

## It's Labor Day And Mary Won't Help

It's Labor Day Weekend. You can hear the collective sigh that issues from everyone on this weekend. Summer has gone by too quickly, we didn't get everything done we intended to for the summer, we've rushed around trying to get the kids all ready and back into school and now, everyone just needs one day to kind of collapse and then try to pull ourselves together and face a new day on Tuesday.

Labor Day is really the unofficial end of summer. It is another of the hamburger and homemade ice cream holidays in our family. In case you are uncertain, Labor Day actually closes the homemade ice cream season. You put the freezer away and it doesn't come out again until next May for Memorial Day which then opens the season. I'm glad I could clear that up for you.

It seems everyone is tired. Exhausted. In fact, so many people are so stressed with the economy, the job situation. Some can't get enough hours and they are working two or three jobs if possible just trying to keep from losing their house or their car. Prices are climbing and so is the stress level. Many of us are just overloaded in every sense of the word. Frustration is growing. What are we going to do?

I want to share some thoughts with you about dealing with the stresses of overload. Turn with me to **Luke 10:38-42**. This is the story of a stressed out lady and her sister and their very special guest, Jesus. It's the story of a woman who desperately needed a day off. She needed a labor day weekend. As we look at this story, I want to acknowledge Dr. George Wood as a key source for some of the observations I'll share with you today.

Let's read this passage from Luke 10:38-42. It's interesting that at this time Luke doesn't mention Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. Luke doesn't mention the town where they lived which happened to be Bethany, a town about two miles from Jerusalem. These ladies and their brother were special friends to Jesus and no doubt he was a frequent guest in their home.

As we look at the story, we can see several signs of Martha's rising stress level and we can tell she is on overload.

**1. Martha was distracted.** (V40) The word translated as distracted here can literally be translated as "to drag all around." Instead of being focused on one thing, on

the truly important things, Martha's attention had been dragged all around. Her attention was being drawn from one thing to another to another.

In the end, we conclude that her attention, her focus was on service when it should have been centered upon the Lord himself. She was so busy trying to serve the Lord that she was unable to be with the Lord. Before it was over, the focus really was on herself and her feelings and whether she had been wronged by Mary and whether Jesus even cared about her any more. Her focus was all wrong. She should have focused on the relationship and being with Jesus.

It's interesting. The NIV says Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made, however, a more literal translation uses a word that we are familiar with, the Greek word diakonia from which we get our word deacon. Martha was distracted with much "deaconing." It is the idea of service. Martha was caught up in and distracted by all of the serving she was trying to do – all of the tasks and preparation. She was busy with ministry, but ministry had begun to drag her away from time spent with Jesus.

As we look at Martha, we see some of the ways we too can become distracted. First of all, Martha lost sight of her number one priority. Jesus' priority for Martha and for Mary was that they would have a personal relationship with Him. Cleaning house and preparing food should have been secondary to being with Jesus and developing a deeper relationship with him. Martha had her priorities messed up. We can get distracted and allow our priorities to be in disarray. Scripture gives Martha and us some direction for our priorities and our focus.

**Spending daily time with Jesus should be a number one priority in our lives** – nurturing the relationship we have with him through faith. If that is absent, then we too are distracted and we will find ourselves and our focus dragged all around. We will likely find ourselves focused on the wrong things, wasting time on the unnecessary and neglecting the essential things. Spending time with Jesus should be at the top of our daily list. Spending time with him in prayer, studying God's word, spending time in reflection and in thanksgiving to God.

**A second priority in our life should be our family and those we love.** In the midst of all of the busyness and hurriedness of life, you will have to find or make time to

be with those you love. Life is going by at such a rapid pace. Don't neglect to spend time with family. Don't allow busyness to deprive you of the priceless treasure of watching your children grow, of enjoying your grandchildren, of taking a vacation with the family. Don't allow the stress and overload and pressures of life to deprive you of precious time with elderly parents and family. Too many years I was too busy to stop by my parents house and visit when my Mom was alive and well. Now it's too late. I can't imagine what I was so busy doing that I couldn't have spent 30 minutes sitting with her and dad and visiting. Make your family a priority. Get together with family tomorrow or invite some friends over this evening. Make it a priority. Don't allow life to distract you from your priorities. Life is about relationships. First with Jesus and then with family.

