

Week 8

Such Devoted Sisters

Luke 10:38-42; John 11:17, 17-43; John 12:1-8

Day 1

Jesus Comes to Dinner

Are you a Mary or a Martha?

The story of these sisters who hosted Jesus for dinner is so familiar that you probably need no further context to understand the meaning of this question. Yet, pigeonholing these women as one-dimensional characters based on a single incident may do them a disservice. Jesus was clearly very close to this family, and the Gospels include two additional encounters between Jesus and the sisters. Through this week's study you may begin to think a little more broadly about both of these women, and you will see how much Jesus valued the intellect of the women who followed him.

Bible Reading: Luke 10:38-42

What do you know about these women and their situation from this passage?

Do they appear to be married?

Who owns the home?

How old do you think they are?

From what you know about the culture of the time, what might you infer about why they were unmarried and how they were viewed by their community?

What surprises you about the events described here?

Which sister was behaving more typically for a woman in first-century Palestine?

What was Mary doing that Jesus encouraged? Was it typical behavior for a woman?

The Gentle Savior

How did Jesus talk to Martha about her confused priorities (that is, did he belittle or condemn her)?

Was Jesus impressed with the culture's concept of what made a woman worthy (that is, getting married, having babies, serving meals)?

How do you think Mary felt after this interaction?

How do you think Martha felt?

What do you learn about Jesus from this story?

Prayer Time: Reflect with God about how you can behave more like a disciple of Jesus and less like this a woman of this world.

Day 2

Dealing With Death

Bible Reading: John 11:1-7, 17-43

In John 11:5, what is the order in which the three people Jesus loved are named?

How do you think Mary and Martha were feeling about Jesus when he arrived after their brother was dead?

Can you imagine either of them was thinking, “Oh, well, it’s all good. Jesus will just come and bring Lazarus back to life when he finally arrives”?

Who first ran out to meet Jesus and who stayed back at the house?

Does that surprise you? Why or why not?

Does Martha’s conversation with Jesus surprise you considering their previous encounter?

Why did Jesus have this lengthy conversation with Martha?

Did Jesus think that what Martha believed about him was important?

Did he think it was important that she have a more complete understanding of him?

How did Martha articulate a deep understanding of who Jesus was in this conversation?

Compare Martha’s confession of Jesus in John 11:27 with Peter’s confession in Matthew 16:16-17. Can you think of anything significant or surprising about Martha’s statement here?

Martha’s Confession

Peter’s Confession

The Gentle Savior

Why is Martha and not Mary having this conversation with Jesus?

Do you think that in the interim since the infamous dinner episode Martha had spent a little time at Jesus's feet herself?

What were the first words both Mary and Martha said to Jesus when they saw him?

What tone of voice do you hear in this statement?

Contrast Jesus's response to Martha's first words (v. 21) with his response to Mary's first words (v. 32). How do you account for the difference?

Did Jesus rebuke the women for being upset with him?

What might Mary and Martha been feeling about Jesus at the end of this day?

What have you learned about Jesus from this story?

Prayer Time: Has Jesus ever disappointed you (that is, failed to answer a fervent prayer the way you wanted)? Talk with him about that today and get it off your chest.

Day 3

Jesus Comes to Dinner Again

Bible Reading: John 12:1-8 (Also possibly Matthew 26:6-12; Mark 14:1-9)

Who was serving dinner on this occasion?

Was that a bad thing?

What do you think Mary knew (or felt) that led her to pour a “year’s worth of wages” (see NIV) on Jesus’s feet (and/or head, depending on which passage you read)?

Contrast the response of Jesus to the response of the others present at the dinner.

Do you think he minded that he was going to walk around for the next day or so smelling like a cologne factory?

What did Jesus say about Mary?

Why did Jesus accept Mary’s gift so graciously?

Two times in the Gospels, we are told about a person who gave a financially sacrificial gift. Those people were Mary (about whom you just read) and the poor widow (about whom you read in Week 6 of this study guide). You also read in Week 4 about women who supported Jesus financially from their own means. *What compels a woman to give sacrificially?*

What does it say about God that he gives this special honor in the Gospels to women?

What have you learned about Jesus from this encounter with Mary?

Prayer Time: Meditate with God about how your material gifts to him are a reflection of your love.

Four Accounts of Jesus Anointed with Perfume

Although the accounts of a woman pouring perfume on Jesus in Matthew and Mark are similar to each other, they differ markedly from the account in John.

What differences did you notice?

Even though Mary was not named in the Matthew and Mark passages, do you think these accounts describe the same event as in John 12? Why or why not?

