

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 13 June 2004

No. T0321

Speaker: Mr. Jeffery Brett

Bible Women: Mary and Martha - Faithful in Service

It surely must be the first desire of everyone who truly loves Lord Jesus to want to serve Him faithfully. There was a household in the village of Bethany, not far from Jerusalem, in which were two sisters, Martha and Mary and a brother called Lazarus. We read of this family at the end of Luke 10, and then in John 11 and 12. We are not told of their ages or very much of their circumstances, but the incident recorded in John 12, where Mary anointed the Lord's feet, is also recorded in Matthew 26, where we are told that it took place in the house of Simon the leper.

The first of these two sisters that we read of is Martha. It says of her in Luke 10:38, "A certain woman named Martha received Him into her house." Whoever Simon the leper was, it seems as though he may have passed away, as Martha seems to take charge of this house. The first and perhaps most important thing about Martha is that she received the Lord. We do know that the Lord Jesus often went to Bethany. It was, in fact, near to Bethany that the Lord Jesus ascended back to heaven after His resurrection. It was a home where He was always welcome, because those two sisters loved Him, and the Lord Jesus loved them.

Service for the Lord Jesus must flow out of affection for Him. We need, like Martha, to make room in our lives for the Lord Jesus and to make sure that He will always be given the first place in our hearts. We then read about Mary in verse 39, "And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard His word." The word heard really should be 'listened to'. There may have been others in that room who could hear the Lord talking, but Mary was listening to what Jesus said Martha was getting the meal ready. She wanted to provide something for the Lord to eat, but the scripture says that she was 'cumbered'. We can never serve the Lord Jesus faithfully if we become distracted by what others are doing, or if the service becomes a burden. Martha had received the Lord into her home but then things could never be the same. She had many lessons to learn and here we see the first one.

Mary was sitting at the Lord's feet and paying attention to what He was saying. She seemed to realise that there was something more important than serving straightaway. The scripture does not tell us anything of what the Lord Jesus said but, whatever it was, Mary was drinking it in. Her heart had been won and she was enthralled by what she heard. Martha perhaps had not yet realised this. We need to learn this lesson. Before we can do anything for the Lord, we have to learn His word and His ways. Martha was irritated by Mary doing this and not coming to help her with the meal, and complained to the Lord. Her words almost accused the Lord of not considering enough what she was doing and the fact that she needed some help. "Lord, dost Thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? Bid her therefore that she help me." From the natural point of view her complaint may have been justified, but not in the eyes of the Lord Jesus. Her service for the moment was a burden to her. She felt her sister should have shared that burden and so complained to the Lord about it.

I wonder if we have ever felt like this. What we may be doing for the Lord has become a burden and we think others ought to be doing something to help. If this is the case, perhaps we have not been in the Lord's presence enough, listening to what He would say to us and learning from Him. We have become distracted from just having the Lord Himself before us in our service. Let us be sure of this, if the Lord gives us a service to do for Him, then He will supply all the grace and help we need to carry out that service. But if we are occupied with what others are doing or not doing, then we may find the job a burden. This can never be true and faithful service.

The Lord answers Martha in verse 41, "Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things." He repeats her name twice as if to make sure that He had her full attention. She was weary in her work and troubled in her heart about her sister, instead of her heart being full of love for Christ. The Lord goes on to say in verse 42, "But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her." The Lord puts His finger on the problem, but also gives the remedy for it. Mary had deliberately chosen to sit at the Lord's feet and to listen to Him first and foremost. Martha had neglected this, and had got on with preparing the meal. The Lord was not going to tell Mary to help her sister; she had chosen something that is vital to every one of us. She wanted to be in His company and to learn from Him. Only thus can anyone serve Him faithfully.

The next occasion that we read of this family at Bethany is found in John 11. Here a great sorrow comes to the family. The brother of the two sisters is seriously ill. In their distress, they send word to the Lord Jesus. In verse 3 we read, "Therefore his sisters sent unto Him, saying, Lord, behold, he whom Thou lovest is sick." For reasons that at that time

they could not understand, the Lord Jesus waited for two days before He began His journey to them. We are left in no doubt as to the Lord's love for them, for we read in verse 5, "Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus." But the Lord Jesus tells His disciples in verse 4, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby." The Lord Jesus was to use this illness and ultimately death, for Lazarus did die, to glorify Himself. In this way they would learn that even death was subject to Him.

