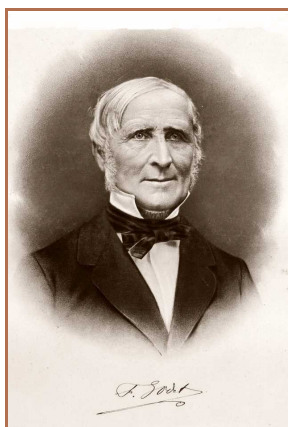


‘Martha, Martha ...’

Have we chosen the ‘good portion’?



Frederic Godet
(1812-1900)
‘one of the most
exquisite scenes which
gospel tradition has
preserved to us’

THE SETTING

A - How thankful we should be that we have 4 gospels, not 1. Even if we had 3 not 4, we might have missed the good Samaritan, the lost sheep, the prodigal son, all of which are unique to Luke. And so too this little episode in the home of Martha and Mary (‘one of the most exquisite scenes which gospel tradition has preserved to us’ - Godet). We might know a little of Martha & Mary from the even more famous incident in John 11 and 12. In case that doesn’t ring a bell right away, let me merely mention the name of Martha & Mary’s brother – Lazarus, and I’m sure you remember John’s story. Lazarus, Martha & Mary, all it seems dear friends of Jesus and the apostles. How dear to Jesus? We recall Lazarus’ death brings about the shortest

verse in the KJV - *Jesus wept*. Yet in Luke Lazarus is not even mentioned. Mary appears only in the accusation of her sister, and her defense by Jesus. It is **Martha** who is front and centre. It is, according to v.38, *Martha’s house*

B - We have now placed Martha at the centre of this episode. Let us place ourselves geographically. Though Luke is vague about the place,

we learn from John that this home was in Bethany. Some have wondered what this episode is doing in the section of Luke generally regarded as describing Jesus’ journey **toward** Jerusalem. But some of our best commentators suggest that Jesus regularly made trips to Jerusalem for festivals, and therefore this seemingly out-of-place incident can be accounted for. This chronological detail, however, is probably not relevant as to Luke’s placing it here in his gospel.

‘After the parable which elucidates the meaning of the second commandment comes a story which may be regarded as elucidating the first commandment ...’ [Marshall 450]

Plummer suggests a further answer to “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (v.25) “Mere benevolence, such as that of the Samaritan, is not enough. It must be united with, and be founded upon, habitual communion with the Divine.” [Plummer 290]

So the story’s situation in Luke may have more to do with the lesson of the good Samaritan (*who is my neighbour?*, v.29) which precedes it, and also with Luke’s version of the Lord’s prayer, which follows it in ch.11.- The 2 great commandments, and the divine priorities of the Lord’s prayer, certainly seem necessary in any attempt to understand Luke’s point in including this ‘exquisite scene’ in his gospel.

We have 5 verses, and they fall under 5 heads, which are --

1. MARTHA - THE PERFECT HOSTESS

A - Where do we see ourselves in this scene? Are we reclining with Jesus, like Mary? Or are we bustling about making sure our guests are well-served? How else, after all, should one honour the Messiah? Isn’t this what a Jewish woman should be doing anyway - serving household and guests? Would we criticize such a dutiful hostess?

2. MARY - THE MODEL DISCIPLE

A - Whether Mary had helped in the preparations, and left off, feeling enough was before her guests, or whether she had not even participated in preparation, is not clear from the account (commentators are

divided).

B - But what Mary was doing, in taking her position at the feet of Jesus, was not only offensive to her sister:

“Judaism did not forbid women to be instructed in the Torah ... but it was very unusual for a rabbi to lower himself to this. In the social system of the time women were a ‘rejected’ group, and Luke pays considerable attention to the acceptance which Jesus accords them.” [Ellis 162]

C - Whether others in the room were offended, we have no clue. But Martha was livid. So much so that she takes a piece off not only her sister, but Jesus as well!

D - And what of Mary? Was she lazy? Inconsiderate and unloving? Listen to Spurgeon’s take on Mary’s choice:

‘Let us, without fear, enjoy leisure with Jesus – leisure, but not laziness: - leisure to love, to learn, to commune, to copy. ... Leisure to sit, and to sit in the most delightful of all places.’ [Spurgeon vol 1, p 184]

- ‘LOVE IN LOWLINESS ... In this lowliness, let each one personally copy Mary. Say to yourself, “I chose the feet of Jesus to be my place.”

