

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Memorable Choices: Mary - Luke 10:38-42

Companionship is one of the great needs of the human heart. Not just company but companionship, someone who can share our fears and hopes, our joys and sorrows. Each one of us surely has had occasion to value the presence and support of a close and trusted friend. Surprisingly the Bible tells us that God also has a great desire for companionship. In Proverbs 8 we are told that even before the creation of the world His "delight was with the sons of men". In the early chapters of Genesis we have recorded the account of when, before Adam and Eve sinned, God would come down "in the cool of the evening" to meet with Adam and Eve and talk with them. As we carry on through the Bible we find different people who were called a "friend of God" and to whom God confided His thoughts and intentions.

In the New Testament we see that, through the wonder of the Virgin birth, God had become flesh in the person of the Lord Jesus. At the beginning of His few years of public ministry He chose twelve disciples. They were not there to errand boys, to fetch and carry. They were not there to control the crowds who thronged around the Lord Jesus wherever He went. No! We are told in Mark 3:14 that they were chosen so that they might be with Him. Yes, they would learn so much as they were with Him and heard His remarkable teaching and, yes, they would go out and preach and perform miracles. But the first reason we are given is simply that they might be with Him. This is why Mary's choice is so important, so memorable. She grasped an opportunity to spend time with the Lord Jesus, an opportunity that would not be available to her very often.

We are not actually told much about this Mary in the Bible. She doesn't seem to have moved far away from her home at Bethany which was a small town about 3 km from Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives. The home is first identified to us in Matthew 26 as "the house of Simon the leper". Evidently the family had known the anxiety of serious illness and probably the sorrow of bereavement. Later, it is called the house of Martha and it is clear that Martha's sister Mary and her brother Lazarus either lived there with her or were certainly welcome and frequent visitors. The Lord Jesus also appears to have been a frequent and certainly welcome visitor. Scripture doesn't recall that the Lord Jesus ever spent a night in Jerusalem until the time of His arrest. Often it appears that, if He had been in the capital during the day, He would retire to Bethany during the evening to rest. It is a challenge to all of us as to how comfortable the Lord would be in our homes. It is a tremendous thing that there was a home here where the Lord Jesus could find rest and refreshment away from the antagonism and opposition that faced Him most days.

Our story today is from Luke 10:38-42. I'm reading from the New King James Version. "Now it happened as they went that Jesus entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary who also sat at Jesus feet and heard His word. But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me" And Jesus answered her and said to her "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her"

The story starts with a visit of the Lord Jesus to Bethany where Martha receives the Lord Jesus into her house. This mark of hospitality is very attractive and the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews warns us in Hebrews 13:2 not to forget to entertain strangers for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels. Here, of course, someone much greater than an angel was received into Martha's house! Paul, writing to Timothy, makes it clear that anyone desiring a place of leadership in Christian circles must be hospitable. Peter, however, in 1 Peter 4, reminds us that we mustn't be grudging in our service of hospitality. Maybe Martha had had a bad day; possibly she had been working hard to prepare the house and the meal and was tired. She certainly resents the fact that she seems to be doing all the work while her sister Mary sat at the feet of the Lord and listened to Him.

Martha then uses an expression that must have been really hurtful to the Lord. "Do You not care?" The disciples use the same expression when they were in their boat on the lake in a storm, "Do You not care that we perish?" If I am honest I, sometimes either by word or thought give expression to the same feelings: "Lord do You not care?" I see only the current circumstances or difficulties, not the hand and heart of infinite love that allows these experiences in my life for my ultimate good and God's glory. Yet the words of the hymn put it so well, "No one ever cared for me like Jesus, there's no other friend as kind as He" Whatever my situation or circumstances, I have no right to ever question the care and interest of the Lord in me. He has proved His love for you and me in the most emphatic way at Calvary.

