

Beware of the Martha Syndrome

Martha and Mary were sisters who lived with their brother Lazarus in the tiny town of Bethany. The Gospels indicate that Jesus shared a special relationship with these siblings. After all, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, which endeared Him even more to them. Apparently, Jesus made frequent stops in Bethany to eat and lodge with this family and to retreat from the crowds and the demands of ministry. John's Gospel makes no bones about the obvious fact that "Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, [Mary] and Lazarus" (John 11:5). I call them the "touched trio," because they were all three deeply touched by Jesus in unique ways. It is speculated that Martha was a widow who, upon her husband's death, had her younger siblings move in with her. Otherwise, as the *Zondervan Handbook of the Bible* notes, "She was likely the eldest in a family of young adults who had lost their parents."

Bethany is a beautiful name for a girl. In fact, we strongly considered using it when our daughter, Emily, was born. In the Bible; however, the name Bethany has a negative connotation. It means "house of misery" or "poor house." Perhaps it was because of the many sick people and invalids that congregated there. We do know Simon the Leper lived there (Matt. 26:6), presumably a man Jesus healed (or no one would have attended the supper he hosted at his house). Some sources suggest there were many lepers quarantined near this town. Leprosy, incurable in Bible times, was a fitting symbol of sin for only God can cure the leprosy of the soul.

Bethany, it seems, was Jesus' headquarters in Judea. It was situated less than two miles east of Jerusalem, on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, another favorite hot spot of Jesus and His disciples. Notice Jesus didn't just associate with the high and mighty in Jerusalem. No, He deliberately frequented Bethany—He went where the need was. In fact, He forfeited His heavenly splendor to come down to this "house of

misery" called earth to cleanse us from the leprosy of sin. It was also in Bethany where Jesus cursed the fig tree (Mark 11), raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11) and ascended into heaven (Luke 24:50-51).

On one occasion when Jesus visited Martha's house, Mary sat at His feet, riveted to His every word. Martha, though, was busy serving food to the guests and complaining that Mary wasn't helping her. She even had the audacity to interrupt Jesus and accuse Him of not caring that she was doing all the work by herself. Jesus responded, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed. And Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:41-42).

In today's lingo, Jesus was saying, "Relax, Martha. Calm down. Take a chill pill. You make coffee nervous, girl." You see, Martha was a worry wart. One author noted, "Worry is a futile thing, much like a rocking chair; although it occupies your time, it doesn't get you anywhere." Mahatma Ghandi said, "Nothing wastes the body like worry, and one who has any faith in God should be ashamed to worry about anything whatsoever." Paul instructed the Philippians, "Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything" (Phil. 4:6a, TLB).

Martha was preoccupied worrying about trivial, earthly things, while Mary was hungry for spiritual, eternal things. Worry is a sin! It shows a lack of trust that God is in control. A modern beatitude says it all, "Blessed is the person who is too busy to worry by day and too tired to worry by night." We must learn the secret of "Cast[ing] all your care upon Him, because He cares for you" (1 Pet. 5:7). God is going to be up all night anyway, so let Him be your burden bearer. Holocaust survivor Corrie Ten Boom said it well, "Worry doesn't empty tomorrow of its sorrow; it empties today of its strength."

Many people today make the same mistake Martha made—they are so consumed with temporary things that they fail to focus on

eternal things of greater importance. Many are too busy to attend church, too busy to pray, too busy to read the Bible. The Martha Syndrome is a very real threat to everyone, especially those in ministry. The Martha Syndrome is being so busy working *for* God that we neglect to spend time *with* God. It is being busy doing a lot of good things but avoiding the best thing—sitting at Jesus’ feet, hearing His Word and feeding your soul.

Martha must have learned her lesson. Later, long after Jesus reproved her and after He brought Lazarus back to life, Simon the (former) Leper threw a feast for Jesus in Bethany. John 12:2b informs us that “Martha served.” Why are we not surprised? She served—that was her gift—even though the dinner wasn’t at her house. Then her sister Mary poured out her pricey perfume on Jesus in an extreme expression of gratitude. The value was equivalent to about a year’s wages. Judas objected to the waste of money (John 12:4-6). The other disciples were outraged by such extremism (Matt. 26:8). Other dinner guests were upset and thought Mary went overboard (Mark 14:4). But, strangely, Martha never uttered a single word of protest, even though her younger sister spent a fortune on Jesus. Instead, she kept her mouth shut and quietly continued serving.

Both sisters, you see, worshipped Christ in their own unique ways. Martha worshipped with her work, while Mary worshipped with her words and deeds. Interestingly, the word “worship” comes from two Old English words *weorth* (worth) and *scipe* (ship) meaning “the quality of being worthy.” While others considered it a waste, Mary and Martha knew better. Jesus was worth it—every penny.

Be sure in the busyness of your life to take time to worship, to sit at Jesus’ feet and feast on His Word, for He truly is worthy. People who are too busy for God have a serious disorder. I call it the “Martha Syndrome.” Beware!

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