This chapter tells us of further deep lessons that those who would serve the Lord Jesus must learn. We are so prone to judge according to our own understanding and may forget that He is over and above all things. There is not a power that He cannot overcome. So we have to learn to wait His time, even though we may wonder why sometimes. Events, which cause sorrow and sadness, sometimes are allowed to take their course, but it is that we may learn something from the Lord. These two sisters were troubled that Jesus did not come to them as soon as they sent word to Him. And undoubtedly they were terribly disappointed when Lazarus died before Jesus came. If He had come and cured Lazarus of His illness they would have rejoiced. But they then would have lost the wonderful sense of the greatness of the person of Christ that they gained, because of the events recorded in this chapter. The Lord's voice could not only cure illnesses, but could call the dead forth from the grave!

Jesus told His disciples in verse 11, "Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep." The disciples did not understand the Lord and assumed that He spoke of natural sleep. Jesus tells them in verse 14, "Lazarus is dead." We learn from these words of the Lord that death to a believer is no more than falling asleep, the power and terror of death have been broken by the Lord Jesus in His death and resurrection. And so after four days He comes to Bethany and is met by Martha who had heard of His coming, when yet He had not come into the town. But Mary "sat still in the house."

Here we see again a difference in these two sisters. Martha, in her sorrow and agitation, as soon as she hears of the Lord coming, hurries out to meet Him. We may think she did right, but the Holy Spirit records something else of Mary. I believe there was a calm in the heart of Mary. She had already learned lessons while sitting at His feet. Perhaps she had a feeling that all would be well, and so sat still and waited. Martha meanwhile had accosted the Lord with the words, "Lord, if Thou hadst been here, my brother had not died." She seems to question why the Lord had not come sooner. This provoked a discourse which, although she said that she believed, was beyond her understanding. We read in verses 23 to 27, "Jesus saith unto her, Thy brother shall rise again. Martha said unto Him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day. Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in Me shall never die. Believest thou this? She saith unto Him, Yea, Lord: I believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world." Being probably a devout Pharisee, Martha believed in the resurrection in a general way. She also believed in the coming of the Messiah and that the Lord Jesus was indeed that person. But the thought of a selective resurrection was unknown to her. The power of resurrection was in the Lord Jesus Himself. He had taught in John 5:28-29, "For the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear His voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation." That is still future. But in verse 25 He had said, "The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live." Martha and Mary were to see a demonstration of the life-giving power of the voice of the Son of God.

This is also true in a spiritual way now, because Jesus had also said in that same chapter and verse 24, "He that heareth My word, and believeth on Him that sent Me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life."

Martha runs to get her sister. Upon hearing that the Master had come, she arose and went quickly to Him and said exactly the same words that Martha had said, but in a vastly different way. Here we read of the second time that Mary is found at the Lord's feet, she says, "Lord, if Thou hadst been here, my brother had not died." But she said those words at His feet and she was weeping. This is not said of Martha. Mary's tears brought forth the question from the Lord, "Where have ye laid him." Also that profound little verse, "Jesus wept." The Lord Jesus knew what He was about to do and yet He mingles His tears with those of Martha and Mary. What a privilege for them! Had Lazarus not died, they would have known nothing of the sympathy of Jesus and the way His heart shared in their sorrow.

But not only this, they were to see His glory as the Son of God with power 'according to the spirit of holiness by the resurrection of dead persons' (Romans 1:4) He goes with Mary to the grave and commands the stone to be taken away. Martha protests, "Lord, by this time he stinketh." Again she tries to interfere with the Lord's work, not being obedient to His word, and is rebuked by the Lord, "Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?" He prays to His Father in verse 41, "And Jesus lifted up His eyes, and said, Father, I thank Thee that Thou hast heard Me. And I knew that Thou hearest Me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that Thou hast sent Me." And then Jesus cries with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth. And he that was dead came forth."

