

Focusing Our Families on Jesus

When you stop and think about it, it is remarkable and quite surprising about how many people in the Gospel accounts of the ministry of Jesus did, as the British would say, “had a go” at Jesus. In other words, there are several accounts of people who actually found something to be critical of Jesus, and they did not hide their anger or contempt. They let Jesus know in no uncertain terms how disappointed they were in His actions! Just the fact that there were so many different individuals who did this, and lived to tell the story, should impress upon us how much our God truly loves us, and how patient and understanding He is of His children.

There are the obvious ones, the “usual suspects,” such as the Jewish religious leaders of the day who set Him up with their political maneuvering and shenanigans and had Him crucified. This was to be expected from that crowd. It was from this ilk that came the criticism of Jesus and His disciples for allegedly “working” on the Sabbath, or claiming He was a “glutton” and a “drunkard” because He ate with taxmen and sinners. They obviously had no real faith in God, and all they sought was to hold onto the power and influence they had accumulated. No, it is not these individuals to which I am referring. I am referring to how many of His own family, friends and close associates thought it necessary to jump all over the Lord for what they felt was some perceived indiscretion on the part of Jesus.

News of the miracles Jesus had performed had spread like wildfire throughout Palestine, and His popularity among the masses had grown. Because of this, we are told the Jews in Judea **sought to kill Jesus**, and so He had secluded Himself among the people in the safer region of Galilee. Jesus’ own brothers, we are told in John 7, scoffed at Jesus, for they did not yet believe in Him. It was one thing to not believe in Jesus, but it most certainly was an entirely different matter to do what they did next, and what they did was utterly inexcusable. His very own brothers **dared** Jesus to **prove** Himself by walking into that lions’ den, and attend the Feast of Tabernacles held in Judea, and **openly** declare Himself amongst the mob that sought to take His life!

Can you imagine how that must have felt? Yes, Jesus was fully God, but when He walked this Earth at that time He was also fully human, too. We must **never** forget this. This situation with His brothers had to have pained Him immensely. But Jesus did not attack His brothers for their unloving attitude, but simply told them it was not yet His time to do what they suggested. They left Him and went to the Feast by themselves, and Jesus went separately, unbeknownst to them. But guess what Jesus did? As John tells us in John 7:14 [RSV], “**About the middle of the Feast Jesus went up into the Temple and taught.**” Jesus was compelled to teach the people, and they marveled and were amazed at the great depth and wisdom of His knowledge and understanding.

Jesus did not go into Jerusalem with great fanfare at that time and say, "Here I am, people, your King, so you better bow down to Me!" No, He did as He always had done: He humbled Himself, and simply taught the people, out of love for them, and out of His love for His Father. He did this because it was always His Father's will to do so. As Jesus said in John 4:24 [RSV], **"My food is to do the will of Him Who sent Me, and to accomplish His work."**

How many times do we find Peter trying to keep Jesus from doing His ministry? Peter was unwilling to let Jesus wash his feet, and he was obviously angry with Jesus for washing the other disciples' feet. Peter also sought on another occasion to keep Jesus from fulfilling God's will to the point that Jesus actually referred to Peter as Satan in Matthew 16:23.

Another of the friends of Jesus, Judas Iscariot, criticized Jesus for letting Mary Magdalene 'waste' her money on Him. Jesus' reply to Judas at that time was simply this: **7. "Let her alone, let her keep it for the day of My burial. 8. The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have Me."** (John 12:7-8 [RSV])

In Luke 10:38-42 [RSV] we have an interesting story involving a godly family, that of Lazarus, Mary and Martha. And once again, we find an occasion of one of the friends of Jesus getting angry and criticizing Him. In this case it is His friend, Martha.

38. Now as they went on their way, He entered a village; and a woman named Martha received Him into her house. 39. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to His teaching. 40. But Martha was distracted with much serving; and she went to Him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me."

41. But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; 42. one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her."

One of the lessons we can learn from this passage is that even in godly families, sometimes we can get our priorities all mixed up.

One can almost hear Mary shouting at the top of her lungs, "Jesus is coming! Jesus is coming!" to announce the good news of the arrival of her dear friend, Jesus, to her hometown of Bethany. As she ran and burst into the house where she lived with her brother and sister, her sister, Martha, began to busy herself in making preparations for her cherished guest's appearance.

