

## A Most Scandalous Story

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I guess you have all heard about the scandalous news story involving billionaire Robert Kraft, the owner of the New England Patriots, who has been charged with soliciting prostitution at the Orchids of Asia Day Spa in Jupiter, Florida. That is pretty scandalous news because of the very unholy nature of Mr. Kraft's alleged depravity. But, that's not the scandalous story that I want to talk about this morning, because there is another very scandalous story in Luke's Gospel as well. In fact, it's one of the most scandalous stories in the entire New Testament. Those who initially heard it back in the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. were shocked to learn about what was going on in Martha's house. But, believe me—it was not an unholy scandal, as in Mr. Kraft's case—Oh, no. It was scandalously holy! So let's read this short passage of Luke to see what all the scandal was about.

Luke 10:38-42 tells us the following shameful facts: <sup>38</sup> As Jesus and his disciples went on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha welcomed him in her home. <sup>39</sup> She had a sister named Mary, who sat down at the feet of the Lord and listened to his teaching. <sup>40</sup> Martha was upset over all the work she had to do, so she came and said, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to come and help me!" <sup>41</sup> The Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha! You are worried and troubled over so many things, <sup>42</sup> but just one is needed. Mary has chosen the right thing, and it will not be taken away from her." (TEV)

Now why is this so scandalous? Well, all of this would have taken place sometime around 30 to 33 A.D. And, at that time, the customs of the Jewish society in Palestine were quite clear—a woman's place was in the home. And

more specifically, there were certain places for her to be within the home, especially when the men were gathered in a nearby room where they'd recline on mats at a long table to eat and discuss matters of concern for that day. And when the men got together in this 1<sup>st</sup> century version of what we might refer to today as a "Man Cave"—it was strictly off limits to women. The only time that women could come in there was to serve food and drink and to take away the dirty dishes. Otherwise, the only place for a woman in the house was in the kitchen. And never, ever was a woman to be present when men were discussing things of great importance—particularly if those discussions happened to be of a religious nature. They viewed the presence of women as just a waste of space—for these things were too lofty, you see, for any woman to possibly understand, less more contribute to. So, when the people of Jesus' day heard this story from Luke's Gospel, they were appalled.

Not only had this woman, Mary, violated the social norms of the day by failing to stay in the kitchen and attend to her natural duties, she had gone so far as to go into the "Man Cave" where Jesus and His disciples were clearly involved in religious discussions far beyond her ability to comprehend—or so they thought. And not only this, but Mary had assumed a position among this group of men that was strictly forbidden under the Jewish customs.

Notice that Luke tells us that Mary ***sat down at Jesus' feet***. Now, when we read that, it quite often goes right over our heads. But, such phraseology had a specific meaning during Jesus' day. If you sat at someone's feet, it was the position that you would take to show that you were that person's disciple. If someone sat at the feet of any rabbi, then that person was signifying that they were willing to be taught by him. And that, shockingly enough from Martha's

perspective, was exactly what Mary was doing—sitting there at the feet of Jesus. A woman disciple? Could there be anything more scandalous than that? (Perhaps, later, when Jesus hung on the Cross at Calvary, she would have the answer to that very question.)

And certainly Martha must have been outraged by all of this—even more so by the fact that she was left to do all the cooking, serving and cleaning up, while her sister, Mary, lounged shamelessly at the feet of Jesus soaking in His every word. And so she got angry, and displays this anger by asking Jesus a question: ***“Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to come and help me!”*** Now, the way that this would have come out in the Greek language in which she most likely spoke, the question of ***“don't you care”*** was worded in such a way that it implied that only one possible answer could be given. And what Martha expected that answer to be was for Jesus to turn to Mary and say something like: ***“You heard her, Mary! Get up and do your duty in helping your sister. What are you doing in here anyway—this is a place for men only!”*** That's what Martha expected Jesus to say.