In next week's study, you'll read a fourth account of a woman weeping and pouring perfume on Jesus. This encounter is placed much earlier in Jesus's ministry, however, and the conversation takes a very different course. When you read this account next week, see if you agree that this account likely describes a different woman than Mary, the sister of Martha.

Day 4

Bringing it Home

How would you summarize the relationship Jesus had with Mary and Martha?

What have you learned about God from examining these three interactions between Jesus and Mary and Martha?

A Woman Like Me

Somewhere in these three accounts of Jesus, Mary, and Martha, we can probably all find ourselves.

1. Be careful about stereotyping Martha merely because of one afternoon's moment of frustration. *All* of us are busy doing too much, whether it's cooking and cleaning or raising children or succeeding in our careers or serving others in our church and community. We get overwhelmed sometimes and frustrated and feel like we're all alone in the important task we're doing. *Have you ever asked God to please send you some help for all the work you have to do?*

There have been times for *all* of us when Jesus could say, "You are worried and upset about many things." If we could hear him speak in those moments, maybe we would understand that what he wants most is for us to stop and remember that "only one thing is needed" – sitting at the feet of the Master Teacher and learning from his words of life. *In your busy life, what do you need to stop doing, so that you can sit at the feet of Jesus and just listen for a while?*

2. Jesus wants to engage your mind and your heart, not just benefit from your service. Women tend to be natural nurturers and caretakers. We could work 24/7 caring for our families and churches and schools and communities. However, that's not what God asks of us. Don't be fooled into thinking that because you are a worker and a servant you are excused from studying scripture and engaging your intellect in understanding God. As a matter of fact, your service will always be more productive if it is informed and compelled by your understanding of God. Jesus wanted Martha to listen to him, and he also wanted to know what she believed about him. He valued her thoughts and beliefs, and she holds a special place of honor in scripture because she understood that he was the Messiah ("Christ") and the Son of God – long before many of the male disciples did. *Have you ever felt that knowing the Bible well is less important because you are a woman or because you do so much service for God?*

How can you better engage your intellect in your relationship with God?

3. Have you ever been disappointed in God when he didn't seem to come through with the answer to prayer you were desperately hoping for? Has someone you love ever suffered or died despite your fervent prayers?

God doesn't always rescue his people from pain and disappointment. Actually, most of the time, he doesn't. It's perfectly all right to take that disappointment to God, however. (For example, "Lord, my little one could have been saved if you had done something. I don't understand why you didn't.") Mary and Martha both felt this way when their brother died, and they let Jesus know in a way that reflected both their faith and their frustration. The problem is that if you don't ever express that disappointment to God, resentment against him may begin to grow in your heart. Too many people have turned away from God because tragedy struck and they felt he was not listening to their prayers.

Have an honest conversation with God. He's big enough to hear your questioning and still love you. Although you will not likely get the same kind of physical miracle Mary and Martha witnessed, God will help work you through your pain and disappointment with gentleness and compassion. He is a God who brings "a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair" (Isaiah 61:3). *Write about a time in your life when Jesus might have said to you the gentle words he had for Martha, "Didn't I tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"*

4. Have you ever been so appreciative of what Jesus has done for you or for someone you love that you were compelled to give him an extravagantly expensive gift? Mary did, and she didn't care what anyone else had to say about it. (Admittedly, she didn't have a husband who needed to agree with her in advance about the expenditure.) When we read passages in the Bible about giving, we often make a lot of excuses about why they don't really mean exactly what they say or why they don't apply to us. Clearly, though, giving sacrificially to God is a means by which we demonstrate both to ourselves and to him what is truly important to us. "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matthew 6:21).

Where is your physical treasure invested (the bank, the stock market, your house, your car, your kids' sports and hobbies, philanthropic causes, the church)?

How does the way you spend your time, money, and energy reflect where your heart is?

What possession or talent/skill would you consider giving to God out of your love and gratitude?

Becoming More Like Jesus

Isn't it beautiful seeing this side of Jesus as primarily a friend to the Lazarus-Mary-Martha family? Their home must have been a refuge for him, where he could go and relax and let his guard down. Mary and Martha's relationship with Jesus had to be a complex one, though, with feelings of sisterly affection for the human side of him who was their friend evolving into awe and reverence for the divine side of him who was their Lord.

What characteristics of Jesus do you see in these stories that you should try to adopt in your relationships with other people?

Prayer Time: Choose one of the four topics in the "A Woman Like Me" section to pray about today.