

THE GOOD — THE ENEMY OF THE BEST

Luke 10:38-42

Bible stories are the records of events which have a present message and an eternal meaning. They contain the records of real life with both its sunshine and its shadows. Our Scripture contains one of these beautiful stories.

About two miles east of Jerusalem was the village of Bethany. In it was the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus — two sisters and a brother, all of whom were the friends and the followers of Christ. These choice spirits were not only lovers of Christ, but they were loved by Him. In their home there was true family love. Their home was famous for its hospitality. To this well-ordered home, which was so much to the liking of the Lord Jesus, He frequently resorted as a welcome visitor.

Although the Lord Jesus did not have an earthly home of His own, He could enter this home in Bethany as a welcome guest, without advance notice at any time, and there throw off the restraints incident to His public ministry. How pleasant it must have been for Him to enter a residence where He could feel "at home," and at the same time find love, cheer, relaxation and seclusion! The Saviour frequently enjoyed the gracious hospitality of these devoted friends. They greatly enjoyed having Him as their guest and gladly did their best for Him.

One day the Lord Jesus made a sudden and unexpected visit to this home in Bethany, probably accompanied by the apostles. Of this event we read, "Martha received him into her house." This statement implies that she was the owner of the house, and was therefore simply exercising her prerogative by inviting the Saviour to enter it.

As a loving hostess with generous impulses, Martha was anxious to do everything within her power to make her Lord's visit pleasant and enjoyable. Wanting to do all that she could for Him, for Whom she had such a genuine affection, Martha thought that the best thing she could do would be to prepare and serve an elaborate and sumptuous meal. So, she excused herself and hurried into the kitchen to make the necessary preparations.

Evidently Mary went into the kitchen with her and remained there for at least a little while. The word "also" implies that Mary did not spend all of her time sitting at the feet of her Saviour and listening to Him. She helped a bit with the preparations, but soon left Martha in the kitchen to carry on alone. Even though she considered the meal an important matter, she certainly did not think it was of supreme importance.

Martha and Mary were earnest and devoted followers of Christ. Each of them revealed traits of true Christian character which were born of a deep love for their Saviour. Martha's love revealed itself in an untiring self-sacrificial service. She did not want to leave anything undone that would add to the comfort or the enjoyment of her Guest. However, she made a mistake that is common to all practical souls, namely, that of thinking that Christ needed her, rather than realizing that she needed Him.

In these sisters, both of whom were His loving disciples, Christ observed two different attitudes. Martha was busy doing for Him what she thought was worthwhile, and Mary was willing for Him to do for her what He thought was worth while. Martha was busy with her work for Him, while Mary was listening to His message for her. Martha was busy with her will for Christ, and Mary was occupied with His will for her. Martha was placing the emphasis upon the material and temporal things, whereas Mary was emphasizing the spiritual and eternal matters. Each of us places the emphasis on either the material or the spiritual.

One of the tragic features of life today is the apparent carelessness with which many live. With so many the emphasis is placed upon the relatively unimportant things, while the important matters which are rooted in Christianity receive very little attention. The speed and intensity of life today tend to make people materialistic, so the main concern of the multitudes is to make a living rather than to produce a life.

Anxious to entertain Christ appropriately, Martha thought that the best thing she could do would be to prepare for Him a sumptuous meal, so she threw herself most heartily into that effort. Mary had the idea that to receive a guest properly implied that he be given her company. Martha thought that the best she could do for Christ was to give Him a meal. Mary thought that the best she could do for Christ would be to give Him herself. Martha was concerned about food for the stomach. Mary was concerned most about food for the soul. When He was here on earth, the stomach-serving disciples left Christ just as soon as He started to preach to them the truth of the Bread of Heaven. Stomach-serving disciples still do that.

Martha was so bent on providing a good meal for her Saviour that she was on the verge of distraction. Afraid that the dinner was going to be a flop, Martha worried and got nervous. She also resented the fact that Mary was seated leisurely at the feet of Christ while she was having to do all of the work. She became greatly irked by and very impatient with her sister for shirking what she considered to be her responsibility. In my imagination, I can hear Martha muttering to herself, "Doesn't Mary realize that a dinner does not cook itself? Why in the world doesn't she come and help me? Why should she sit and listen while I do all the work? The least she could do would be to lend a helping hand."

In like manner, it is so easy for us to let the duties of life usurp the time which should be spent in sitting at the feet of Christ and learning from Him. However, such conduct always causes anxiety and is fatal to spiritual effectiveness.

At last her irritation mastered Martha and her resentment rose until she could not stand it any longer. Believing that she was being mistreated, and becoming thoroughly exasperated, Martha dropped her work in the kitchen and, with her face flushed with rising indignation, burst into the room where Christ was talking to Mary. Rushing up to Him with feverish excitement, and complaining about the fact that Mary had left her to serve alone, Martha asked Christ to command her sister to assist in the task. Listen to her words of complaint, "Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me." She thought that Christ would rebuke Mary and send her into the kitchen at once.