**A third priority might ought to be yourself.** Take care of yourself. Take some time to rest, to re-create. You need a sabbath. You need a break. Go for a quiet walk this evening (before those friends come over). Relax and thank the Lord that he will give you rest and peace and strength for the journey. Martha could have decided she was going to adjust her priorities that day. She would spend more time with Jesus, and with her family – her sister and her brother – and she would do something for herself and not worry about fixing a huge meal and feeding everyone. They would just have sandwiches and she would be able to spend more time with Jesus and family and maybe even get a nap before the day was over.

**Part of what happens when we get distracted, when we lose our focus and we get our priorities out of order, then everything begins to snowball out of control.** Maybe that's what happened to Martha. "Jesus is coming and we need to get the menu all planned. What are we going to have? I know Jesus loves to eat but he loves spending time with all of us even more. We will just keep it simple so we can all have time to sit at his feet and learn. I'll just fix some hummus and maybe one salad. Of course he loves fresh bread. Then she starts thinking about the fact that Peter really loves that grilled fish, they ought to name that after him, and maybe she should have another main course and before long it has all snowballed. Ten salads and six desserts and three main courses later she is remembering she needs to polish the silver and get out the best dishes. She starts doing one thing and then thinks of another and then

another and it all snowballs. “I was going to get all the meal prepared but then I went into the living room and realized we never had finished painting that one wall so I thought I would just get that done real quickly and then I noticed the chair needed to be recovered to match the new paint so I tried to get that done as well.” Sound familiar? Sure, it all needs to be done, but...

Be careful you don't let life begin to snowball out of control. Be careful that you don't miss the truly important things while being distracted by all these minor things. The important thing that day should have been simply being with Jesus. But Martha was distracted, her priorities were out of order, her life was beginning to snowball and now her perspective had become distorted. I don't think Martha was a negative person. I don't think she was by nature a whiner. But look at what she says to Jesus. **“Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”**

“Don't you care Lord.” Of course he cared. Martha knew that. But the stress level was rising. “Lord, you don't care about me because if you did you would have told my sister to get up and get in there and help me fix this meal. You heard me in there making all that noise and dropping those pots and pans. I'm in there working for you so you can have a nice meal and you don't even care...” People that are stressed out and overloaded and distracted and their priorities are all out of order, they also get distorted perceptions of other people and of other people's motives. Their perspective on life and on others gets all messed up. “You can't trust Mary or Jesus or anyone. Fine, I'll just do this all myself... no one cares about me.” None of that is true, but that's how we start to think and feel and act. It all becomes about us. Which brings us to the next thing.

**Martha blamed others for her problems.** Stressed out folks can start looking for others to blame. “If they would just stop doing this I would be okay. If he would just start doing this it would be alright.” It was Mary's fault. She didn't stop to think about the possibility that she might have been wrong or that she might have taken on more than she could handle. Nope, she just decided to blame Mary.

George Wood thinks perhaps Mary had been helping Martha earlier. The fact that Martha said to Jesus “my sister has left me to do the work by myself”, he thinks

could indicate that she had been in there with Martha, helping her, but then she left her. Maybe she was helping until Martha said, “Okay we’ve got six salads and four vegetables, but I think we need a couple more of each” and Mary just said, “okay, you have rounded the bend towards crazyville.” I’m going to go visit with Jesus, you make more salads or whatever. Have a nice day.” And Mary left Martha alone. Stressed out. Distracted. Looking for someone to blame.

Let me just say, blame is a dangerous thing. It will kill all the joy in your life. It will kill the possibility of growth in your life. Stop blaming others. Maybe it wasn’t fair, all that happened to you in your past and maybe you had nothing to do with it. But this is where you are and you can either remain here, paralyzed while you point and blame everyone else for your trouble, or you can quit blaming everyone else and realize that your future is in your hands. Stand up and ask God, “Now what? I can’t do anything about the past, but I can decide what to do about the future. Lord with your help, I plan to live my life for you, living in a new way, for a new cause, traveling a new direction.”

**Martha wanted Jesus to approve her wrong perception and her wrong solution.** “Jesus, you straighten Mary out and then you tell her to get in there and help me.” And Jesus refused to get caught in the middle of this or to be manipulated. Instead, he gives her some insight on how to get out from under this stress and overload.

The first thing he does is give her a very tender rebuke. He speaks her name twice, to refocus her attention where it belongs – on Jesus. I think it might have been kind of a “Martha look at me. Martha, Martha, Martha...”

Jesus then states the problem. “You are worried and upset about many things.” That’s the problem. According to George Wood and his study, “worry” refers to the inward condition of turmoil and “upset” refers to the outward manifestation. Confusion and turmoil on the inside leads to confusion and turmoil on the outside.

