

Lessons from Bible Women 5 – Mary and Martha

Reading: Luke 10:38-42 “.... Mary has chosen that good part ¹.....”

Introduction:

This lesson is a continuation of the series where we are looking at various women recorded in the scriptures, with the aim of learning some biblical lessons from either the women themselves, or events that occurred during their lives.

During His ministry, Jesus spent most of His time with the twelve disciples. But there were other people with whom He was closely associated (apart from the multitudes). For example, in **Luke 10:1f.f.** we read of Jesus sending 70 of His disciples out to preach, and in **Mark 15:40-41** we read about various women who followed and ministered to Him when He was in Galilee.

In this lesson, we will be looking at another two women who had a close relationship with Jesus – Mary and Martha, two sisters who lived in Bethany. They also had a brother, Lazarus, who Jesus raised from the dead (**John 11:1-44**). These two women had different personalities, but there are lessons that we can learn from both of them.

LESSON

1) Three references to Jesus meeting with Mary and Martha

a) Luke 10:38-42 – Jesus invited into Martha’s house

The first mention of Mary and Martha in the scriptures is in **Luke 10:38-42**, just after Jesus spoke the parable of The Good Samaritan. While on His travels, Jesus entered the village of Bethany², and Martha invited Him to her house. Martha then busied herself in serving her guest(s) to ensure that their physical needs were well cared for. She was their host, and she wanted to look after them.

However Mary chose to sit at the feet of Jesus. This showed her eagerness to hear what He had to say, and to take it into her heart. After all, this was Jesus, the Son of God, the Messiah, and He was right there in her sister’s house. But from Martha’s perspective, Mary was being a bit lazy in not helping her with the serving.

Note: It is possible that (some of) Jesus’ disciples were also present. Verse **40** mentions “*much serving*”, which would be the case if there were several guests present.

Martha complained to Jesus, and wanted Him to tell Mary to give her a hand. But Jesus responded in a way that Martha didn’t expect. He said;

“⁴¹Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled by many things.

⁴²But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her.”

Luke 10:41-42

¹ All biblical quotes are from the New King James Version Bible.

² Mary and Martha lived in Bethany – **John 11:1**.

Lessons from Bible Women 5 – Mary and Martha

There is nothing else recorded as to what happened next, but I suspect that Martha had a think about what Jesus had just said, put aside what she was doing, and joined her sister at Jesus' feet.

b) John 11 – the death and resurrection of Lazarus

The second reference to Mary and Martha is in **John 11**. Lazarus, their brother, was sick, and so the sisters sent word to Jesus (vs.3). But Jesus responded in a most unexpected way. There had been previous occasions when people had come to Jesus to ask Him to heal someone who was sick back at their home. At those times, Jesus either travelled to the sick person straight away to heal them³, or He healed the person right there and then (without actually going to the sick person⁴). But on this occasion, Jesus did nothing for two days, then went to Bethany with His disciples (vs.6-7).

By the time Jesus arrived in the area near Bethany, Lazarus had already died and had been buried for four days (vs.17). When word came to Martha that Jesus was approaching, she went out to meet Him (vs.20). She spoke with Jesus, and mis-understood His comments about Lazarus rising again – she thought that He was referring to the resurrection in the last day (vs.24). Martha then went back to the house and privately told Mary that Jesus had come (vs.28). Mary quickly rose up and went out to meet Him (vs.29-30). She fell at His feet and said, “*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*” (vs.32).

Verses **38-44** then go on to detail the event of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. What joy there must have been in their house after Lazarus had been raised.

c) John 12 – the anointing of Jesus by Mary

The third time that we meet Mary and Martha is just before the time of the Passover. Jesus was in Bethany and had supper in the house of Simon the leper (see **Matthew 26:6; Mark 14:3**)⁵. Mary, Martha and Lazarus were also present, and once again, we see the industrious Martha doing the serving (vs.2).

Mary had brought with her a flask of very expensive spikenard⁶ oil. Based on the response by some of those present, the cost of this oil was around 300 denarii (**Mark 14:5; John 12:5**). Now a denarii was the equivalent of a day's

³ For example, the girl restored to life – **Matthew 9:18-25**.

⁴ For example, the Centurion's servant at Capernaum (**Matthew 8:5-13**), and the nobleman's son (**John 4:46-53**).

⁵ The incident with the anointing of oil and the response from others about the cost links **Matthew 26:6-11** and **Mark 14:3-7** with **John 12:2-8**. Also, **Mark 14:1-5** appears to suggest that this took place two days before the Passover. However, **John 12:1-5** appears to suggest that it took place 6 days before the Passover. But **John 12:1** simply says that Jesus came to Bethany six days before the Passover. It is entirely possible for there to be a few days between verses **1** and **2**. Similarly, **Mark 14:3** may have taken place before the events described in **Mark 14:1**.

