

# In Defense Of Ms. Martha

*Recovering a biblical view of Lazarus' sister*

(Craig A. Smith)



Poor Martha.

What a legacy to leave behind. She made the ultimate “who’s who” list, but is this any way to earn your spot in the pages of Scripture?

You do remember Martha, right? Martha of the famous Mary-and-Martha duo? Sister of Lazarus, the man Jesus raised from the dead?

If you don’t remember Martha, don’t sweat it. She actually plays a fairly minor role in the Bible, so she’s easy to overlook. In fact, she’s only mentioned in two of the Gospels: Luke and John.

She served the disciples at the meal before the Triumphant Entry (John 12:2), but that’s not what people remember about her.

When Lazarus died and his two sisters heard that Jesus was coming, Mary remained in the house. It was Martha who jumped up and hurried out to meet him (John 11:1-28), but that’s not what people remember about her, either.

What everyone remembers about Martha was an unpleasant domestic incident recounted for us in Luke 10:38-42. While Jesus was visiting Mary and Martha, Mary elected to sit at Jesus’ feet while Martha continued bustling about. Frustrated with Mary’s lack of help, Martha asked Jesus to tell her to pitch in. Jesus replied, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her.”

That’s all he said. A rebuke, certainly, but a fairly minor one, given some of what Jesus had to say to people during his ministry. And yet, this rebuke has spawned a veritable industry of Martha-bashing. Type

in the word “Martha” at a Christian book distributor’s website and you’ll see exactly what I’m talking about. Recent works in this vein include: *Martha to the Max: Balanced Living for Perfectionists*, *Mary vs. Martha, Martha: How Christians Worry*, and the currently popular book, *Having a Mary Heart in a Martha World*.

But is Martha really so bad?

I think not.

Worse, I think that the typical treatment of Martha has contributed, at least in a small way, to a bad case of what I call “justified lethargy” in the Christian church. Too many times to count, I have heard people refuse to get involved in ministry and turn down service opportunities by saying something like “I just need to take time right now to sit at Jesus’ feet. I need to focus on my relationship ‘with’ him instead of filling up all my time doing stuff ‘for’ him. After all, I don’t want to be like Martha.”

Now, certainly, not all of Martha’s qualities are worth emulating. Jesus *did* rebuke her, after all. But what did he rebuke her for? Was it for being too busy serving him?

There’s no indication that it was.

Jesus never once told Martha to sit down, slow up or chill out. In fact, if we look at the account of this incident in Luke 10:38-42, there are some indications that Martha was doing exactly what she was supposed to be doing.

First, most translations of Luke 10:38 indicate that Martha “welcomed” Jesus into her home or something along those lines. In terms of the general concept, this sort of translation is fine. However, the original Greek uses a word (*hupodeksato*) which literally means that Martha “received him as a guest.” This word is a bit unusual, occurring only here and in Luke 19:6, Acts 17:7 and James 2:25. It is used to indicate not just that someone let a visitor enter his or her house, but that someone *took on the obligation of hosting the visitor*. In the world of first century Israel, such obligations were quite serious. All of Martha’s “preparations” (probably for the meal) were not only normal, they were virtually *required* of the host. To fail to make them would have been considered not only terribly rude, but perhaps even sinful as well. The Bible has a great deal to say about hospitality as a godly virtue.

There is another indication that Martha’s busyness was not the problem. The very context in which Luke presents this story to us is illuminating. Few people seem to remember that the story which immediately precedes this one is that of the Good Samaritan. Obviously in that story we see Jesus affirming the Samaritan because he took action. Its proximity to this Mary-

Martha incident ought to predispose us to look at least with *some* favor on Martha's efforts.

Interestingly, while John's Gospel doesn't relate this particular incident, when John first mentions Martha, he says this:

"Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus" (John 11:5).

In most of the literature today, Mary is portrayed as being closest to Jesus – why else would

we want a "Mary heart?" - but John, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, quite intentionally emphasized Jesus' love of *Martha*. What are we to make of that?

It is also intriguing that the passage in John which relates this curious fact, while presumably focused on the raising of Lazarus, actually spends more time recounting Jesus' interaction with Martha than anything else. It is almost as if the raising of Lazarus provides a stage on which to present another, perhaps more important, incident.

When Martha ran out to meet Jesus she said, "If you had been here my brother would not have died, *but even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask for.*" On the other hand, when Mary finally went out to meet Jesus, all she said to him was, "...*if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*"

In light of this, Martha's words come across more as a statement of faith while Mary's sound like an accusation. This may explain why Martha's words occasioned a very important conversation about the coming resurrection:

*Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."*

*Martha said to Him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."*

*Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?"*

*She said to Him, "Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world."*

Don't miss this: *Martha is the only woman in Scripture to be shown making an explicit declaration of Jesus as the Christ.* Ironically, Mary, who is perceived today as having been so focused on intimacy with Jesus, is never shown proclaiming him as the Christ, though I have no doubt she believed this.