It was not that Jesus didn't appreciate Martha's service for Him, but rather that there was something that He valued even more and so should we. I put great store on my food and look forward to mealtimes but the Scripture reminds us that "man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." (Deuteronomy 8:3 and Matthew 4:4) Mary had clearly learnt this lesson from the Old Testament well. Here was something more important than food. She had this unique opportunity to sit and listen directly to "every word that proceeded from the mouth of God," God Who had become a Man in Jesus Christ. Martha, in the words of the Lord Jesus, was "careful and troubled about many things" in spite of the fact that we are told to be anxious for nothing. Mary had "chosen that good part which shall not be taken away from her." It is this feature of calmly sitting at the feet of the Lord Jesus that seems to characterise all of Mary's life and actions. One hymn writer has expressed it:

*Low at Thy feet, Lord Jesus,
This is the place for me;
Here I have learned deep lessons:
Truth that has set me free.*

It is noticeable that whenever this Mary is mentioned by name in the Bible it is always in the context of sitting or falling at the feet of Jesus. In John 11 our attention is again directed to this house and family. Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary, falls ill and the two sisters send a message to Jesus: "Lord, he whom You love is sick". Rather than immediately responding to this message Jesus waits two days. He tells the disciples that "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified by it" (John 11:4). After this deliberate delay, Jesus is aware that Lazarus has died and goes with His disciples to Bethany to wake Lazarus from sleep. Martha learns that Jesus is coming to their house and runs out to meet Him. Mary sits still in the house.

Each of the sisters when they meet the Lord on this occasion use exactly the same words, but you sense that the tone in which they are used is very different. Martha met the Lord and said, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died". She had confidence in the healing power of the Lord Jesus but there is also an unspoken rebuke. I can almost hear the words, "Lord do You not care?" that she had spoken to Jesus previously. Mary, on the other hand, when she is told that Jesus wanted to see her, rises quickly and goes out to find Him and immediately falls down at the feet of Jesus. It is difficult to believe that there is any reproach in her voice as through her tears she, too, says, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died". Jesus, seeing her tears and hearing her words, is troubled and groans deeply. He, more than anyone else, understood the pain and sorrow that sin had introduced into the world and now again was affecting this family. He moves on to the grave and then we have recorded the two words, "Jesus wept". These words have been a tremendous source of amazement and comfort to Christians ever since.

The last time we read of this Mary in the Bible is in John 12 where again the Lord Jesus is a guest in Martha's house. This time, however, all is harmonious and peaceable. Martha is serving and is happy to do so. Lazarus is sitting at the table with the Lord Jesus and Mary, as always, is at the feet of the Lord Jesus. There now occurs an event that is recorded in Matthew, Mark and John. Although the details that each writer emphasises vary slightly, the essence remains the same. Mary takes an alabaster box of costly fragrant oil and breaks the box and anoints the head and feet of her Lord. The perfume fills the whole house. Judas and the other disciples criticise Mary and call her action wasteful but Jesus defends her. He appreciates the action so much that He says, "Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial. For you have the poor with you always, but Me you do not have always" (John 12:7-8) We are told in both Matthew's account and Mark's account that Jesus also said that wherever the Gospel would be preached this story would also be recounted.

This is obviously so important. I believe Mary's action flows out of her time spent sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to Him. Some writers have suggested that this perfume was actually the fragrant ointment that a Jewish maiden would have saved for her wedding day. It would be something that Mary valued a great deal and was keeping for her special day. Instead, she had now broken the box and anointed the Lord with the costly oil of spikenard. Jesus credits her with motives that possibly Mary herself did not fully realise. He said that she had "kept this for the day of My burial". Had she, when sitting at His feet and hearing Him teach, come to realise that He was going to die? He had often told His disciples that this was going to happen but they don't appear to have understood. Mary had understood and seizes the one opportunity she had to give to the Lord Jesus the one thing that was precious to her and would be appreciated by Him. She is not mentioned among the other women who tried unsuccessfully to anoint the Lord's body following His crucifixion. She had grasped the opportunity to serve in this way and the incident is recorded in Scripture and recounted wherever the Gospel is preached.

What are we to learn from these stories and from Mary's memorable choice? Obviously it is good and necessary for true Christians to be active in service of one kind or another. If we serve we are told that we must do so in a spirit of love and willingly because we serve the Lord Jesus Christ. Even a cup of cold water given in the name of the Lord Jesus will not be forgotten and will receive a reward. Yet we are forced to go back again to what the Lord said when challenged by Martha in Luke 10, "One thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her."

Spending time in the presence of our Lord and Saviour is not optional; it is vital. Jesus said “one thing is needed”. It is necessary and it is something that He values a great deal. We do not question this on a natural level. It would be most strange and disturbing if two people who claimed to love each other spent no time at all together! Jesus certainly loves me and I claim to love Him yet how often I let slip opportunities to spend time in His company. King David in the Old Testament in Psalm 27:4 writes “One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in His temple”. King David was an immensely successful monarch ruling over a vast kingdom and yet he had learnt the vital importance of spending time quietly in the presence of the Lord. It was the one thing he desired and sought for. Many strong Christians have learnt this lesson. The busier their lives, the more time they would spend in meditation and prayer.

