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Getting the Best of Everything Luke 10:38-42

Imagine the following situation. It's 7:23 in the morning and you wake up with a jolt realizing that the alarm hasn't gone off and if you don't leave for work in 7 minutes, you're going to be late again, and your boss isn't going to be happy. So with time to do just one of the following, which do you do? Eat breakfast? Read your Bible and pray? Take a quick shower? Or put on your clothes? The one we hope you do is put your clothes on. Amen? But the point is, you have to choose, and what you choose reveals something about your priorities, and that's our topic this morning. Our topic this morning is priorities which as you can see on the screen behind me comes from the word "prior" (meaning before or earlier in time), which means a priority is what? It's something you do prior to anything else.

For example, let's say it's Saturday and you've promised to help a friend move the next day on Sunday. He's recently divorced and you want to support him however you can, but your kids remind you it's Mother's Day on Sunday and they want to take Mom out to lunch and spend the rest of the day doing something together as a family.

So what do you do? As I thought about it, and I've made mistakes like this in the past, I came up with 3 options: 1) You can take a risk (a big risk, I might add) and ask your wife, who also cares about your friend, if she wants to make it a family affair and have you all do it together as a ministry to the guy. What do you think, ladies? Or 2) You can make both your wife and your friend unhappy by trying to do both things: spending the afternoon with your family and then rushing over to your friend's house to help him in the evening. Or 3) the safest decision, unless you want to start looking for another place to live yourself, is to tell your friend that you're sorry, you forgot it was Mother's Day and though you want to help him, he'll have to wait till after work on Monday, so you can devote Mother's Day to your wife and children. Because your priority, if you want to stay married very long and I'm serious about that, is to meet your wife's needs first, prior to making promises to your friends. Am I right, ladies?

Our topic this morning is priorities, and if I were to ask the average guy on the street, he'd probably come up with all sorts of answers—family, friends, health, fitness, school, career, sports, going green and saving the environment. But if I ask a Christian the same question, I expect to get just one answer, right? Because there's really one priority for a Christian, and what's that? "Wait a minute," you say, "I know he's talking about God, but I'm not sure what he's getting at." It's like the story about the boy in Sunday school whose teacher asked him, "Johnny, what's gray, eats nuts, climbs trees, and has a busy tail." "Well," he says, "I know the answer is Jesus, but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me." And some of you are saying, "I know it has to do with Jesus, but I'm not sure what you're getting at?" And I think the safest place to go for the answer is Jesus Himself who boils it down to one thing. He says the secret to life is just one thing, but knowing what that one thing is, is the difference between gaining every good thing life has to offer and losing everything. And the place where He tells us what this one thing is, is Luke chapter 10 starting with verse 38, if you'll open your Bible there now. This is one of the great short stories in the Bible involving two sisters who have a serious disagreement about priorities. So the Lord

settles it for them, and in so doing, helps us get our priorities straight as well. I want to approach it as a 3-act play. The first act I call “Pressures,” which is something we all face on a daily basis, the pressure of deciding when to say “yes” and when to say “no.” But prior to doing that, I want to pray because that’s always the priority when we study the Bible together—

1. Pressures

This morning we meet two of Jesus’ closest friends, Mary and Martha who along with their brother Lazarus lived in Bethany, a little village on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, less than 2 miles from Jerusalem, which is where Jesus would stay when visiting Jerusalem. Luke doesn’t tell us that. We learn that later in John’s gospel when Jesus visits Bethany, first, to raise Lazarus from the dead and then a few weeks later when He visits them again and Mary anoints His feet with perfume in preparation for His death. That’s a little bit about the background. Listen now as I pick up the action in verse 38. “As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. 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!” Let’s stop there for a moment and zero in on that phrase—“Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.”

The word “distracted” means to be dragged or pulled away. Martha, you see, was the oldest of the siblings and grew up with that feeling of responsibility that firstborn children often carry. Add to that the fact that it was her house Mary and Lazarus lived with her, which was very common in that culture—but Luke makes it clear that it was Martha who opened her home to Jesus. And she was also a woman and the fact of the matter is: Women didn’t enjoy much respect or authority in that culture. So they found it where they could. I’ll never forget making a comment along those lines to an older missionary after our first trip to Romania. I said, “You can’t believe how oppressed the women are!” His response was: “I’m sure it seems that way, but give it time and you’ll find ways they exert their influence.” He was right! Men may call the shots in church and government but there’s no question who’s in charge of the home. When you sit down at that table and Mama says, “Eat!” you eat whatever she puts in front of you! Mama decides what and when her family eats, where her children sleep, and how her home is furnished. That’s what Martha is doing as the curtain rises on this story. She’s mopping the floor, polishing silverware, baking bread, setting the table, and making sure there are clean sheets on the beds, while Mary sits there and does nothing but listen. Think about it! This is the Son of God she’s entertaining in her home, and which of you if the Son of God dropped by your house for dinner tonight, wouldn’t want help getting ready for Him? Be honest! You wouldn’t settle for anything less than perfect, would you? But here’s the point: Almost all of this stress was self-imposed. Jesus didn’t care how the table was set! What He cared about was her! But we do that to ourselves, don’t we? Let ourselves get dragged away from the best thing of all, which is time with Jesus, by desperately trying to live up to a certain image we have of ourselves.

