

The Sisters

Luke 10:38-42

John 11:1-44

John 12:1-11

Questions:

In the above passages what do we learn about each of the sisters, Martha and Mary?

Who do you most identify with and why?

How did you learn to appreciate people with different personalities?

How easy is it to treat personality differences as moral differences?

In what ways should we be tolerant?

When is toleration inappropriate?

What is the relationship between loving service and proclamation of the word?

How was this managed in the incident in Acts 6:1-4?

Three accounts that mention these two sisters, Martha and Mary.

Lk 10, Jn 11 at the raising of Lazarus from the dead and John 12 at the anointing of Jesus by Mary.

Luke 10 most well-known.

We identify with one or the other of the sisters

Relationship between the parable of the good Samaritan and this account.

Balance between good works and faithful devotion. Martha – works, Mary – faith.

Martha welcomes. Brother Lazarus not mentioned. Thought Martha's house – possibly widowed and/or eldest sister. Name Martha in Aramaic is related to the word master/mistress. The story is astoundingly brief.

How do you relate to this story? Many, particularly women, feel great sympathy for Martha.

Different gifts, different personalities. Different personal preferences. Like this family church also consists of people who are different from each other. In the disciples there was a range of personalities – the sons of thunder – and a vast range of political preference – zealots to tax collectors. Pharisees and ex-prostitutes. These are all brought together into one community by Jesus and particularly their response of faith in him.

The church is an inclusive community in that it is inclusive of people of different races, personality, giftings, politics, personal preferences. Common faith in Jesus and what he has done, and in the outworking of that faith in action and behaviour.

Not diverse on belief and moral behaviour.

In NT there is appropriate and inappropriate toleration.

4 I urge you, then—I who am a prisoner because I serve the Lord: live a life that measures up to the standard God set when he called you. ²Be always humble, gentle, and patient. Show your love by being tolerant with one another. ³Do your best to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives by means of the peace that binds you together¹

Luke immediately describes Martha as being **distracted** by much service

In the church we can be distracted, particularly when we have a serving gift. We can be doing so many things, and not realizing that all that service is directed towards enabling people to hear the word of God.

We have here a warning from Luke. The parable of the good Samaritan demonstrates what it means to love one's neighbour, but it's not the whole story nor

¹ American Bible Society. (1992). [*The Holy Bible: The Good news Translation*](#) (2nd ed., Eph 4:1–3). New York: American Bible Society.

even the most important part. We are to love God and to love our neighbour. To love God means, at least, listening to him.

Luke's implied criticism of Martha is not because she was serving, but because she was distracted by it. And not only that, she seeks to involve Mary in this distraction.

It is clear from the text that Martha blames Jesus for Mary's lack of help.

"Is it of no concern to you that my sister has left me to do the serving all by myself?"

Angry with her sister and redirects her anger onto Jesus.

Then she tells Jesus what he should do to make the situation right

"So, tell her to help me."

there is a deliberate contrast here between Martha who *tells* Jesus what he *must* say and Mary who *listens* to what Jesus *wishes* to say.²

How often are we telling Jesus what he must do.

How does Jesus respond?

The double use of her name is a sign of sympathy and is accompanied by a gentle rebuke.

In fact, (if ἐνός is read) there is need of only one thing; the reference is undoubtedly spiritual with reference to the 'good portion' chosen by Mary. The implications are that **Mary should be not deprived of it by helping Martha, and that Martha should so curtail her domestic cares that she too will be able to have the one thing that matters.** Then χρεία refers to Martha's own personal need. If, however, ὀλίγων is read, then the sense is that there is need for only a few preparations for Jesus' meal, so that Mary does not have to be taken away from listening to Jesus in order to help Martha. There is then no positive lesson for Martha, but only a rebuke. This, together with the fact that Luke probably understood the saying in a spiritual sense, speaks strongly in favour of 'one' being original.³

Martha must now learn to give the Lord and his word priority even over loving service. There are important human needs, whether of the victim in vv. 30–35 or of Jesus himself. But what is most "needed" goes beyond even these. The thoughtful reader will recognize, however, that this spiritual priority is not the same as the sterile religion of the priest and Levite in vv. 31–32.⁴

² Nolland, J. (1993). [Luke 9:21–18:34](#) (Vol. 35B, p. 604). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

³ Marshall, I. H. (1978). [The Gospel of Luke: a commentary on the Greek text](#) (p. 454). Exeter: Paternoster Press.