Some choices are monumental. A nation might choose to embark on an aggressive foreign policy that ultimately will destroy thousands of lives. A family might choose to move to a different part of the country or even a different country entirely. The effects of their choice will have a dramatic effect on their lives and the lives of each succeeding generation of that family. A company might choose to invest millions of pounds in a new product, and its success or failure will impact on the lives of all in the local community. Other choices are more mundane. Choosing to eat this or that breakfast cereal is unlikely to vary the character of my day, let alone have any lasting effect on myself or those around me. Mary’s choice appears to be mundane and yet, as we read her story, it is very clear that her attitude and choice forms her motives and underpins her life and actions.

Today, we obviously do not have the opportunity literally to sit at the feet of Jesus and hear His words. But we do have the opportunity, if we so choose, to spend time reading the Bible, meditating on it, and speaking to God in prayer. Mary’s seems to be such a simple, easy choice and yet most of us find it so difficult to copy. Why is this? Is it sometimes easier to be busy than it is to be still and quiet? We are almost scared to stop doing whatever it is that seems so important to us and in turn makes us appear important in case we discover that really our busy-ness isn’t so vital after all! The Shepherd of Psalm 23 will lead us into green pastures and beside still waters. The Lord said to His disciples, “Come you yourselves apart and rest awhile”. There is work to be done but first we must learn from the Master and we can only do this by spending time in His presence.

There are several things that flow out from this. To help me remember, and maybe to help you as well, I have selected four words that each start with the letter C:

- Companionship;
- Confidence;
- Contemplation; and
- Conformity.

Firstly, **Companionship**, which I have already touched on. We discover that it gives our Lord great pleasure. It is amazing but true that the Creator of the universe wants you and me to spend time in His company! To be able to hear His voice and to understand something of His heart’s desire. It is the “one thing that is needed”. In John’s Gospel, when several of His disciples start to leave the Lord Jesus because they found His teaching difficult to accept, He says to the twelve, “Will you also go away?” You can sense the great sadness He felt, His pain as those that He loved left Him. How much joy Peter’s response must have given Him: “Lord to whom can we go?” For Peter, as for Mary, there was no one else!

We also discover that it gives us great **confidence**. Confidence and security: “He who dwells in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress; my God, in Him will I trust.” Psalm 91:1-2. King David writing in Psalm 16 says of the Lord “He is on my right hand, that I should not be shaken; therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced” We can also think of the really well known verses in Psalm 23, the shepherds Psalm, “though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff they comfort me.”

Contemplation is not a word that I hear very often. The dictionary gives its meaning as “to think about intently and at length” Psalm 45 is titled “A contemplation ... a song of love.” In it the writer speaks about the things that they had observed about their king. The apostle John records in his Gospel that he contemplated the Lord’s glory and discovered it was the glory of an only begotten Son who always lived in the enjoyment of His Father’s love and was full of grace and truth. The bride in the Song of Songs 2:3-4 says of her beloved, “I sat down under His shadow with great delight, and His fruit was sweet to my taste. He brought me to the banqueting house, and His banner over me was love.” She goes on to say, “My meditation of Him shall be sweet”. You can’t contemplate in a hurry, it just can’t be done! And where better to contemplate the Lord Jesus than sitting quietly in His presence?

The fourth word is **conformity**. We will grow more like Him. In Philippians we have listed what we might call rules for safe spiritual hygiene. The government goes to great lengths to ensure that the food we consume is as safe as

possible, but we are not at all careful about what we read and watch. Just as if we constantly eat junk food we can expect to be unhealthy so, if we indulge in junk food for our mind we cannot expect to prosper spiritually. How can we avoid this hazard? Philippians 4:8 tells us to occupy our minds with things that are true, things that are honest, things that are just, things that are pure, things that are lovely, things that are of good report, things that are virtuous, and things deserving of praise." Where else can we do this but at the feet of the Lord Jesus? Who but the Lord Jesus can possibly meet these criteria? We are what we eat, and we will become like Jesus if we spend time in His presence, reading about Him and speaking to Him in prayer.

And finally, just like Mary, we may also learn secrets that others miss!

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