So we see in this chapter further vital lessons that the servant of the Lord must learn. Firstly, to wait His time, even though we may not understand the delay. Secondly, to be able to sit quietly until He moves and to await His bidding. Thirdly, to know something of His sympathy when apparently all has gone wrong and to realise that all things are in His hand. Then to witness that when He moves and commands, all will be to His glory and our blessing. Sadly the end of this chapter records the hatred that this wonderful event caused amongst the Jewish leaders and their plotting to put Him to death. One of the most difficult lessons we have to learn is that our service for the Lord Jesus will not be appreciated in the world that is governed by men who do not love Him.

The last time we read of this household is in John 12. Here the Lord is entering the final week of His life before the cross. In the first verse we read, "Then Jesus six days before the Passover came to Bethany, where Lazarus was which had been dead, whom He raised from the dead." Something very wonderful had been added to that home from when we first read of it. The brother, Lazarus was there, but now as one who had been raised from the dead by the voice of the Son of God. It is remarkable that in all the verses concerning this family, we never read of a single word that Lazarus said. I believe this is because he is a picture of what is true of every believer on the Lord Jesus Christ. Every one of us has received life that is eternal life, because by faith we have heard the voice of the Son of God and have passed out of death into life according to God. Lazarus is found in this chapter as a companion of Christ. He is witness to the life-giving power of the Lord Jesus, sitting in His presence as one fitted to be there.

When we were first introduced to this family, we found the Lord Jesus a welcome visitor there and Martha serving Him. In this chapter it was not just Martha who provided the supper. The scripture says in 12:2, "There they made Him a supper." The whole family was involved in this supper, but they were each serving in a different way. Lazarus was there in company with the Lord and a testimony to His power. Martha is found serving again. But oh! How different is her attitude! Here there is no complaint against her sister. She is not distracted in her work. A great change had taken place in her life. Her heart and her mind were now centred on Christ alone. She had learned much from what the Lord said to her on that first occasion, "Mary hath chosen that good part." She had heard His words at the grave of her brother, "I am the resurrection and the life." She had known His sympathy and love as witnessed by His tears. And she had seen His power in bringing Lazarus out from among the dead. If we learn these lessons as she did, then our service for the Lord will be without complaint about others. It will not be a burden but will be a joy as really serving the Lord Jesus.

Once again, we see Mary for the third time at the Lord's feet. Firstly she sat and listened to Him. Then in a day of sorrow she found all her need met by Him. Now she anoints His feet as a worshipper. We read in verse 3, "Then took Mary a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair: and the house was filled with the odour of the ointment." If the scripture says of that ointment that it was very costly, we can be sure that it was something that Mary valued greatly. The word here 'very costly' is only used three times in the New Testament. In Matthew 13 in the parable of the merchantman seeking goodly pearls, in verse 46 the one pearl that he found was said to be 'of great price'. In 1 Peter 3:4, the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit with which godly women of old adorned themselves is said to be 'in the sight of God of great price.' So putting the three quotations together we have: God's value of the character of godliness, Christ's value of the church, and Mary's value of Christ.

It would have been normal in eastern countries for a young woman to put such things aside for her wedding day, to anoint herself for her bridegroom. Her fragrance would draw the attention of all to herself, especially her husband-to-be. Mary was only concerned with drawing attention to Christ, so she used her spikenard to anoint His feet. The words of the Lord Jesus in verse 7, "Let her alone: against the day of my burying hath she kept this", show that He not only valued the gift but that He also looked into the heart that gave it. Once again, the Lord defends Mary and what she did. He said to Martha that what Mary had chosen would not be taken from her. Here He forbids any to interfere with her. There is nothing that the Lord Jesus values more than a heart that seeks only Himself and His glory. Mary puts the top stone to this happy scene. Lazarus sits as a companion of the Son of God; there is no greater privilege than this. Martha serves willingly from a full heart that is not distracted. Mary pours out her affection for Christ in the anointing of His feet. Can we wonder that the Spirit of God records in verse 3, "And the house was filled with the odour of the ointment."

In going through the three times that the scriptures record this family at Bethany, we have seen the lessons and the progress of faithful servants. If we are to hear from the Lord in a coming day, 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord,' then we must also learn these lessons.

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.