

"Lesser Known People of the New Testament"
"Mary of Bethany"

This is the last in a series of messages where we're looking at some of the lesser known people who are in our New Testament. Hopefully we've seen that even though some of them are barely mentioned, they played an important role in the early church, and they can instruct and inspire us today. Today we look at Mary of Bethany.

Like almost all of us, Jesus valued having friends. Three of His friends are a brother and two sisters: Lazarus, and his sisters Mary and Martha. They live in Bethany, a village about 2 miles outside of Jerusalem. Lazarus, you may remember, died and was brought back to life again by Jesus!

We'll begin by looking at a story found in Luke, chapter 10. The setting is the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus in Bethany. "Now as they went on their way, they entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home" (Luke 10:38). Jesus stays in the home of these 2 sisters and their brother. It's Martha who welcomes Jesus into their home. I can see her rushing to the door and greeting Jesus with a smile on her face. "Come in! Come in! So glad you could come!" (*Remember, hospitality was a sacred duty back then. Martha provides that!*).

Mary, her sister, is there too. "She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying" (Luke 10:39). Martha is setting out the snacks, checking the things on the stove, making sure everything is in place, and Mary....well...Mary's sitting on the floor next to Jesus, listening to what He's saying. Now ladies, be honest. How would you feel if you were Martha? You're doing your best to be a good hostess. You're the one doing all the work, *and getting no help!*

Well, Martha doesn't like it either! "But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me'" (verse 40). Can you hear the edge in her voice, the frustration: "Lord, don't you care that I'm stuck doing everything! Tell that sister of mine to pitch in and help out!"

And how does Jesus respond? "But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her'" (Luke 10:41-42). "Martha, Martha...you're worried and distracted by so many things. Only one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen it." The Common English Bible puts it this way: "One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part. It won't be taken away from her."

What's going on here? Most of us feel badly for Martha, who's stuck with all the work. Yet Jesus kind of scolds her, and commends Mary! What does Jesus see here that we're missing? What is this "one thing necessary" that Mary has, but Martha lacks?

There are a couple of clues in this story. *First of all, Luke tells us that Mary "sat at the Lord's feet".* John Ortberg tells us that "to sit around at someone's feet" was a technical expression back

then that described the relationship between a rabbi and his disciple. If you were a disciple you wanted to be around the rabbi as much as possible in order to soak up and learn everything you could from him. Mary is doing that!

Now, it's important to understand that *Martha* had faith and believed in Jesus. In John 11, where the story is told about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, when Jesus arrives, Martha says, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask" (John 11:21-22). Notice her faith! Jesus replies, "Your brother will rise again" (John 11:23). Martha says I know he will rise again on the last day. Jesus responds: I'm the resurrection and the life, and whoever believes in me, even though they die, they will live eternally. Jesus says to Martha, "Do you believe this?" and she answers, "Yes... I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world" (John 11:27).

Martha has faith in Jesus – but it seems *Mary goes further and deeper: she not only believed some things about Jesus, she was a disciple, a follower!* She had made a commitment to be with Jesus in a way that shaped and defined her whole life.

The other clue to this story is this: *Martha was worried and distracted.* Luke writes, "But Martha was distracted by her many tasks" (Luke 10:40). Jesus said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things" (Luke 10:41). She's worried (fussing around). She's *distracted*. She wasn't doing anything bad. In fact, what she was doing was good - serving, being hospitable. But she was so taken up with her serving responsibilities that she missed something much better - the chance to really "be with Jesus" and learn from Him.

When you think about it, look at the opportunity Martha had, and passed up. *Jesus* was in her home. Crowds pushed and shoved and flocked just to get a glimpse of Him, and hear Him speak. Here He is – *in her home! The Teacher, The Master, the Lord of all Creation!* I mean, wouldn't you like an hour or two for a one-on-one with Jesus! Besides, He would soon be taken from them – crucified. It's not that Jesus wanted Mary to do nothing the rest of her life but sit on the floor at His feet. It's just such that she took advantage of a golden moment to *be* with Jesus!

This story has to do with our relationship with Jesus. Being with Jesus. First century Jews had a way of expressing a disciple's desire to be close to their rabbi. They said, "May you always be covered by the dust of your rabbi." In other words, as a disciple, you seized every opportunity to be with your rabbi, to follow him around so closely that you got covered with the dust he kicked up when he walked. Mary was a *disciple*, and had an intimacy with Christ that Martha lacked. That was the one thing needed.

