, insane way of life is filled with these electronic distractions. How can we concentrate on anything? According to some research firms, the average office worker checks email thirty times hourly; the average teenager sends and receives 3,339 text messages monthly; and on average businesses lose \$650 billion annually due to worker interruptions, distractions, and lost productivity.

Run, run, run. Hurry here and hurry there. Instant this and instant that. Multitasking. Rapid response times. Faster downloads. This is all we hear today. This is the way society lives today: too much to do, too little time; too much activity, too little God.

I remember an episode of the Andy Griffith Show in which a visiting pastor, a Doctor Breen, preached a sermon titled “What's Your Hurry?” He mesmerized the good people of Mayberry with compelling talk of slowing down, easing up, and making time; with memories of lazy Sunday afternoons at the community park bandstand, when life was

simpler and slower. He concluded his sermon with a loud “So I say to you, what’s your hurry?”

After the service, as people shook the pastor’s hand and thanked him for the fine message, Sheriff Taylor invited Doctor Breen over for a leisurely, home-cooked dinner. Doctor Breen glanced at his watch, gasped, and said, “Oh, I can’t, Sheriff. I’m late for another speaking engagement. I have to run.” As he raced off, Sheriff Taylor called after him, “What’s your hurry?” Of course, this episode was written in the black-and-white days of the 1960s. How much has our world sped up since then?

And perhaps the greatest distraction of all is worry. “**Martha, Martha,**” said Jesus, “**you are worried and upset about many things,**” Luke 10:41. The Greek word translated as “worried” in this verse literally means ‘to have a divided mind;’ to be double-minded or to be of two minds about something: indecisive, uncertain, unable to determine what to do or where to turn, pulled in multiple directions.

Isn’t this what was happening to Martha? We can easily visualize Martha hurrying from kitchen to dining room; fussing over silverware; straightening place settings; stirring and sampling pots; adding spices; adjusting heat; retying her apron; brushing a sweaty bang from her brow; all while casting angry glances at her sister Mary.

Mary sat. Martha ran. Mary listened. Martha worried. Mary was the picture of calm. Martha was the picture of distraction. And because Martha was distracted, she was unable to focus on the “**one thing needed.**” In the same way, if you and I are excessively worried about someone or something today—family members, sickness, finances, relationships—will our minds be here or elsewhere? Will we be able to sit quietly at the feet of Jesus and actually listen to what He’s saying; or will our minds be stewing like the pots in Martha’s kitchen?

You and I have many responsibilities in life. Going to work. Earning a living. Caring for our families. Enriching our relationships. Sharing the Gospel. Eating right. Exercising regularly. Improving health. Driving defensively. Giving liberally. Rotating the tires. Changing the oil. All of these responsibilities are good, though some are more important than others. But the question raised by today’s text is this: Are any of our responsibilities, projects, activities, or commitments, no matter how wholesome or important—are any of these more important than hearing God’s word? Are any more needful than “**the one thing needed?**”

Martha, Martha was “**distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.**” However, not once did Jesus criticize or condemn Martha for making these preparations.

The preparations in and of themselves were wholesome and admirable. Martha wanted a clean house. Martha wanted to serve a perfect meal. And who could blame her? Her guest that day was none other than Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As I said earlier, Martha's intentions were right, but her priorities were wrong. Feeding Jesus was important. But Jesus feeding her with the word of God was far more important. And so He told her, "**Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed,**" Luke 10:41. Only one thing is essential. Only one thing you cannot do without.

This is what Jesus told Martha. This is what Jesus is telling us. Of every other need we have in life—food, drink, clothing, shelter; job, companionship, health, insurance—the need to hear God's word surpasses them all. Why? Finally, this is the crux of the matter, isn't it? Why is God's word "**the one thing needed?**" In answering, consider the following brief points.

First, God's word is the one thing needed because God tells us this Himself. God is the One who told Martha and tells us, "**You are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed.**" And if we had no other reason to regularly hear the word of God, this statement of Jesus in Luke 10:41-42 would be reason enough.