In Martha’s case, it was the image of someone highly organized, responsible, and caring! And we care about that too! But the question is: What could you and I ever hope to do to impress the Son of God? He knows our every fault and flaw! In fact, the only reason you and I are still in one piece this morning is because He’s holding us together by His grace, which means all that pressure we put on ourselves is completely unnecessary because the Bible says He accepts us just the way we are. Psalm 103:14 says:

“As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear Him, for He knows our frame. He remembers that we are but dust.” You see, the only thing you prove by beating yourself up over your performance is that you’re still trying to find your value and acceptance from something other than your relationship with Christ, whereas says that if you want to come to Christ, you have to come just as you are—no covering up or pretending to be more than you are! You have to come just as you are with all your sin and brokenness, or Jesus won’t be able to touch that part of you that needs to be healed. What’s more, if you still trying to project an image that’ll impress others, it’s going to inevitably distort your perception of them as well. And that’s the second element of the story I want you to notice with me—

2. Perceptions

Let me read those first 3 verses again, this time from the NASB, which puts it like this: “Now as they were traveling along, He entered a village; and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. She had a sister called Mary who was seated at the Lord’s feet listening to His word. But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up to Him and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me.” The expectation, when obsessed with reaching this or that goal, is for others to cooperate with you, and if they don’t, then they’re part of the problem, keeping you from success, aren’t they? In Martha’s mind, Mary was selfish and lazy concerned about nobody but herself! In that sense, it reminds me a little bit of Eliab, David’s brother, when he left the sheep to take on the giant who was mocking the God of heaven. It says, “When Eliab, David’s oldest brother, heard him speaking with the men, he burned with anger at him and asked, “Why have you come down here? And with whom did you leave those few sheep in the desert? I know how conceited you are and how wicked your heart is; you only came down to watch the battle!” Eliab was jealous of David, attributing evil motives to him because, rather than staying with the meager task he’d been given, he dared to take on a role that couldn’t possibly be his!

And the same thing is true here! Mary sits at Jesus’ feet taking on the role of a disciple which is something no other rabbi would let a woman do. In fact, a woman wasn’t even allowed to sit with her husband in the synagogue. She had to sit in a separate place with the other women and children because it was men only when it came to learning the Law! But Jesus is a different kind of rabbi with a different attitude towards women. He welcomed Mary’s desire to sit at His feet, and He welcomes you to do the same thing today regardless of your race, gender, or age! The only thing you need to become His disciple is a humble, teachable spirit! You’ll remember earlier in Luke, Jesus’ brothers and sisters come to Him expecting special treatment from Him because we’re family. But they didn’t believe in Jesus yet, and they weren’t willing to listen to Him! So what was His response? Pointing to those who sat around Him, He said, “Whoever hears God’s Word and puts it into practice is my brother and sister and mother.” No one but Jesus would allow Mary to sit at His feet and learn from Him. So Mary took full advantage of the opportunity. And frankly, that made Martha jealous because she would have liked the same thing, but there was something inside her that refused to let go of the apron and join her sister at His feet. So instead of dealing with her own stuff, she criticizes Mary for being lazy when, in fact, she’s the one with the attitude problem! But, then, that’s why we call them blind spots, isn’t it? Because even though others see them very clearly, we can’t because they’ve become so much a part of us.

I wonder. Do you have any faults like that? We all do, don’t we? And the only way to keep them from separating us from Jesus is to trace the problem back to where it began. And 9 times out of 10 we’ll

find it began when instead of asking Jesus, “What is it you want me to do for you?” we come up with a goal thinking, “This is what’ll give my life meaning,” and assuming that because it’s a lofty goal, “This must be God’s plan for my life,” putting all our energy behind it, the project becoming everything and relationships falling by the wayside. Of course, when we’re children, Mom and Dad can step in to help us. But when you’re adult children, like Martha and Mary, there are no parents to bring sanity to the situation. So where do we turn with our complaints? To the Lord! “Lord,” Martha complains, “Don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself?” That’s called “passive aggressive.” “Lord, don’t you care about me?” “Care about you?” Jesus could have answered, “In just a few weeks, I’m going to die for you!” But He’s too gracious to say that. And then, in my opinion, she crosses the line. “But Lord,” she says to Him, “Don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself?” and now she dares to give the Lord a command, “Tell her to help me!” There’s no question about it. Martha loves Jesus very deeply. That’s why she invites Him into her home waiting on Him hand and foot. But what she needs to do is what we all need to do when our attitude goes sideways. We need to go back to where we got off track and start again confessing, “Lord, I’m sorry for getting my will confused with your will. Please forgive me and help me start again.” But it’s a blind spot, and Martha can’t see it yet. So Jesus graciously takes her there Himself, to the real issue she needs to deal with, and that’s the third element I want us to notice in this story, the question of values and—

