

## MARY & MARTHA



*"As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!' 'Martha, Martha,' the Lord answered, 'you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her'" (Luke 10:38-42 niv).*

When we were married, someone gave us a plague which started, "Lord, I have a Mary's mind, although I have a Martha's hands" It went on to describe a prayerful attitude towards all of life -while we wash dishes or shine boots, etc. Without detracting from that application, let us ask, is that really what the story of Mary and Martha is about? Is the application of the message only that we should pray while we do the mountain of dishes left after tea or that we should play tapes of sermons while doing the ironing? Do we have to jump into "the spiritual realm" to find an application for the average housewife?

Before tackling these questions, let us look at the text above. Jesus and his disciples are travelling through Bethany, and a woman named Martha opens her home to Him. That this is a common stopover for Jesus is evident in John 11 where Jesus raises Martha's brother Lazarus, and is called a friend of the family - and indeed from the tone of the text in front of us, it is obviously not an isolated event. It appears that Mary lives with Martha, and, as we get a glimpse of this part of Jesus' life, Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet, listening intently to all He is saying. Martha loves Jesus too, and wants His company, but is distracted by the meal preparations for her guest(s) -perhaps the disciples were there as well. Finally, in frustration (can't you just see her glowering at Mary to get her attention?) she appeals to Jesus for justice -"Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

Can you sympathise with Martha's dilemma? Have you ever had "special company" coming, and spent the day - or indeed days before -cleaning the house until it shone, and preparing an extra course or extra touches to the meal to the extent that when they arrived, you were exhausted, and didn't really enjoy their company at all - in fact, afterwards you had to ask your husband how the evening went?

What was Jesus' response? "Your priorities are wrong, Martha. Mary has made the right choice." Is Jesus recommending "the contemplative life"? Should we all apply to be nuns, single for the rest of our lives? Well, there is something of that concept before us. As Paul says, an unmarried person is free from this world's concerns and can devote himself/herself to the Lord's affairs (1Cor.7:32-35). We ought to encourage our single brothers and sisters not to spend all their time wishing they were married and had a family, but to take advantage of the privilege temporary or permanently - of being single: to catch those after dinner conversations that the men have while the women are putting the kids to bed, to sit and listen and talk to friends for hours without interruption, to hear a sermon through from one end to the other, to have your quiet time consistently at the same time of day and without interruption, to be more free to order your day to drop in on someone who needs comfort or help.

Have the rest of us made the wrong choice in becoming wives and mothers? No, Paul is clear that we are right in getting married (c.f. 1Cor.7 again) But does the passage before us have anything to say to us? Let's look again - Mary and Martha both want to serve Jesus -Martha is trying in

every way she knows how, Mary is listening to hear what His will is. How are we to serve Jesus? By obeying His word! What is true piety according to God? 5a.m. prayer meetings? No. A spotless house? No. Rather, it is visiting orphans and widows in their distress (James 1:27) or teaching younger women how to love their husbands and raise their children (Tit.2:4).

In what ways do we reflect wrong Martha-type attitudes? What things distract us from the Word? In what areas are we being choked by the cares of this world? (c.f. parallels in the parable of the sower - Mat.13:22). Is Jesus saying that housework doesn't matter -that we should spend our time in devotional exercises? No, our God is a God of order, and a household that constantly looks like a hurricane has hit it is not pleasing to him. But, we display wrong priorities when we skip Bible Study to clean the house or catch up on our sleep, or are late to church because we had to finish the breakfast dishes or get Sunday lunch into the oven. Your housework you will always have with you

What do we learn about hospitality from this passage? Hospitality is not all food and clean houses. It is availability for talking, learning, discussing. Do people drop in on you - or do they know you would be embarrassed? When someone drops in and there are no cakes, scones or biscuits in the house - don't panic, a cup of tea will do. Plan Sunday's lunch ahead of time - a casserole to stick in the oven, or sandwiches nearly ready to go, rather than a roast dinner with all the trimmings at 3p.m. What kind of a hostess are you? Do you hover over your guests to make sure you have given them everything you can think of to make them physically comfortable - or does the fellowship go deeper to a person's real needs and desires?

Before we leave Mary and Martha, let us turn to John 12 and get our last glimpse of them in the Gospels. You will remember that one chapter earlier Jesus raised their brother Lazarus from the dead. Now, in chapter 12, a dinner party is being held in His honour. And what is Martha doing? Yes, she is serving again - and it's probably not even her house (c.f. parallel in Mat.26:6-13 - unless she is Simon the leper's widow). And Mary? Yes, she is still at Jesus' feet, now anointing the Christ, the Anointed One, with expensive perfume. Why did she do it? As a token of her esteem of her Saviour yes, but more than that. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem to die. He had tried to explain his death to his disciples several times already, but they haven't yet understood. Jesus says the anointing was for the day of his burial, and it would appear that

Mary, who had concentrated on what Jesus said without the distractions of the disciples' power play or her sister's preoccupation with serving food, may have understood more fully what was about to happen.

First seek His kingdom and His righteousness

By Pat Jackson