Now, none of this is necessarily a criticism of Mary. After all, Jesus did say of Mary and her decision to sit at his feet, "...Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her." Given the choice between getting to know Jesus better and doing work that she wasn't obligated to do, she chose rightly.

I'm not suggesting that Mary messed up and Martha got it right. What I am suggesting is that

the way we normally characterize these women may be a bit at odds with the actual descriptions of them we find in Scripture. We are often told that Martha missed out because she was so busy doing things *for* Jesus that she didn't take time to be *with* him. However, it is difficult to square the notion of Mary having the enviable attitude and Martha as missing the boat when it is Martha

who is shown having faith that Jesus could raise Lazarus, declaring Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God and being given the privilege of serving at the Last Supper.

I have a lot of respect for Martha. Mary, on the other hand, doesn't seem to *do* much of anything. Her knowledge of Jesus doesn't seem to have resulted in any concrete action.

So if Martha's "busyness" was justified and if her efforts were acknowledged and rewarded in the various ways discussed above, why did Jesus rebuke her?

Make no mistake, he *did* rebuke her, but not for being busy. Martha's problem wasn't *busyness*...it was *bitterness*.

Look at the incident again:



*Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up to Him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me."*

The bitterness is hard to miss. Martha's error wasn't in failing to sit at Jesus' feet. If she had done so she would have been failing to provide the appropriate hospitality to her guest and his disciples. This would have been incredibly callous and disrespectful, if not actually sinful. But we have no indication that Martha was inventing more work than needed to be done or that she was somehow trying to derive her sense of self-worth from her work (of which she is often accused today).

No. Martha's mistake was in allowing herself to grow bitter. She wanted to sit at Jesus' feet and disliked the fact that her obligations prevented that. Mary was doing what Martha wanted so much to do, but couldn't at that moment. And so irritation grew into resentment and resentment blossomed into bitterness. Martha's statement to Jesus was really an attack on Mary. Jesus, recognizing this, rebuked her.

What Martha should have done was not abandon her responsibilities, but stop the runaway train of resentment and bitterness that prevented her from serving Jesus with joy.

Too many Christians today use a misinterpretation of this incident to justify their unwillingness to serve. Mary is not the heroine here.

It is ironic that so many people use the "I need to just sit at Jesus' feet" excuse to avoid meaningful and necessary Kingdom work. The fact is that it was quite hard to spend much time at Jesus' feet...because his feet were always moving, taking him from place to place and from need to need. He didn't sit still much. Of course he took time to commune with his Father. Of course he recharged his batteries regularly. But why? So that he would be fresh for new ministry.

The church would be in much better shape today if we could learn that lesson. The 80/20 rule is almost a cliché: 20% of the people in churches today do more than 80% of the work that needs doing. It's the same in almost every congregation. When desperate pleas are made for

Sunday School teachers, outreach participants, clean-up crews or whatever...it's always the same people who respond.

Actually, the 80/20 rule is badly-named. It's really more like the 20/20 rule. 20% of the people doing 20% of the work that needs doing, because 20% of God's people cannot possibly accomplish what all of God's people should be joining together to get done.

Of course, not all of our "justified lethargy" arises from a misinterpretation of the Mary and Martha incident. Misplaced priorities, excessive work demands and plain old laziness all bear their respective share of the blame as well. I don't expect that a biblical defense of poor Martha will change all that much, but perhaps removing an unsupportable excuse will be a step in the right direction.

Oh...and a word to the often self-righteous 20 percent-ers: don't make Martha's mistake. Don't let resentment and bitterness rob you of the joy that comes from serving your Lord.

Yes, there's always more work to be done and there are never enough people to do it. So what? You're not called to do it *all*...you're called to do all of it you *can*. It's okay to say, "Lord, I'm tired," but it's not okay to say, "Lord, I'm tired because

so many of your people are such sluggards."

And you know what? It's okay to say, "no" sometimes. Not to Jesus, of course, but at least to some of his more demanding followers. Just make sure you're saying "no" for the right reasons.

Finally, whether you're realizing you need to do more, or you're realizing you need to do all you do with a better attitude, keep the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-29) in mind. The issue there is clear: it is not the talents themselves that matter most, but what we choose to *do* with them. The point seems obvious: Sitting at Jesus' feet is good...but only so long as we take what we learn there and *do* something with it.

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