3. Priorities

Jesus corrects her in verse 40 but notice how kind He is about it. Martha says to him, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me,” which is not the way you talk to the Lord if He really is your Lord! But notice, instead of pulling rank on her and saying, “Back off, Martha! Have you forgotten who you’re talking to?” He simply says her name two times, “Martha, Martha.” Isn’t that a great example of how to correct someone who has a good heart but has temporarily lost her focus? It also reminds me of the way He corrected Peter after his fall from grace. 3 times He asked him, “Peter, do you love me?” And each time he answered Him, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” But it says after the third time He asked him, Peter was so hurt by the question that he added, “Lord, you know all things! You know that I love you!” And Jesus knew that Martha loved him, so all He says to her is, “Martha, Martha.” That’s something we’d do well to remember the next time we correct a child or a friend who loves the Lord, but has momentarily lost her way. Paul says we’re to restore them in a spirit of gentleness considering ourselves so that we too are not tempted. Jesus corrects those who go astray, and we should too, but we’re to do it in such a way that the other person feels helped, rather than beaten up. It’s taken me a long time to learn that, but gradually I’m learning to do it the way Jesus would. What about you?

And He continues in verse 41, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things...” And that’s our problem too. We have this long mental list of things we need to fix, both in our lives and the lives of those we love. But as Dr. Phil would say, “How’s that working for you? Are all those anxieties helping you enjoy the abundant life Jesus came to give you?” No, and I doubt those you are trying to fix appreciate it either. Because the only One capable of carrying all those concerns, and He’s able to do it perfectly well without any help from you or me, is Jesus Christ Himself. Some of you may recognize this illustration from Campus Crusade. It’s a picture of a person who loves Jesus, but he’s still trying to work everything out in his wisdom and strength and as a result, everything in his life out of order, because as Jesus goes on to say to Martha, “You are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed!” And what’s that one thing? Jesus said it like this in another place—“Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these

things will be added to you.” In other words, “If you give me my rightful place in your life, then as you can see in this second illustration, everything else in life will fall into its proper place, because Jesus, not you or I, is sitting on the throne of your life, making all the executive decisions. Amen? Is that where Jesus is in your life today? If not, all it takes is a humble confession of our sin and pride and a decision to let Him take center place in our lives again, and He will.

He corrects Martha very gently and then praises and protects Mary. “Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better.” Literally it says, “Mary has chosen the best part,” which is a play on words because the phrase “best part” is how they referred to the main course of the meal. “Mary has chosen the main course and best thing in life which is listening to me and following my word and that’ll never be taken away from her or anyone else because that what pleases me most!” David said it like this (Psalm 27:4), “One thing I ask of the Lord, the thing I seek most, is to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life and gaze on the beauty of the Lord.” Paul’s testimony was the same. He said (Philippians 3:7): “One thing I do: forgetting what’s behind and reaching forward to what’s ahead, I press on toward the prize,” which is what? To know Christ! That’s all that matters to me now! I want to know Him and let His Word mold me into His very likeness. That is also the transition Luke now makes in his gospel. Up till now, the focus has been on miracles—Jesus proving His authority by healing the sick, casting out demons, and raising the dead. But now Luke focuses on something even more important. 14 chapters left in this book but only 7 more miracles! So what’s the emphasis now? Teaching! Jesus teaches about prayer, faith, money, heaven, the Holy Spirit, which is why Luke puts this story here: to remind us that there’s only one posture fit for a disciple and that’s to sit at His feet like Mary, feeding on His Word, so that we have the wisdom and power to minister to others.

So that’s the keynote on which I want to end this morning—the priority of spending time with Jesus as often as we can because that’s the only thing that’ll ever change us or make any difference in our lives. And I want to be practical about it and remind you that nothing of significance happens in our lives unless we’re intentional about it and make plans to do it. That’s true whether you’re planning for retirement, reserving a vacation spot, or going out on a date Friday night. It happens because you make specific plans about when, where, and what you’re doing to do. And it’s no different when it comes to our relationship with Christ! If we aren’t intentional about it, it won’t happen. So as the worship team comes to lead us again, I want to challenge you to jot down on a piece of paper a simple plan for the week ahead that includes when and where and how you’re going to spend time with Jesus. And in case you don’t currently have a plan and you’d like help getting started, we’ve put copies of a terrific little booklet from the Navigators in the back each seat with suggestions about how to have a quiet time with Christ starting out with just 7 minutes. It’s called “7 Minutes with God,” and I invite you take a moment to read it now and then take it home with you as a reminder of the most important thing in life. But first I want to pray—