

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost; August 7, 2022

+ Luke 10:38-42 +

“True Service Starts with Listening”

As they went on their way, Jesus came to a village, and a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who was sitting at the Lord's feet and listening to his word. But Martha was distracted with all her serving. She came over and said, “Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her to help me.”

The Lord answered and told her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but one thing is needed. In fact, Mary has chosen that better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

Before we begin exploring the story of Mary, Martha, and Jesus, can we start by agreeing on one thing? Before we do anything else, can we please agree not to be too hard on Martha? It's true: Martha blows it in this story. On his way to Jerusalem to die for the sins of the world, Jesus Christ stops and stays in Martha's home. And Martha doesn't listen when Jesus speaks. Yes, that's bad. Martha sins, no doubt, by failing to sit at Jesus' feet and listen to him, like her sister Mary.

Martha is distracted. But at least she's distracted by something good. The Son of God has come into her home, and Martha wants things to be nice for Jesus. She's distracted, sure. But it's not like she's distracted by something worthless. Service to Jesus is important. **Martha welcomed him into her home.** Excellent. And she does want to serve Jesus. That's good, too.

Martha shows a lot of good instincts. But she does sin. She does go wrong. Not in welcoming Jesus, or serving him. She goes wrong by starting in the wrong place. Mary gets it right. She starts by sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to him and learning from him. True service to Jesus starts by listening to him.

Jesus gives us countless opportunities to serve him every day of our lives. We may not welcome him personally into our homes, but every act of love for any neighbor is service to Jesus. Working hard at our jobs is service to Jesus, who gives us our talents and opportunities to work. Athletic competitions are an opportunity to glorify God. So is reading and learning and serving a meal (as Martha was) and cleaning and chauffeuring children to practices. These are all ways to serve and glorify God. Think I'm getting too trivial? I'm not. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul mentions some of the most boring, run-of-the-mill activities as opportunities to serve and glorify God: **Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God.** Whatever you do, everything you do, is a chance to serve God by using what he has given you to his glory.

But the story of Mary, Martha, and Jesus teaches us where God-pleasing service must start. It must start with listening to God's Word.

“One thing is needed,” Jesus tells scurrying Martha. **“Mary has chosen that better part.”** Listening to the Word is where we need to start, because that, in Jesus' words, is **“the one thing needed,” “that better part.”** When we listen to God's Word, he convicts us and damns us. He calls us nasty (but true) names like lost, condemned, sinful, dead, enemies. God's Word yanks its listeners down by telling them that God is holy and requires them to be holy – and they're not, so they're lost. But God tells us these things because he loves us, and he is preparing our hearts to hear the best news there is.

God is not only holy, he is also love. In perfect love, he sent us Son to save all sinners. Jesus Christ is the perfection we need. His death on the cross absorbs the eternal punishment our sins deserve. His resurrection guarantees our own on the Last Day. When we listen to God's Word, we see his saving love in action in the work of his Son, Jesus Christ. With every perfect word, thought, and deed of Jesus' life, we see God's love for us. As his blood pours down the cross, we see God's love for us. As we lean into his empty tomb and find nothing but neatly folded grave clothes, we see God's love for us. As we watch him ascend and say, **"Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age,"** and we see that God's love for us endures as his Son reigns over all things while remaining at our side always.

This is why Jesus calls the Word of God **"the one thing needed"** and **"that better part."** It is God's scathing, damning law preparing hearts to hear the sweet good news of love and salvation in Christ. But the better part gets even better. Because when people listen to it, the Spirit uses the good news to bring them to faith in Jesus. This is why we must start by listening to the Word: the Word offers eternal life in Christ, and the Spirit uses that message to bring us to faith.

And then, with faith in Jesus, people can truly serve God. A person who does not believe in Jesus can do many things that look good to other people. But not to God. In order to offer true service to God, you must believe in Jesus first. Your sin must be removed by his holy life and death before God will receive any service from you. Jesus himself says, **"I am the vine you are the branches; if you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing."** There is a popular idea that what you believe doesn't matter, as long as you do the right things. That idea is not just unchristian, it is anti-Christian. Before God will receive service from you, you have to be right with him. And that happens when you listen to what his Word says, and believe it.

True service starts with listening, because the Word gives us Jesus and faith in him. And then, with that faith, we are able to offer service to God from our minds, mouths, hands, and hearts.

