

# Only One Thing Needed

by Rev. John Cheek



*Jesus at the Home of Martha and Mary*

*<sup>41,42</sup> "Martha, Martha," ... few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."*

## Prayer

Gracious God, give us humble,  
teachable, and obedient hearts,  
that we may receive what you have revealed,  
and do what you have commanded.  
Amen.

## Introduction

### The cultural understanding concerning honor and shame

Everyone's role is established on the basis of whether they are in a position of honor or shame. Everyone is seeking to be in a position of greater honor. Some, however, are permanently in the position of shame. These include:

- People whose work includes being in contact with dead animals like tanners.
- People whose work brings them into contact with Gentiles, like tax collectors, who were also seen as collaborators with the enemy, or traitors.
- Beggars.
- Women, whose role was to do household work and to produce children, preferably male children. Women were taught (usually by their mothers) enough of the Torah to avoid disobeying its mandates, but no more.

Luke's goal in writing Jesus' biography is to show that, in his life and his ministry, Jesus turns these cultural assumptions upside down.

Hospitality was, and continues to be, a very high priority throughout the Middle East.

### Scripture: Luke 10:38-42 (NIV)

#### At the Home of Martha and Mary

<sup>38</sup>As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. <sup>39</sup>She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. <sup>40</sup>But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

<sup>41</sup>"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, <sup>42</sup>but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

...

## SERMON – “Only One Thing Needed”

A. (v. 38–40) As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, they *[This is the last point in this passage that there’s any reference to the disciples. From here on out, the only persons discussed are Jesus, Mary, and Martha.]* came to a village *[We know from John’s gospel that this village was Bethany, a little less than two miles from Jerusalem.]* where a woman named Martha opened her home to him.

1. (v. 39) She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. *[Mary is doing something counter-cultural by seeking to learn from Jesus.]*
2. (v. 40a) But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made *[to fulfill the hospitality requirements].*

(v. 40b–42) She came to him *[Jesus]* and

1. (v. 40c) asked, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me.”
2. (v. 41 & 42) “Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered,
  - a. (v. 41b) “you are worried and upset by many things,
  - b. (v. 42a) but few things are needed—or indeed only one. *[There is a double meaning here. In the immediate conversation with Martha, Jesus is saying that she doesn’t need to make so many dishes and arrange so many things. It would be fine for her to do less, even making a single dish for her guests. At the same time, he is saying that, if one wants to be one of his followers, there is one thing more important than anything else.]*
  - c. (v. 42b) Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her. *[Mary has chosen to listen to Jesus and to be transformed in that pursuit. Jesus says that this is more important than the duties of hospitality, and that it’s more important than anything else.]*

### What can we take away from this story this morning?

First, the church is designed and expected to be counter cultural. At the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry, the culture said that women were low on the list of who mattered. Jesus spent time with women, as we see in the passage today. Culture said that women had no business learning spiritual truths from a rabbi. Jesus said that wasn’t true. Culture said that sinners, tax collectors, and women should be shunned. Jesus said this wasn’t true, and he hung out with them all the time.

What does the culture say today? Culture tells us who matters and who doesn’t. Jesus says everyone matters. Culture agrees with a poster that was on a wall in a friend’s office. The poster showed a mansion and a limousine and a man with a glass of champagne. The caption said,

"The one who dies with the most toys, wins." We remember Jesus telling the rich, young ruler that his possessions were weighing him down and that he needed to rid himself of them.

The culture tells us that we need to be winners. Jesus tells us that the first (the winners) will be last and the last (the losers) first. Culture tells us that our status defines our value. Jesus tells us that our value stems from God's extravagant love for us. Culture tells us that violence is the way to get on top and stay on top. Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek.

One of the worries I have about the church in this stage of its life is the degree to which the church has chosen to get on board with the cultural values in society. There's a long history of this. During the time that restaurants in the south regularly refused to seat or serve African Americans, too often the white pastors, including Presbyterian pastors were saying, "Well, it's too bad, but it's not time yet. That will change sometime in the future, but not yet." See, the church sided with the culture and the status quo, rather than standing for justice. We, all of us, need to look at what the culture says and to weigh that against what Jesus says.

A second lesson we can take away from this passage is that Jesus is Lord. In this little passage of five brief verses, Jesus is identified as Lord three times. The commentators agree that this is a story-telling device that emphasizes Jesus' authority. What does it mean to us today that Jesus is Lord? Is it just words? Is it something that fits into our Sunday morning life but is irrelevant the remainder of the week? What does it look like to live in a way that, seven days out of every week, Jesus is the Lord of our lives? We need to look into our lives, our choices, our priorities and decide where Jesus fits and where we want him to fit.

A third message we can take away from this passage is related to the other two. Jesus wasn't angry at Martha in this story. He corrected her but he didn't scold her. Rather, he wanted the best for her and told her how to have the best. Her desire to be the perfect hostess kept her from listening to Jesus. Don't we do the same thing?

What are the distractions that keep us from listening to Jesus? Remember, none of the things Martha was doing were wrong or improper. It's just that she had her priorities wrong, and she wanted Jesus to tell her sister to embrace those same wrong priorities. It's easy for us to be there too, isn't it?

We might be saying, "I need to get this next promotion, and then...." Or we might be saying, "I need to meet this sales goal, and then...." Or we might be saying, "I just need to get all this under control, and then...." All of those may be perfectly good things to work toward, but Jesus says, gently and lovingly, "My precious and wonderful child, you are worried and upset and distracted by many things." We need to listen to the words of Jesus, but how can we do that?

Well, clearly, worship is one of the ways we can attend to what Jesus wants us to know and understand. But what are some other ways we can listen to Jesus? How about if we make it a regular practice to read God's Word regularly? How about if we become part of a regular Bible study? How about if we intentionally spend time with brothers and sisters in Christ? And I want to make clear: I'm not saying that you should only spend time with other Christians. I am blessed

to have a number of friends who are not religious. I love them and they love me and each of our lives are enriched by the other. But to strengthen my walk with Jesus and to remind me of God's love, I also need to spend time with my sisters and brothers in Christ.

Can you hear the voice of Jesus saying, "John, John, you are worried and upset by many things, but few things are needed—or indeed, only one." I want to hear and to get my priorities in order. Are you listening? Are you hearing?

May it be so. Amen

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