This certainly is not a pretty picture of Christian attitude -- accusing Christ and commanding Christ -- accusing Christ for failing to see our side and commanding Christ to do what we think ought to be done -- complaining against Christ for what we have to bear and finding fault with Christ for what others do not have to bear. "Lord, don't you care that others are having an easier time and less worry and sorrow than I am having? Do for me then what I am praying for." This is the talk of the Marthas who do for the Lord what they think is worth while.

With Martha it was clearly a case of the tyranny of things. Things have their place in life alright, but they should never occupy the first place. The tyranny of things loads our lives with cares that ought never to be borne and makes living far more difficult for others.

The Martha spirit is far too prevalent among us today. So often it shows itself in the censure and ridicule of those who are loyal to the teachings of God's Word. In conversations, classroom lectures and discussions, and columns of newsprint earnest and consistent Christians are frequently denounced as ignorant and impractical.

Mary's great desire was to learn as much as possible from Christ in the little time that He was in their home. She sat at the feet of the Master, listening attentively to Him

and imbibing eagerly the teaching which was food for the enrichment of her soul. Thus she was getting that for which her heart yearned, and at the same time she was pleasing their distinguished Guest.

Mary put attitude to Christ ahead of activity for Christ. "Mary sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word." The point of praise here is not of idleness as contrasted with activity. Christ did not say that Mary never worked and Martha never worshipped. Neither did He say that Mary's attitude toward Him was better than Martha's because she was not doing anything and Martha was doing much. Her attitude was better because Mary was doing the better thing -- learning Christ's word and will rather than making that secondary to doing what she decided was wisest and best -- learning what Christ thought was necessary for her rather than doing what she thought was necessary for Christ.

Our Lord rebuked Martha for becoming the slave of the things with which she had to do. She was threatened with the tyranny of things. If the tyranny of things was a danger in Martha's day, it is a far greater danger in these strenuous days in which we live. We are living in an era of many things. Our productive industry has multiplied the things we can eat or wear or purchase. A century ago the average person in this country had 72 wants, 16 of which were regarded as necessities. Today the average person has 484 wants, 94 of which are regarded as necessities. Furthermore, a century ago there were not more than 200 different items urged on the average man by the seller, but today there are over 32,000. Bondage to things always causes worry. The man who is a slave to things is always wanting something. His desires increase far more rapidly than his income increases. But, happiness never comes through being a bondsman of things.

In spiritual matters the good is always the enemy of the best. Christ said, "Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her." The Lord Jesus was rebuking Martha because she had become so occupied with her duties that she did not have any time for Him. Martha thought she was doing her duty, but she was closing out the Saviour, and that was very displeasing to Him. She had substituted the good for the best. Anything that closes out Christ is exceedingly sinful, regardless of what it may be. In order to survive the inner anxieties and the outer agitations of our day the inner man must have the refreshment which Christ alone can give.

This passage sets forth the greatest need of the Christian. What is that need? Is it to be more liberal in his giving? to be more zealous in service? to be more orthodox in doctrine? to be more fervent in prayer? to cultivate a greater humility? to seek a filling of the Holy Spirit? to render more implicit obedience to Christ? to give more time to the study of God's Word? No; every Christian has a deeper need than any of these. What is it? The one thing which is needful is to sit at the feet of Christ and hear His Word. To sit at His feet and to receive from Him is the solution to every problem of the Christian life. This "one thing" is the basis of everything else.

To be occupied with Christ is to be satisfied, and this is the "good part" which shall never be "taken away" from us. Our Lord wants us to sit at His feet and receive of His fulness in order that He may enrich us and that we in turn may serve others. We cannot minister to others until we have received from Him. The vessel must be filled before it can overflow.

Here, then, is the one thing needful --- fellowship with Christ. It is to cultivate companionship with Him. It is to have our eyes fixed on His face and our ears opened to His voice. It is to be able to say,

"I have heard Thy voice Lord Jesus,
Tell me not of ought beside.
I have seen Thy face Lord Jesus,
And my soul is satisfied."

One of the great curses of our day is too much activity, and too little sitting at the feet of the Lord Jesus and hearing His Word. Men are so busy doing things for themselves, for others and for Christ that they do not have time to cultivate fellowship with Him. For effective service we need wisdom, grace and power, but these are the fruits of much time spent in His presence. If you are in fellowship with Christ, you will receive that wisdom which cometh from above, you will have compassion for the lost, and you will have that power which will enable you to do greater works. Fellowship with Christ is the one condition of fruitbearing and the secret of abounding joy.