Let me be—

Not a busy housewife and manager, which any one may be, and yet be graceless; but –

1. A penitent, which is an acknowledgment of my unworthiness.
2. A disciple, which is a confession of my ignorance.
3. A receiver, which is an admission of my emptiness.’

- LISTENING to JESUS is the ‘good part’ [my thought - notice Mary doesn’t bite back, she KNOWS she’s got ‘the good portion’ - and rests content]

- [Bishop Hall, quoted on p188] ‘The greater submission, the more grace. If there be one hollow in the valley, lower than another, thither the waters gather.’

Have WE found the deep waters?

3. HANDS THAT SERVE, FINGERS THAT POINT

A - How is it that so often busy hands have fingers left to point? Some of the great commentators like Calvin and Godet suggest that in criticizing her sister, Martha was carrying service beyond its proper bounds, actually finding pride in her work, and judging those who do less. Was the seeming selflessness of her service contaminated by self-importance?

B - And what on earth would cause a hostess to tear a strip off a guest, not to mention the Master? Martha knows her sister well enough to know she will listen to the Lord -- *bid her help me*, she complains. We can take this, I suppose, as a tribute to the Lord, in that Martha and Mary obviously felt close enough to Him, comfortable enough with Him to take liberties. But each took liberty in a way peculiar to her personality and priorities. Mary at His feet, Martha at His throat. Here we do well to picture ourselves in the room. Are you Mary or Martha? Am I a disciple, or a doer?

C - Here we have a lesson that should prevent us comparing OUR type of service to others - Luke’s point is NOT that there is only one way to be a Christian. Rather, there are:

2 temperaments, both loved by Christ (must not compare to others, as if less grace - or even no grace) [Ryle]

4. JESUS - THE FAITHFUL FRIEND

A - Another tribute to the Lord - there is in His response to Martha not merely tact, but infinite tenderness. Do we not sense His grace even in the twice-uttered name, *Martha, Martha* - do we recall 2 other occasions when the Lord repeated a name?

[v.41] - Plummer points to repetition of name (cf. 22:31; Acts 9:4) as expression of affection and concern. “Martha complains of having no one to help her; but it was by her own choice that she had so much to do.” [Plummer 291]

B - What kind of Lord is this? Who says *you’re persecuting Me ... It’s hard for YOU* ... One who tempers truth with tenderness. Yes, it was not Jesus who set up the menu for this dinner. Martha had her own standard of hospitality, and was mortified that neither her sister nor her Master

cared as much as she did. *You are distracted by many things*, the Lord says. While there is infinite tenderness and tact in Jesus' reply, there is also a reproof – fist in velvet, as it were. Martha, Martha why are you bending your own nose? We recall the proverb, *The wounds of a friend are faithful* (Prov.27:6). Do we care enough to check a friend whose choices need adjusting? Would we do it in public, if necessary? And would we be able to balance directness with gentleness, as does the Lord? I often marvel at the outrageous things Jesus says to his 'friends'. (The same Peter heard *Simon, Simon ... I have prayed for you and Get behind me, Satan!*) How is it they didn't take offense? He must have exuded compassion to sweeten the medicine. As Paul would later urge us to do, *speaking the truth in love*. Tempering truth with tenderness – there's a great art. How are you and I doing?

C - Of course, in not responding in kind to Martha's outburst, Christ proved the purity of His motives:

Christ's single object to do good, God's will. [Calvin]

As much as her words stung, it was Martha's loss which hurt the Lord. She is anxious, worried, divided. Here we might remember another saying of Jesus, *If your eye is simple [single] your whole body will be bright*. How bright was Martha's face at that moment? And Mary's? How is it that fussing and fuming go naturally together?

periespato (verb in v.40) - "drawn about in different directions, distracted." [Plummer]

5. HAVE WE CHOSEN THE GOOD PORTION?

A - *One thing is needed*, Some manuscripts have it, *Few things are necessary, even one*. Whichever it is, the thought is clear. Is there not again great art in the indirectness of the Lord's assertion? Martha is left to puzzle, *What is He talking about? Which dish, which course, is the ONE?* Or did she immediately intuit His meaning? The anxiety on her countenance, the hurt in her voice, were both evidence that she had not Mary's simple vision.

one object, to which all else is accessory (Calvin - beware accessories become objects)

one thing NOT defined, but dependence on Jesus (at his feet

learning) [Morris]

'it is simpler to hold that by the expression *one thing*, Jesus meant to designate spiritual nourishment, the divine word, but not without an allusion to the simplicity in physical life which naturally results from the preponderance given to a higher interest' [Godet 311]

B - If Martha thought for a moment that the Lord was talking of the physical food, what would she make of the next remark. *Mary has chosen the best portion, and it will not be taken away from her*.