⁶ Spikenard is obtained from an east Indian plant, *Nardostachys jatamansi*. The plant has fragrant, fibrous roots. It was costly because it had to be imported from India in special carefully-sealed alabaster jars to conserve the perfume.

- Ref: The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Volume 5 Q-Z, Page 502, Spikenard.

Lessons from Bible Women 5 – Mary and Martha

wages (**Matthew 20:2**), so we are talking about something that cost almost a year's wages. Mary broke the flask and poured the oil on Jesus' head (**Mark 14:3**) and His feet (**John 12:3**). She then wiped His feet with her hair, "... *and the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil*". For Mary, the cost did not matter when it came to spending time with and worshipping Jesus.

When some of those present complained about the extravagance (**Mark 14:5**), Jesus responded by saying that what Mary had done was good and appropriate – she had anointed His body beforehand for burial (**Mark 14:6-9**).

3) Lesson for us

Of the various lessons⁷ that we can learn from these two women, I just want to point out two.

a) We need to be ready and willing to serve others

Martha was not the type of person to sit around and let the grass grow under her feet. She was a busy person. In both the **Luke 10** and **John 12** passages, it was Martha who was busy serving others. In the **John 11** passage, it was Martha who went out first to meet Jesus as He approached Bethany.

In **Ephesians 2:10**, we read;

"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."

In other words, God has saved us and prepared us for a purpose – to do good works. We live in a world where people have needs; where people need help; where things need to be done. Most things just don't happen by themselves – they need people to actually do something. For example;

- children need parents to look after them and guide them.
- the sick need doctors and nurses to care for them.
- most of us need farmers to supply our food.
- some of us rely on others to provide us with transport to and from work, *etc.*
- we need clothing manufacturers to provide us with clothing.
- we need builders to provide us with homes.
- the downcast need someone to comfort them.
- we all need to be edified and built up in the faith.

and the list can go on and on.

When Jesus came to earth, His main task was to seek and save the lost (**Luke 19:10**); to lead people back to God. But He also met the physical needs of people – He fed the hungry (**Matthew 14:19**), He healed the sick (**Mark 1:34**), and comforted those who mourned (**John 11:21-27**). These were real people with real needs.

⁷ Another lesson is how to respond when justifiably rebuked. Some people, when rebuked, get upset, "spit the dummy" and swing too far in the other direction. But not so with Martha. All indications are that she accepted Jesus' rebuke in **Luke 10:41-42**, and that she didn't sulk by saying, "*Well I'm not going to serve anyone anymore*". In **John 12:2**, we see that she continued to serve others, and on this occasion, there was no record of a rebuke from Jesus. Consider **Proverbs 3:11-12; 15:10** and **Hebrews 12:7-11**.

Lessons from Bible Women 5 – Mary and Martha

God has given each of us different talents and abilities, and He expects us to use them (**Romans 12:4-6**). That is the lesson from the parable of the talents (**Matthew 25:14-30**). It doesn't matter how big or small our talent is, it is a God-given gift and we need to use it.

– if we don't, we will lose it (**Matthew 25:28**).

And our good works are not to be restricted to serving just each other.

“Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.”

Galatians 6:10

Let us always be ready to serve others in whatever capacity we can.

b) We live in a busy world, but we need to take time out for meditation

While Martha's eagerness to serve her guests was commendable, she did receive a mild rebuke from Jesus. Yes, there were some domestic things that she needed to take care of, but she was doing so to the neglect of an opportunity to listen to and learn from Jesus. Jesus said that Mary at that moment had chosen "... *the good part* ..." (**Luke 10:42**). When a choice had to be made between doing domestic chores, and listening to Jesus, Mary had chosen the latter.

We live in a busy world. World news is brought to us in an instant – in fact, we want everything done in an instant; we want it "now". You can get a meal straight away by walking into a take-away store and be fed without having to wait. People can be working longer hours because more and more is expected of them. There are all forms of activities to entertain us – TV, cinemas, videos, sports events, *etc.* If you wanted to, you could be fully occupied 24 hours a day.

Now while none of the above are necessarily wrong in and of themselves, they become a problem if they leave no room for spiritual things. I think I am taking this statement slightly out of context, but in **Psalm 46:10** we read;

“Be still, and know that I am God.....”

There are times when we need to “be still” – to take the time to meditate on the things of God (**Psalm 1:2**), and to examine our own lives in the light of His word (**2 Corinthians 13:5**). There are times when we need to assemble together to worship God and exhort one another (**Hebrews 10:24-25**). And there are times when we need to spend time alone with God in prayer and with His word (**Matthew 6:6; 1 Timothy 4:13-16**). The things of this life, no matter how important they may be, will someday all pass away (**2 Peter 3:10**). Only the things that are eternal will remain – the spiritual things: God, heaven, our souls.

We need to be like Martha in always being ready to serve others. But we also need to be like Mary, and not let the affairs of this world be an obstacle or a distraction from the things of God.