So, are you a Mary or a Martha? (Guys are probably thinking, I don't want to be like either of them – they're women! But you know what I mean!). *To me, Martha represents a lot of "Christians" today.* They believe in Jesus. They go to church (at least some of the time). Maybe help out in the church. They have a Bible, and sometimes will pray. They think of God and Jesus maybe *sometimes* when they're not in church. They see themselves as "Christians". Often these people have good intentions, and worthy spiritual goals. They want to pray more. Want to

know the Bible better. Want to feel God's presence and experience His guidance. But, like Martha, they're often "worried and distracted". There's always something that gets in the way of a deeper intimacy with Christ. The job, the kids, the responsibilities laid on them. They're kind of "just Christians".

"Mary", on the other hand, is not "just a Christian", but a follower – someone who wants to go further and deeper in their relationship with Christ. To be with the rabbi as much as possible! The Mary's of the world want Jesus to be close with them, in every part of their life, every situation they face, so they can learn from Him, and become more like Him.

So, who are you most like? Who am I most like? Mary, or Martha? Are we "just Christians"? Or are we "followers", people covered with the dust of our rabbi?

What does it look like if we go into a deeper commitment Mary had? *For one thing, we'll want Jesus to be with us in every aspect of our life.* He won't just be in our thoughts when we're in church, or just occasionally throughout the week, or when we're in a crisis. We'll want to consciously feel His presence in every situation so He can guide us and we can be more like Him: when we're at work or school, cleaning the house or washing the car or shopping for groceries, relaxing with friends.

You may think, "I don't know, Harry. You want me to be some kind of religious fanatic – that all I ever think about is religion? And that's all I'll ever want to talk about with people? To me that's a major turnoff." No! That's not what I'm suggesting we be like!

I'm thinking of a man in my home church who probably more than anyone else in my mind was covered by the dust of the rabbi. Jesus was a part of everything he did. His life was centered in Christ! But he was a delightful man. Wonderful sense of humor. Normal in every way – he loved sports, played ball when he was young, golf as he got older (he had a membership at Overlook Golf Club). Humble. Caring. So close to Jesus – just covered in the dust of the rabbi!

If we're like Mary, we'll want Jesus to be with us in every aspect of our life. *Also, if we're like Mary – a disciple – there will be a joyful, spontaneous love for Jesus.* Here's another incident involving Mary and Martha and Lazarus: "Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, 'Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages'. He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. 'Leave her alone,' Jesus replied. 'It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me'" (John 12:1-8).

Imagine that – this perfume was valued at almost a year's wages! Think of a year's wages today, even for someone who's making just a modest income. She pours it out and it's gone, just like that! It's hard to grasp the extent of Mary's extravagance, the total abandonment she had in showing her love for Jesus. When's the last time you and I did something extraordinary, made some sacrifice, poured ourselves out, simply because of gratitude for Jesus and what He's done for us?

Those who are like Mary, fully committed, walking in the dust of the rabbi, are the ones who are most likely to show their love for Jesus in extravagant, costly ways!

Just one other quality about those who are disciples, fully committed to being with Jesus: ***They will love!*** Following Jesus closely, letting Him filter down into every aspect of our life, we become more like Him. That means our life is characterized by *love*. Jesus is God, and the Bible says, "God is love" (1 John 4:16). Jesus said love is the identifying mark of a disciple: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

Following Jesus, having Him be part of every facet of our life, isn't just for our personal gain – even though it brings joy and peace and fulfillment. It's not about us. It's about Christ working through us to bless and love others. The man in my home church who exemplified to me more than anyone living in the dust of the rabbi was one of the most caring, compassionate people I've ever known.

Martha believed in Jesus...she was a "Christian"...but Mary went further. She was devoted to having a relationship with Jesus that etched itself into every facet of her life...walking in the dust of the rabbi. That was the one thing Martha lacked.

So, which are you? Which am I? Martha? Or Mary?

Over many years I've served a number of churches, and been a pastor to hundreds of people. Many of them have been "Christians". *Somewhat* committed. Far fewer have been *followers* like Mary. Men and women and youth, fully committed to Christ, wanting Him to be part of every decision, every goal, every facet of their life.

Perhaps there's no better way to end this series of messages than to challenge you (and myself) to do that one thing needed – to be with Jesus as much as we can – to walk in the dust of the rabbi!

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