But, He didn't say that at all. He didn't say anything close to that. In fact, what Jesus said must have shocked Martha. For Jesus didn't reprimand Mary, but rather mildly rebuked Martha herself. What an unexpected, shocking and scandalous response Jesus gave to Martha when He told her: ***“Martha, Martha! You are worried and troubled over so many things, but just one is needed. Mary has chosen the right thing, and it will not be taken away from her.”*** ***“How can this be?”*** Martha must have thought. What did Jesus' response mean? What was he saying to her? What is He saying to us? There are several things that we can take away from this passage.

First of all, this is a story that breaks down barriers. Clearly, there are no barriers for males or females when it comes to Christ. Jesus was radically redrawing the boundaries for those to whom God's grace was readily available. He was proclaiming a clear message about how the Good News should now be spread far beyond any traditional borders. And, He was starting, right there in Martha's own home, to reestablish the boundaries between men and women as far as salvation was concerned. It was now available to all who would accept Him as Lord and Savior. Jesus was well aware of the fact that in Jewish society if someone were to sit at the feet of a rabbi, it signified that they were identifying themselves as a student of that rabbi. He also knew that if you sat at the feet of a rabbi that it was a public declaration that ***you wanted to be a rabbi yourself.*** Mary was quite openly expressing her sentiments that, regardless of the fact that she was a woman, she was willing to bear the public heat, take on the public shame, and still quietly take up her place as a disciple of Christ. And yes, proclaim His Good News to whomever would listen—men or women alike. Jesus' response to Martha affirmed Mary's right to do exactly that. And so, in the words of N. T. Wright, "***Mary stands for all those women who, when they hear Jesus speaking about the Kingdom, know that God is calling them to listen carefully so that they can speak of it too.***"<sup>1</sup> "Yes," Jesus is saying, "***come sit at my feet and be my disciples—men and women, young and old, rich or poor, Republican or Democrat.*** Paul was basically expressing the same thing when he said: "There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Galatians 3:28 (HCSB) The Sunday School song we learned as children provides the same message: "***Red, yellow, black or white—all are precious in His sight.***" There is no race, ethnic group, gender or social class excluded from the Kingdom

of God. The only class that is excluded is the **unrepentant** sinner who continues again and again to reject the grace of Christ. After a while, their continued resistance to Jesus hardens their own hearts, and they exclude themselves from His presence forever.<sup>2</sup>

There is something else that we can take away from this story. And, it is this: Maybe we are all like Martha sometimes. Maybe we pay too much attention to what others are doing, or not doing, and with our critical eyes focused upon them, we fail to see our own shortcomings. Jesus could have responded to Martha with something He said in the Sermon on the Mount: “How can you say to your brother [or sister for that matter], 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?” Matthew 7:4 (NIV) Jesus was letting Martha know, as He also lets us know, that we’d be so much more effective—witnessing individually, as well as ministering as a church— if we would expend a little less effort in judging others, and a little more time in assessing our own shortcomings.<sup>3</sup>

Now the final thing that comes out of this story is, in many ways, the most important. And some people try to make this point by asking a question. The question that they like to ask when interpreting this story is whether you will be more like Martha or more like Mary. But, I think that that question may very well miss the point. Jesus is not asking us to choose between Mary as a model versus Martha as a model. Rather, we need to consider that, at times, we need to be a little bit like both, because the characteristics of both are essential to living a life of genuine faith.<sup>4</sup>

And yet, there are things demonstrated by both of them that we cannot afford to do all the time. Let me explain. We do want to imitate Martha’s

genuine spirit of servanthood and hard work. Getting out and actually doing work for Christ is a vital part of our mandate. After all, James tells us to “be doers of the Word and not hearers only.”<sup>5</sup> But, staying in the “**doing**” mode **all of the time**, at the expense of **failing to listen** to what God has to tell us, is a big mistake. And so, Martha’s error was that, on this particular day, she was all about “**doing**” and nothing about “**listening.**” Like Mary, we need to take the time to sit at the feet of Jesus and soak in His Words. Do it daily by reading and reflecting upon the Bible—**that’s the Mary part to imitate.** But, if all Mary did was to listen, and never put what she heard into action, she would be as much in error as Martha. Yes, follow Mary’s example in taking the time to hear God’s Word; and then, take those Words and put them into action and apply them in the way you live your life. In other words, do things for Christ—**that’s the Martha part.**

