



Ask, Father James:

How is Mary's Choice Better than Martha's? Did Jesus Really Criticize Martha's Choice?

In Luke 10:42, Jesus says; "*Martha, Martha,*" "you are worried and distracted by many things, but only one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken away from her." This text has been given different interpretations. One interpretation says; Mary's choice represents - contemplation - listening to Christ in a spiritual way and Martha's choice is being active and practical in welcoming strangers. This version of interpretation concludes by saying we need both Martha's practical virtue and Mary's spiritual contemplation. That we can live balanced lives that reflect the receptive and listening Mary and the active and hospitable responsible Martha. If we had one without the other, we would have dinner on the table but no love, and if the other way around, we would have love but no dinner.

I however like to offer another interpretation of this text. I think the text speaks to us about the need to watch out for the "Martha Syndrome" in us. We all suffer from it. It has two diagnostic symptoms - the need to be continually busy, and having anxiety about everything. Some of us even bring our "Martha Syndrome" to church and they cause us distractions at Mass. Despite being in God's presence, we are still worried, upset and distracted about many things. In the brief and engaging interactions with Mary and Martha of Bethany, Martha, allowed herself to become absorbed by many things - worries and anxieties.

The text is not so much a 'put down' of Martha, as it is a gentle rebuke for her anxiety and worrying about many things and thereby causing her distractions, despite being in Jesus' presence. The advice of Jesus is clear, Mary chose the better part: sitting, listening and praying at the feet of Jesus. The question Jesus answers in this text is how to overcome anxiety. Worrying and being full of anxiety are underlying causes of many problems leading to loss of quality of life.

Jesus calls us to stop. Stop what we are doing and listen to Jesus. To sit at the Lord's feet and listen to his word. This is discipleship. Jesus only reminds Martha that Mary has chosen what's important: listening to God. Jesus was teaching Martha and us of the marvelous transformations that can happen when we give attention to God, instead of to the thousands of distractions that society offers us. Silence is hard for many people in the world and many people have quit going to church because they can't handle the silence of church. They forget that; To hear God we need to be silent - Be still and Know that I am God (Ps. 46:10).

The "one thing" which is the sole necessity of life is to feed the soul - To hear the divine word before we go filling the need of the body - food and drink. Mary was seated at His feet spending her time in learning how to feed the soul. Whose feet are you willing to sit at? Jesus' response to Martha was on the necessity to understand the right time, to set aside time for hearing and listening to God instead of wasting time on fleshly things. He asked her and us to set our priorities right. As a general rule, most of us are, by nature, more "Martha" than "Mary." To overcome your anxiety, reverse your priorities! Watch out for the Martha syndrome in your spiritual life.

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