We are worried and upset, inside and out, but Jesus’ words to us are just the opposite. **“Therefore I tell you do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink or about your body, what you will wear.” Matthew 6:25.** Jesus doesn’t say to not be concerned or to never plan for the future. He is talking about the kind of concern that is fueled by anxiety and fear but that offers no solutions to the problems. We hear

his words to us, regardless of the circumstances. **“Therefore do not worry about tomorrow for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”** Jesus wasn’t trying to freak anyone out about tomorrow, he was just reminding us to treasure each and every day of our lives.

We know the problem too well don’t we? Stress. Overload. He tells us not to worry, but everything is so frightening and worry filled. But his answer is found in Philippians 4. To paraphrase **“Do not be worried about anything. Spend time with the Lord and the peace of God will guard your heart and your mind.”**

Jesus shares the solution to the problem with Martha. **“Only one thing is needed”** he tells Martha. He is asking Martha to submit to his priorities. Martha, here is the solution to all your stress and your overload – arrange your priorities to fit with mine. George Wood writes, “Jesus asked Martha to reorient her life according to what is important to him. And the meal, from his vantage point, did not require that many dishes. He wanted time with her. That was what was important.”

Perhaps the Lord is speaking to you this morning. You are stressed out, overloaded, about to go under from all the burden and turmoil and worry. And Jesus is asking you to reorient your life according to what is important to him. He is asking you to order your priorities according to his agenda and purpose and not your own. He is calling you to a new rhythm in your life, to follow him in a new pace of grace.

George Wood shared a paraphrase of Psalm 23 taken from a Japanese version that seems to fit so well with what we are talking about.

“The Lord is my pacesetter. I shall not rush. He makes me stop and rest for quiet intervals. He provides me with images of stillness which deepen my serenity. He leads me in ways of efficiency through calmness of mind and His guidance is peace. Even though I have a great many things to accomplish each day I will not fret, for his presence is here. His timelessness, His all-importance will keep me in balance. He prepares refreshment and renewal in the midst of my activity. By anointing my mind with oils of tranquility, my cup of joyous energy overflows. Surely harmony and effectiveness shall be the fruit of my hours. For I shall walk in the pace of the Lord and dwell in His house forever.”

Jesus told Martha that Mary had chosen what was better. She sat at his feet

and learned from the master and Jesus said what she had received would not be taken away from her.

Mary chose what would last forever. The meal that Martha worked and slaved and fretted and worried over, it would pass through the physical system of the human body within hours and would then be forever gone. But the time you spend with Jesus, those moments are timeless. Wood wrote, **“The secret of life is so often not making the choice between good and evil, which is often easy to do, but it’s making a choice between the better and the best.”**...George O. Wood Mary chose the best.

Understand this story is not a put down of Martha. It is not about conflict between Mary and Martha. If the work of the church depended only on Mary, we wouldn’t have dinner on Wednesday night, the dishes and trash would stack up and soon the health department would come and shut us down. The Martha’s of the world are shaking their fingers at the Marys of the world saying “You’re of no earthly good. If we left it all up to you nothing would ever get done. And the Mary’s of the world are pointing their finger at the Marthas saying, “You are always so busy you never have time for a relationship with Jesus. There will be time for all of that later.”

The problem with Mary and Martha is one of balance. Martha isn’t being put down by Jesus for having worked or prepared food. She is being gently rebuked for being out of balance. Apparently she learned to restore that balance because later, in the gospel of John, she prepares another dinner for Jesus. This time there is none of the turmoil or worry or stress. In fact, things are so peaceful that Mary is able to anoint Jesus’ feet with expensive perfume.

Martha must have learned her lesson. She must have re-established proper priorities and found the balance she needed in her life because in John 11 it is Martha that tells Jesus ‘I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God who was to come into the world.’ She must have spent some time at his feet as well, don’t you think? I don’t think she would have got that revelation in the kitchen fixing a dinner. She learned that in the context of a personal relationship with Jesus, spending time with him, in his presence.

Stressed out? Overloaded? Losing perspective? Priorities out of order? Jesus is calling you to come to him, to find the balance that is in him, to get your priorities

straight, to reorient your life according to what is important to him. He wants to spend time with you. Are you willing? Are you ready to “walk in the pace of the Lord?” Are you ready to live by the rhythm of grace? Are you ready to chose what is better in your life?

Come unto me all who are weary and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light, and you shall find rest for your weary souls.

There is rest in him today. I like that phrase of George Wood. He is calling us to reorient our life according to what is important to him. Let’s walk in the rhythm of his grace.