

Contentment vs. Ambition: The Mary and Martha Dilemma

Our culture seems to always be speaking to us in the competing narratives of: *do more vs. do less*.

On one hand, we should all be doing our part of contributing and have dreams and goals that we are reaching toward and wanting to make the world a better place. On the other hand, we're taught the importance of rest and contentment and being present and enjoying where we are right now.

So how do we reconcile these two seemingly opposing streams of thought?

As a natural "doer" and "go getter," I know for me it can be a really easy propensity to always be striving to accomplish more. It feels good to produce and to feel as though I am leaving an impact on the world around me; to know that what I am doing matters. I find, however, that this often leads me to the other side of this two-edged sword, which is burnout. I get caught up in the *doing* and I lose sight of the proper order of things.

In the biblical account of Mary and Martha, Martha often gets the bad wrap, but I relate a lot to Martha. I understand her productivity, her proclivity toward hospitality, her judgement toward those less inclined to jump in and help with the work that needs to be done. "Pay now, play later" has always been my method and I feel like Martha would stand by that motto.

In that story, Martha is urging Jesus to chastise her more free-spirited sister. "She came to Jesus and said, 'Lord, doesn't it seem unfair to you that my sister just sits here while I do all the work? Tell her to come and help me'" (Luke 10:40, NLT). I have been in that spot, and it feels so justified. But instead of the reproof that Martha was

expecting toward her sister, Jesus says, “My dear Martha, you are worried and upset over all these details! There is only one thing worth being concerned about. Mary has discovered it, and it will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:41-42, NLT).

Jesus didn’t rebuke Martha because she worked. The Bible is clear that a workman is worthy of his wages (Luke 10:7). We know that faith without works is dead (James 2:26). It is right for us to be good stewards of the work that we each have been given. What Martha lost sight of in this instance, however, is what matters most—Him. Work had become her priority and our priority is what we will worship. Mary, on the other hand, had discovered the only One who is ever worthy of first place in our hearts.

Whenever I feel myself slipping away into the anxiety of “doing,” I need the kindness of the Holy Spirit reminding me that my priorities have shifted in the wrong direction. Not even necessarily that I need to stop my actions—though rest is sacred and commanded for a reason—but that I remind myself of my reason for being.

You see, whenever the yoke is hard and the burden is heavy upon my shoulders, I know that I have taken upon myself something that doesn’t belong to me. From the very beginning upon our creation, He appointed us with work—the joy of creatively designing our world in partnership with Him. With the curse came a dread and a dependence on the work of our hand in hard labor (Gen. 3:16-19).

But with our redemption and freedom from the curse through Jesus Christ, He leaves us this promise: “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matt. 11:28-30).

Ambition and accomplishment have never been the enemy. In

fact, they are part of our God-created design. It is only when production becomes our idol and striving sinks us back into a pre-grace curse that we lose sight of the contentment that only comes in Him.

This is why Paul could confidently say to the Philippians that in whatever state he found himself, he could be content. Not because he ceased in his efforts to fulfill his call, but because he found his strength not on his own accord but chiefly through Jesus Christ (Phil. 4:11-13).

When we can be as Mary and keep our Lord as our primary focus in all things—whether in doing or in resting—we, like Paul, can experience contentment in whatever state we are in. We will begin to recognize those moments when our work and our goals have become idols instead of worship to the One who deserves it all.

As He did with Martha, may His kindness draw us to repentance, to learn to be still and know that He is God and we are not. May we remember that our design was always to partner with Him and be led by His instruction in the grace that He affords us anew each day.

And may His smile shine upon us as our work becomes an offering to the King of kings and the Lord of lords. For from Him and to Him and through Him are all things, to whom deserves all glory forever, amen.

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