Over the years, I've told hurting people many times: "You need to go to church to hear the word of God." And when they asked why, my answer was never "because the pastor says so." The answer was "because God said so; because God said that His word is the one thing you absolutely need in your life." More than fame. More than fortune. More than winning the Publisher's Clearing House Sweepstakes.

Second, God's word is the one thing needed because God blesses us through His word. Jesus said in Luke 11:28, "**Blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it.**" In Scripture blessedness also has the connotation of happiness, completeness, and fulfillment. Do you want to be happy? Do you want to feel complete? Where then should you turn? Where should you direct others? To God's word.

Far too often we think of going to church as an opportunity to do something nice for God. There's nothing wrong with doing something nice for God. Martha did something nice for God when she cooked Him dinner. But doing something nice for God is really not what going to church is about. When we go to church, God does something wondrous and powerful for us. And He does this through His word.

Third, God's word is the one thing needed because through it God gives us everything we need for time and eternity. Through His word He creates faith: "**So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God,**" Romans 10:17. Through His

word He brings salvation: **“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes,”** Romans 1:16-17. Through His word He provides wisdom and shows us how to live: **“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path,”** Psalm 119:105. Through His word He reveals absolute truth instead of the moral relativism of the world: **“Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth,”** John 17:17.

In short, through His word God equips us for every purpose, every undertaking, and every situation in life, as summarized beautifully in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, **“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”**

Fourth, God’s word is the one thing needed because through it alone God reveals His plan of salvation through Jesus Christ. In Colossians 1:26 Paul spoke of God’s plan of salvation as **“the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints.”** And in 1 Corinthians 2:9 he wrote, **“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him—but God has revealed it to us by His Spirit.”**

Put in very stark terms, without God’s revealed word, you and I would have no knowledge of salvation and therefore no way to be saved. How important then is the Bible? How much do we need it? As Paul wrote to Timothy, **“From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus,”** 2 Timothy 3:15.

Fifth, God’s word is the one thing needed because it reveals that the only thing needed to be saved is faith in Jesus. And this saving information you won’t find anywhere else. You won’t find it in the Koran. You won’t find it in the Book of Mormon. You won’t find it in the sacred writings of Buddhism, Taoism, Shintoism, Christian Science, Krishna, Wicca, Jehovah’s Witnesses, or any other religious book or philosophy. It’s not there. Every other religion in the world insists, **“You must save yourself.”** Only one book, God’s Book, states, **“We know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ,”** Galatians 2:15-16. Only the **“one thing needed”** reveals that Jesus Christ is the only Savior needed.

Sixth and finally, God’s word is the one thing needed because it alone has the power to help us through even the most difficult circumstances. Mary, who sat at the feet of Jesus listening to His words, was at peace; aware, but not bothered by the

circumstances around her. By contrast, Martha, who found herself too busy to listen to the word of God, was distracted, worried, upset, and exhausted. Is there no lesson here for us?

We've all heard the expression, "Don't judge a book by its cover." But I fear that at times we judge the Bible in this way. It looks so small, so ordinary, so powerless. When we struggle, we wonder how this Book can help us. When we visit hospital rooms or funeral homes, we wonder how this Book can offer hope and comfort in the face of sickness and death.

Have we forgotten that **"by the word of the LORD were the heavens made,"** Psalm 33:6. Have we forgotten the power of the word that made aged Abraham and barren Sarah the parents of nations? Have we forgotten the faith of the Roman centurion, **"But say the word, and my servant will be healed,"** Luke 7:7.

In the end, listening to God's word or not; sitting at the feet of Jesus or not; making God's word our top priority or not; is a choice. Remember what Jesus told Martha, **"Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her,"** Luke 10:41-42.

In the Old Testament, God told His people how often to worship. He said, **"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy,"** Exodus 20:8. But in the New Testament, God makes no such specification. In fact, in the New Testament, God doesn't give any requirement at all about the frequency of worship. Instead, He reminds us of all the blessings that come to us through His word. He tells us that His word is **"the one thing needed."**

And He expects that we will make the right choice.