Ellis titles section PRIORITY OF HEARING THE WORD OF GOD

" ... Jesus rebukes Martha for diverting Mary from his word to less essential tasks. The issue is not two kinds of Christian service but religious busyness which distracts the Christian – preacher or layman – from the word of Christ upon which all effective service rests. ... Martha's concern was to be a proper hostess, Mary's to be a proper disciple. Jesus' concern, as ever, was to serve and fulfill his mission, not to have his rights as a guest. To Martha -- and, Luke implies, to all her daughters – the Lord offers a gentle rebuke: don't let ordinary dinners spoil your appetite for the real dinner." [Ellis 162]

C - *The good portion*. Does Martha **really** think she's heard enough from Jesus? Judging by her dinner-time priority, we might conclude Martha thinks she has graduated from discipling school. Then, Martha, hear this: *I have many things yet to say to you, but you are NOT ABLE to bear them now* – and that after 3 years of personal training with the Master. Do WE think we know the Lord now? Perhaps Martha occasionally sat at Jesus' feet – but her very busy-ness betrays she had not sat there **enough**. Or that if she was at his feet sometimes, her mind was elsewhere. At the end it was Mary who anointed Him for His death. I ask, Which sister loved the Master more? Being a DOER, if it is not informed by being a HEARER, will be relatively fruitless. A disciple will also be a doer - but many doers no longer find time to be disciples. I've met far more Christian 'Marthas' than 'Marys'.

'This story should not be taken to mean that the Saviour taught that a life of quiet worship and contemplation is the right form of religion and that an active Christian life is to be disapproved of. There is here no question of such a contrast. What we do learn here is that in our life's active service we must not be anxious and agitated, sulky and dissatisfied with our fellow-Christians or with our Master,

and that we should not busy ourselves to such an extent with outward things that we neglect the quiet worship of the Lord. The most important part of our religion is the spiritual exercise of communion with our Redeemer. When things are right in this respect, we shall also in our practical life be actively busy in His honour. [Geldenhuys 316]

“One thing is needful.” How true that saying! The longer we live in the world, the more true it will appear. The nearer we come to the grave, the more thoroughly we shall assent to it. Health, and money, and lands, and rank, and honors, and prosperity, are all well in their way. But they cannot be called *needful*. Without them thousands are happy in this world, and reach glory in the world to come. The “many things” which men and women are continually struggling for, are not really necessities. The grace of God which bringeth salvation is the one thing needful. Let this little sentence be continually before the eyes of our minds. Let it check us when we are ready to murmur at earthly trials. Let it strengthen us when we are tempted to deny our Master on account of persecution. Let it caution us when we begin to think too much of the things of this world. Let it quicken us when we are disposed to look back, like Lot’s wife. In all such seasons, let the words of our Lord ring in our ears like a trumpet, and bring us to a right mind. “One thing is needful.” If Christ is ours, we have all and abound. ... What do we know of this “good part” which Mary chose? Have we chosen it for ourselves? Can we say with truth that it is ours? Let us never rest till we can. Let us “choose life,” while Christ offers it to us without money and without price. Let us seek treasure in heaven, lest we awake to find that we are paupers for evermore. [Ryle 387-389]

D - If you are stung by these questions, I am also. For these days I sit less at the Master’s feet than I once did. Even as a Jehovah’s Witness, undistracted attention was my goal -- *attending upon the Lord without distraction*, in Paul’s words (1 Cor 7:35). I wouldn’t even let the Watchtower distract me from that goal. It had to be so if ever I was to escape the WT. Nothing, no idol, not even the ‘organization’ of God could come between the Lord and me. But then I was a bachelor, with few responsibilities. But NOW I have every excuse – wife, child, business, ministry, church responsibilities, 100s of friends and often needy acquaintances. Life seems far more complicated. Yet is not Christ saying to ME as well as Martha, *there is no excuse, not even service to*

ME?

