

Martha

Control and Confidence

In the life of the Lord Jesus Christ, we could say that in the midst of many Marys, there is only one Martha.

Her very name implies a strong personality,¹ a quality borne out in her regular activity. She has often been fodder for preachers who compare and contrast her with her siblings and draw negative conclusions that highlight Mary's spiritual virtue and Martha's carnal tendencies. Yet, Martha's interactions with the Lord Jesus don't paint a hopelessly negative picture of her. They do, however, provide practical lessons from her weaknesses and strengths and show how the Lord can refine our faith and character through suffering. We will look at two of the three Martha passages of the New Testament.

Distracted in Service

Luke 10:38-42

Let's be fair: it was her house (v38). She was accustomed to arranging the menu and meals in the home. Here, she was in control. But on this day, the pressure of entertaining was overwhelming, and she could use a little help. We cannot deny that she was busy in the most essential of Christian ministries by showing love to the brethren and entertaining strangers in her house (Heb 13:1-2). However, there appears to be a slight issue with her service.

Peter commands the show of hospitality, but with the critical caveat, "without grudging." (1 Peter 4:9). Another translation helps us see the importance of Peter's words, "Be hospitable to each other without secretly wishing you hadn't got to be!"² Martha's service effectively provided for others, but her underlying attitude presented a problem. Was she murmuring while making the meal? Was she secretly wishing that she could leave behind her mundane chores to be like Mary?

Dominant one; mistress; Stelman Smith and Judson Cornwall, [*The Exhaustive Dictionary of Bible Names*](#) (North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos, 1998), 167.

² The New Testament in Modern English by J.B Phillips copyright © 1960, 1972 J. B. Phillips.

Her protest to the Lord (v40) seemed like the boiling point of the simmering bitterness she had carried around all morning! In this case, she was not showing hospitality without grudging.

We have often been told that the Lord rebuked Martha for her activity in service, but in reality, He only rebuked her for being distracted by service. The words “cumbered” (v 40) and “troubled” (V41) share a similar meaning and indicate that Martha’s deaconess service had pulled her away from something more important. Perhaps identifying a couple of Martha’s struggles will help us address issues in our own service.

First, we notice that she was serving the Lord, but her eyes were on someone else. Focused on Mary, her heart became jealous and bitter, and so will our hearts if our ministry is done with this toxic attitude. It is very common for our carnal flesh to take pride in our own service and condemn the devotion and activity of others. The Lord Jesus' words come to mind as He addressed Peter’s unhealthy interest in John’s ministry. The words “What is that to thee, follow thou me” help us to focus on our responsibility and can preserve us from many pitfalls on our path of discipleship. (Jn 21:22).

Second, we see that she prioritized the physical and temporary. Care for the practical needs of the saints became a concern in the early days of the church (Act 6:1-6) and continued to be encouraged in the epistles. However, maintaining and developing physical, corruptible things is never more important than nourishing spiritual and eternal things. (2 Cor 4:16,18) Like Mary sitting at His feet, hearing the word of God in communion with Christ feeds the inward man and should come second to no other activity.

Confidence Tested in Sorrow

John 11:1-44

“Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus.” (John 11:5). With these words, we are assured that Jesus' love for this woman was never doubted. In a time of illness and death, she would face many uncertainties, but her relationship to the Man of Sorrows was never in question; He loved her. Why, then, this loss and grief?

Remember now, Martha’s confidence in His ability wasn’t an issue, but her concern about His inaction was. Her “take control” mindset couldn’t see any

practical reason for the Lord not to intervene. However, a close reading reveals three purposes for the death of Lazarus.

1. For the Glory of God and His Son (v4)
2. For the strengthening of the disciples' faith (v15)
3. To produce faith in the onlookers at the tomb (v42)

Furthermore, Martha was very clear about who and what she believed. Two times, we are told what she knows. Verses 22 and 24 indicate that she had confidence in the Lord's authority and that she expected a future resurrection. She would even say she believed His messiahship claims (v27). But how would that knowledge and faith play out practically? For biblical faith isn't complete with just knowing; faith forms the foundation for attitudes and actions, and her faith will now be tested at the tomb.

The Lord's command to remove the stone is met with a sharp protest from our dear Martha (v39). A practical roadblock had arisen, and her "take control" mode was activated. But this was inconsistent with her confession moments earlier. She said she believed in His power. She said she believed in resurrection. She even said she believed that He was the Son of God. So, why oppose His desire to remove the stone? Like many of us, Martha had not yet made the connection between the clear conviction of what she knew and the casting of care upon the One she knew. Indeed, this is the case for us all. We are clear and confident in the assembly gatherings and in our reading chairs, but when it's time for that faith to work out in adversity, we let the difficulty override our dependence. Just like Martha, when we see the problem, we lose sight of His power.

In reminding her of His previous words (v40), the Lord is not just rebuking her obstinance but reinforcing a principle. He had already told her things, and now He will act consistent with His word. The woman accustomed to organized control watched helplessly as the Lord accomplished something outside her influence. In Lazarus' resurrection, the Lord took Martha's armchair faith, improved its character and increased it.

We can relate to Martha because of the comfort that comes with feeling in control, and like her, the Lord may have to bring us through challenging circumstances that transform our faith's character. May He help us look beyond the practical problems to know His purpose in our circumstances, peace in our sorrow and power in our lives.