This family had many friends, but Jesus was a very special friend. It is easy to imagine Martha saying to her sister, "Come help me get things ready, Mary." It is

not unlikely that Mary probably did help her sister at first. Mary and Martha loved each other and their brother Lazarus, and the women shared in the housework of keeping their home clean. But now, Mary was so happy about what was soon to transpire she could hardly wait! It had been such a long time since she had last seen Jesus. He had been teaching and preaching in many places since His last visit with them. Mary knew she would sit up late listening to Jesus talk about God, and tell them all about what he had done on His travels.

Finally, Jesus and His companions arrived and Mary, Martha and Lazarus went to the door to welcome into their home Jesus and His disciples as dinner guests. Mary was so interested in what she was about to hear from the lips of Jesus that she found herself mesmerized. She stopped her work when Jesus came into the room, drawing closer to Him as she listened and hung on to everything He uttered. She did not wish to miss a single word Jesus had to say! He had told so many wonderful stories in the past, she could hardly wait to hear what was coming next!

While Mary sat there was listening enraptured, Martha, who prided herself on being a good hostess, kept busy preparing and bringing food to everyone in attendance. Martha was in a flurry, fixing the meal for Jesus and His disciples, and refreshing their cups to quench their thirst. It was a huge task, and the longer she served, the angrier she became with her sister for not helping her with the preparations, and the angrier she became with the Lord for not interceding on her behalf. Finally, enough was enough. She was fed up, and eventually Martha tired of serving the guests all by herself. It was then she decided to complain to Jesus, saying, ***“Lord, don’t You care that my sister has left me so I have to do all the work by myself? Tell her to come and help me!”***

Jesus answered, ***“Martha, Martha, you worry about too many things. What Mary is hearing is more important to her than serving or eating. She has chosen the right thing and it will not be taken away from her.”***

Now most sermons I have ever heard about Martha and Mary always end up asking you to think: Are you a Martha or a Mary? Are you like Mary – someone who will take time to sit and listen to Jesus, a pray-er, a thinker, someone who reflects calmly on life; or are you like Martha – someone who cannot sit still, always has to be moving around and doing, and maybe missing out of hearing what God wants to tell you?

These sermons always major on Jesus' quote at the end, ***“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”***

It seems to me that these sermons always end up making the vast majority of the congregation go home feeling rotten about themselves because we all feel like

Marthas at many times in our lives. We are busy people with not enough time on our hands to get to know God any better.

I, however, would like to take a different slant today, and to concentrate on what made Martha mad at Jesus. Let us see if we can discover what she did with her anger, and to look again at Jesus' response to see if there is any good news in it for Martha, and those of us who feel like her.

“Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” That is what she said; but I wonder if that is what she meant. Let us try getting closer to Martha by painting a picture of her in our minds. This is all guesswork, of course, but there are clues from Scripture that help us reach these conclusions. Perhaps Martha was a woman like this:

Martha seems to be a woman who always knew her place, and sought to act in such a manner. The Scriptures tell us this was **her** house, which would seem to indicate that she was the oldest of the siblings in her family. It was not unusual for Jewish families to have children several years apart in age, so it also appears that since no parents are mentioned, they have long since passed away, leaving the care of the younger siblings of Mary and Lazarus in the hands of their elder sister, Martha. This, too, would explain why Scripture refers to this as being Martha's house.

Some believe that Martha was a widow, and that she was living in the house that had belonged to her husband. But I reject that conclusion for the following reasons. First of all, it would be very unusual for her brother to be living in the house that had belonged to his brother-in-law. If Martha had become a widow, and Lazarus would have assumed the responsibility to care for her, then Martha would have gone to his house. He would not have gone to her house. It would not, however, be unusual for him to be living in the house that had belonged to his father, even if it had passed into the possession of his sister. As the son of his deceased father, Lazarus would have been entitled to remain in that house as long as he wanted to remain there. Secondly, when we are first introduced to women who are widows at the time of our meeting them, the Bible readily identifies widows as being widows, even if it is but a passing reference to an action taken by a woman, or if it was but a brief encounter we find with a woman in Scripture. If she is a widow when we first meet her, we certainly are told this information. Martha is mentioned on more than one occasion in the Bible, and never is she identified as being a widow.

To me, her being an elder sibling, and one by several years, explains why this is called her house, and why her siblings were living with her. I think it also explains how she is behaving as both a mother **and** a jealous sister with Mary in this passage of Scripture. The younger Mary still has prospects for marriage. Martha, burdened with the care and responsibility of two younger siblings during her prime years to become a bride, and bereft of a dowry to bring into a

marriage, is overlooked as being a suitable candidate for marriage, which means she will never have the chance to bear children of her own. Remember, a barren woman at this time in history was considered a shamed woman. Mary, on the other hand, being younger and in her prime, and not having any "extra baggage" of children with her, still held out the hope of finding a husband to marry, and raise a family of her own.