Before concluding, let me add two things about Martha, because I don’t want you to get the wrong impression about her. First, I don’t want to make it sound like Martha’s overemphasis on the “**doing,**” to the detriment of her “**listening,**” is solely a female problem. It’s a male problem as well. The Apostle Peter is a good example of this. During the Transfiguration, Jesus stood there on the mount in the presence of Elijah and Moses. That might have been a very good time to stop the “doing” and kick into “listening” mode. But, Peter was worse than Martha. All he could think about was **doing** something—he wanted to build little memorials to honor these holy three.<sup>6</sup> And so, God had to remind Peter, just as Jesus reminded Martha, sometimes it is better to use your ears than to use your hands. God got Peter straight and told him, “This is my Son, my Chosen One. Listen to Him.” Luke 9:35 (NLT2) For us, it’s the same command—open your Bibles and not only read with your eyes, but listen with your heart.

And the second comment about Martha is this: The description of Martha in this story was describing her on just one day. And, it probably wasn't one of her best days. But, did she move beyond that? Did she ever start listening to Jesus, and not just doing? Absolutely! In fact, she apparently listened more closely and perceived things more clearly than the male disciples did. Take for example, her conversation with Jesus on a later occasion when Jesus told her that He is the resurrection and the life. Jesus then asked Martha if she believed that to be true. To which she responded: "Yes, Lord, I have always believed you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who has come into the world from God." John 11:25-27 (NLT2) Apparently, Martha had been listening to Jesus quite a lot on different occasions to come to such a conclusion way before some of her male counter-parts who were also followers of Jesus.

What a wonderful story we have here—so rich, with so many things for us to think about. And perhaps the most crucial thing to ask is: Who will you serve?—and at whose feet will you sit? So many people today put their faith in sitting among faulty feet. So, where will you sit?—At the feet of Nancy Pelosi or Chuck Schumer? At the feet of Donald Trump? None of them are God, and none of them have the answer to your ultimate salvation (as much as they'd like you to believe otherwise). Maybe you haven't really taken a seat at Jesus feet yet because, like Martha, ***"you are worried and troubled over so many things."*** Don't be. Remember what Jesus said: "I tell you not to worry about everyday life—whether you have enough food and drink, or enough clothes to wear. Isn't life more than food, and your body more than clothing?" Matthew 6:25 (NLT2) Jesus is saying, in effect, "don't choose food, drink and clothing (or any other merely material things of this world) over Me." ***Make the right choice.*** Make

Mary's choice, for she chose rightly the only thing that is needed: ***Jesus Christ***. And then make Martha's choice as well—***serve Him only for the rest of your life***. Now, the world might see that but fail to understand. The world might see that and even think that it is scandalous. But, hey—what a wonderful thing to be, when we are scandalous for Jesus Christ!

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church  
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Darvin Satterwhite, Pastor  
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<sup>1</sup> N. T. Wright, *New Testament for Everyone – Luke for Everyone*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 129-131.

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 11:10 (NASB) Moses and Aaron performed all these wonders before Pharaoh; yet the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not let the sons of Israel go out of his land.

<sup>3</sup> Darrel Bock, *NIV Application Commentary, The – Luke: From biblical text...to contemporary life*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 306.

<sup>4</sup> Diane G Chen, *New Covenant Commentary – Luke*, (Eugene, OR 97401 : Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 156.

<sup>5</sup> James 1:22 (KJV) But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 9:33 (NLT2) <sup>33</sup> As Moses and Elijah were starting to leave, Peter, not even knowing what he was saying, blurted out, "Master, it's wonderful for us to be here! Let's make three shelters as memorials—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."