And to what extent is life’s complexity my choice? *Martha, Martha, you are distracted with many things*. Substitute David, David – or your own name – in that sentence which so artfully combines reproof and infinite patience. For in every scene of the gospels, every occasion when the Lord is present, we are there too – either listening, to our eternal good, or not listening, to our eternal loss. Have we found the hid treasure, for which we will sacrifice all? Have we found, in the words of Proverbs, ‘the very knowledge of God’ - which treasure can be found ONLY by the diligent – that is, the *quick to listen, quick to HEAR?* (Prov. 2:1-5) Mary found it, and would not give it up – not even to serve Jesus! For the Jesus SHE knew was more interested in serving than being served. All of us regularly consecrate time to serve. Are we careful to consecrate time to BE served? Let us pray.

PRAYER Lord, may we be disciples first, hearers of the Word, and not distracted with many anxieties, however well-intentioned. Let us realize that all fruitful service begins not in our hands, but at your feet Amen..

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ellis, E. E. *The Gospel of Luke* (NCB, 1966; 2e. 1974)

Geldenhuys, J. Norval *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (NIC, 1951) A favourite among conservatives, with warmth and good interaction with scholarship. Excursus on date of crucifixion

Godet, Frederic *A Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke* (1870; tr. 1893) Great work by an exegete who epitomized the rare combination of scholarship and deep reverence

Marshall, I. H. *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC, 1978)

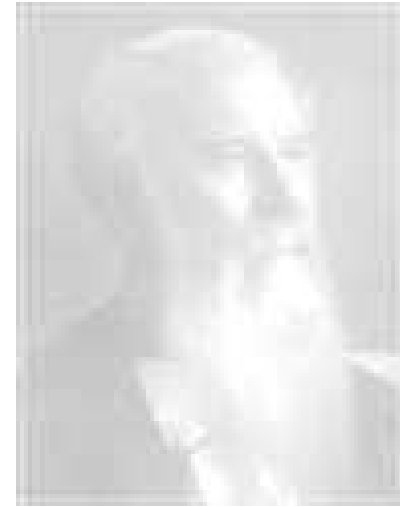
Morris, Leon *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (TNTC, 1974; rev. 1983) Sturdy, thorough, concise

Plummer, Alfred *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on ... St. Luke* (ICC, 1896; 5e. 1922) A classic handling of the Greek text, with 75 page intro, verse-by-verse exegesis

Ryle, J. C. *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Luke* (1856) As

always, rich with practical help

Spurgeon, Charles Haddon *Sermon Notes*



J.C. Ryle:

*“Hold the things of this world
with a very loose hand”*

“If we desire to grow in grace, and to enjoy soul-prosperity, we must beware of the cares of this world. Except we watch and pray, they will insensibly eat up our spirituality, and bring leanness on our souls. It is not open sin, or flagrant breaches of God’s commandments alone, which lead men to eternal ruin. It is far more frequently an excessive attention to things in themselves lawful, and the ‘being cumbered about much serving.’ It seems so right to provide for our own! It seems so proper to attend to the duties of our station! It is just here that our danger lies. Our families, our business, our daily callings, our household affairs, our intercourse with society, all, all may become snares to our hearts, and may draw us away from God. We may go down to the pit of hell from the very midst of lawful things. Let us take heed to ourselves in this matter. Let us watch our habits or mind jealously, lest we fall into sin unawares. If we love life, we must hold the things of this world with a very loose hand, and beware of allowing anything to have the first place in our hearts, excepting God. Let us mentally write ‘poison’ on all temporal good things. Used in

moderation they are blessings, for which we ought to be thankful. Permitted to fill our minds, and trample upon holy things, they become a positive curse. Profits and pleasures are dearly purchased, if in order to obtain them we thrust aside eternity from our thoughts, abridge our Bible-reading, become careless hearers of the Gospel, and shorten our prayers. A little earth upon the fire within us will soon make that fire burn low." [J.C. Ryle, First Bishop of Liverpool, *Luke*, vol.1 pp. 385-386]