Yes, she obviously loved her brother and sister, and she had become the mother to them, the mother they needed, upon their mothers' passing, but it is not hard to imagine her wondering occasionally about the harshness and unfairness of life, and why it was that she had to live her life as an unmarried woman, instead of having a husband and family of her own as many of her childhood friends had.

No, it is not difficult to imagine that after her mother and father died Martha did all the cooking and baking and laundry the way her mother had done. But she knew her place. . . .

She knew it from the very day her mother died and she took over in the kitchen. She knew it was her duty to welcome everyone at the door and bring them in and make them feel comfortable. She desired for the people to enjoy the aroma of her delicious cooking and baking. She wanted them to feel comfortable in her clean and tidy house. She was readily there to serve them and to pour them refreshing drinks, and to make this house a home, a place of comfort, even a respite for the Lord as He traveled on His journeys.

I think you might be able to see Martha as a woman like that, not an unusual person by any means. Someone who knew her place and got on with it, but one who must, from time to time, have simply got fed up with it. I can picture her lying on her bed during the dark hours of night, wondering why it was *always her* who had to look after them, even now they were all grown up.

Hopefully, you can begin to see, understand, and empathize with why Martha "had a go" at Jesus that day. Years of bottled up disappointment and annoyance broke through. Feeling trapped and alone, and busy in a house full of people, but left alone in the kitchen while this welcome visitor, her friend, was enjoying the company of her younger sister, Mary, she blew off steam. There was lovely, doe-eyed little sister Mary, sitting there at His feet, and looking adoringly up at Jesus. It was all just too much for Martha to take, and her frustrations boiled over.

Often when you and I "have a go" at people it is because of things like these. Hidden things, things we have left simmering underneath the surface of our everyday lives, just waiting for the pressure valve to be released. And if we do not release the pressure, then we are bound to blow up eventually ourselves, just as what happened with Martha.

I am not saying that we are all like this Martha in every detail – we are all different, we are all unique – but I am saying that like her, we all carry around with us resentments and frustrations, things which sometimes cause us to lash out at others. It was not really Jesus' fault that Martha felt like that; and it probably was not even Mary's, either, because I suspect that Martha probably did not actually *let* Mary do much about the house most of the time. Martha knew and understood that the housework was her duty, and the kitchen was her place. But Jesus and Mary were there, and so it was they who received the brunt of Martha's anger, and it hit them full right between the eyes!

Jesus, never short of a response to those who “had a go” at Him, calmly responded by saying, ***“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.”*** Jesus did not say what that *one thing* was. But Martha, as well as you and I, can guess what that one thing is, and that one thing is to turn to Him. Trust in Him. Find your place in Him. Finding your place in anything else leads to worries and distractions, whether that is being the perfect housekeeper, surrogate mother, or the perfect breadwinner, hard-worker, or even friend. The message is, turn from those things if they are distracting you from what is really important, and find your place in Christ.

Perhaps we can all learn something quite practical from Martha. The next time it looks like we are going to “have a go” at someone because of the way we feel, have a go at Jesus instead. He is used to it, He wants it, and when He sees what is going on inside our hearts He will diffuse the situation, and provide a way for us to put all those cares behind us and find our place in Him.

I believe we can learn from both of these women of God. At times, it is important for us to offer our hospitality and take care of guests in our homes. In fact, Paul commands **all** Christians to be hospitable in Romans 12:13, and as for widows to be added to the care and financial responsibility of the church, Paul writes in 1 Timothy 5:9-10 [RSV], ***9. Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband; 10. and she must be well attested for her good deeds, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the feet of the saints, relieved the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way.*** The Apostle Peter says in 1 Peter 4:9 [RSV], ***“Practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another.”*** The Hebrews writer informs us in Hebrews 13:2 that some of us who have entertained and helped strangers have actually been showing hospitality to angels, unaware that we were doing so. Elders are also especially commanded to show hospitality in 1 Timothy 3:2. However, there are times that it is equally important for us to just sit at the feet of Jesus in order to nourish our spirit, and simply bask in His presence! Martha always gets a lot of criticism when this story is discussed; but I believe her motive was pure. After all, it was Jesus Who was her dinner guest! But maybe what Jesus was teaching her was that it was time for sandwiches, instead of a full-blown meal!