Here's another reason that your service has to start with listening: God's Word is where he tells what pleases him. The law of God condemns us because of our sin, but then it also guides Christians in their service. What does God expect from a Christian father? How does he want a child, a worker, a soldier to serve him? How do you know? Again, there is a prevailing thought: follow your heart! Do what seems right in your heart, and God will accept it. But the prophet Jeremiah says **the heart is more deceitful than all things**. Please, don't follow your heart when you're serving God. Your heart is sinful and will often lead you astray when you serve. Listen first to God's Word, and he'll tell you what pleases him. Then you'll know you're offering him the service he wants from you.

True service starts with listening. Because when you listen, you know God's salvation, and are able to serve him. And when you listen, you know how to serve him. And start by listening, because that is what our Servant Jesus does. When Jesus stops at the home of Mary and Martha, he is heading to Jerusalem. All through this season of Pentecost, we have been following Jesus on this journey, watching him send out missionaries, heal diseases, teach his disciples about his mission, and tell parables. Now he makes one more stop, but all the time he's moving closer and closer to the cross, where he will save us from our sins. Why is Jesus doing this? Why is steadily striding toward his own suffering and death? There are lots of ways to answer that question, but here is one right way: He is listening to his Father. Jesus starts by listening to God's Word. When God says, "Go, embrace your cross; suffer, die, and rise," Jesus goes and does it. Jesus' own service to us and to his Father starts with listening to God's Word. We follow him. So our service starts the same way.

True service starts with listening. To know your own salvation; to serve God with a heart of faith; to know how to serve him correctly; and to follow your Savior's path of listening first. And finally, true service starts with listening because true service to God is joyful. And when you listen first, you will serve him joyfully. Picture Martha's face as she complains to Jesus. Do you see a big joyful smile behind these words? **"Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her to help me."** Do you think Jesus is looking at a joyful person when he says, **"Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things."**? Martha was doing important things. But how was she doing them? Not joyfully, but worried and upset.

God wants joyful service. When we shoot out of the gate and go straight to work without listening to God first, we worry. We get upset. We feel pressure. So listen first! Listen to how much God loves you! Listen to how he forgives your sins in Jesus! Listen to him tell you that lays out the opportunities for you every day to serve him. And then your service will center on Jesus' love and be filled with joy. And that's what God wants! Not just that we're doing things that please him, but doing them in gospel joy. So first: listen to the gospel, let it fill you with joy, and then serve with joy.

Whenever you find yourself stressed out, feeling like you don't have time, pressured and worried, that's the most important time to stop and listen to Jesus tell you how much he loves you. But there's no time, you say! There's so much to do! I have to do this and that and this and that! There's no time to listen! No. That's the exact time to listen. Refresh your faith in the Word. Refresh your joy. Then go back to serving with a light and rested heart, the way God wants you to.

Sometimes it's very challenging to apply the main point of a text to your lives. This is not one of those times. The application here is very simple. Before you schedule anything else, schedule time for the Word of God. Choose the better part. That of course includes church, because this is one place you listen to God's Word. If you currently treat Sunday worship as a nice, optional activity, if you have time and you feel like going...then it's time to change that approach. If your family is not in the habit of spending time together in God's Word, start now. Stop making excuses about not knowing how to do it. There are piles of devotion books in the back of church left untouched every month. If you know how to read, you know how to read the Bible. Take the time in the morning or before bed at night, whenever you can concentrate the best. Don't try to be a superstar, at least at first. Just one little Psalm, one parable, a few quick verses, with time to pray and meditate on what you've read.

Choose the better part, for all the reasons already discussed. But let this be the main reason: **"Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."** When you start by listening to God's Word, he is giving you what can never be taken away: life in his heavenly kingdom.

And there we will get to serve God forever, and serve him perfectly. This God promises will not be taken away from us. He makes us no such guarantee about anything else. Our jobs, our money, even our families and friends. All the things we use to serve God in this world he can, and eventually does, take away. There is only thing he promises will never be taken away: the heavenly kingdom.

So, when you start with listening, you are starting with what never ends, what will not be taken away: the Word that promises you life in heaven. With that promise of what will not be taken away, you will go throughout your day serving God in faith, serving him according to his commands, serving him like your Savior, and serving him with joy. With heaven in view, we will use our time and our talents and our money in true service to God. It all starts with listening to the better part, which will not be taken away.