⁴ Liefeld, W. L. (1984). [Luke](#). In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 945). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

Painting Johannes (Jan) Vermeer - Christ in the House of Martha and Mary

Painting Martha preparing the meal while (in the background) Mary of Bethany sitting at Jesus' feet; painting (1566) by Joachim Beuckelaer

See Jn12.

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ² Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. ³ Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁵

Here there is no implied criticism of Martha and her serving. There is a degree of harmonious relationships expressed in different ways.

In comparing with the same account in Matthew, this takes place in the house of Simon the Leper.

All that is here stated is in agreement with it: (1) that Martha should have shown her reverence by serving her Lord, according to her wont, not necessarily as hostess (Hengstenberg and Lange), but as the expression of her devoted thankfulness; (2) that Lazarus should have been one of those who sat at meat, reclined at table, with him, *i.e.* took a position as a guest, like himself; and (3) that Mary should have poured forth her costly spikenard, in royal self-forgetting love.⁶

Very different. Personalities – different gifts.

In 1 cor 12, Paul illustrates the need for a diversity of gifts by comparing the church to a body with its different parts. Each is necessary for the functioning of the body, and no one part can claim that the others should be like it.

Martha's problem is one of projecting her obvious gift of serving onto Mary.

John's account shows that Mary's behaviour was not conventional (like her sister), but was rightly directed.

Story of the raising of Lazarus.

Read Jn 11:1-37

Mary, however, remained "seated in the house" (*kathezesthai*, "sat;" the NIV has the less acceptable "stayed at home," 11:20). The custom was for the bereaved to remain seated in the house and for the guests to come and sit in silence and

⁵ [*The New International Version*](#). (2011). (Jn 12:1–3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁶ Spence-Jones, H. D. M. (Ed.). (1909). [*St. John*](#) (Vol. 2, pp. 130–131). London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company.

periodically support the grieving parties with sympathetic tears and moans. For me the experience of having observed modern wakes in the Middle East has left an unforgettable memory of what “sitting in the house,” crowded on benches in the heat of day and mourning for the dead, can mean. Moreover, one must not forget that it was the brother (the obvious wage earner of that home) who had died. The loss was an intense one. Reading again Ruth 1:6–14 will provide some sense of the feelings that probably were present in that room.⁷

Jesus does not join the mourners inside the house.

His arrival somewhat secretive, perhaps not wanting to disturb the mourning process going on in the house.

Martha hears that he is coming and goes out to meet him.

Perhaps conscious of the awkwardness of his being there. Even amongst Jews sympathetic to Jesus, Jesus’s delay in coming may have been a problem.

Why did Mary not go with her sister? Did she know Jesus was coming? Perhaps, being the emotional one of the pair her focus was on her immediate grief.

Martha greets Jesus with the words, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.”⁸

Although most commentators do not take Martha’s word as accusatory, it is difficult not to do so when it may have been known that Jesus’s delay was deliberate.

⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.⁹

Martha still has faith in Jesus, “²² But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.”¹⁰

What was she thinking? Probably not that Lazarus would be raised.

Somehow Jesus can do something. This is the essence of faith – not a belief that something specific might happen, but a trust in Jesus in difficult circumstances.

Jesus’s reply deliberately ambiguous, “Your brother will rise again.”¹¹

⁷ Borchert, G. L. (1996). [*John 1–11*](#) (Vol. 25A, p. 355). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

⁸ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#). (2016). (Jn 11:21–22). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

⁹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#). (2016). (Jn 11:5–6). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

¹⁰ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#). (2016). (Jn 11:22). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

¹¹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#). (2016). (Jn 11:23). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

We know what happens.

Martha could only think that Jesus is referring to the resurrection of the body “on the last day.”

This is a response of faith and elicits from Jesus one of the most dramatic of the “I am” statement. One used in many funeral services for believers.

²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. ~~Do you believe this?~~”¹²

Jesus also asks the question so often missed out or overlooked, “Do you believe this?”

Martha’s response shows the depth of her faith in Jesus, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.” ¹³

Perhaps we should pause and let this question be addressed to us. Is your faith in Jesus who is the resurrection and the life. Our hope in death lies in him. Our focus at the death of a loved one is on Jesus.

Martha shows herself to be a woman of great faith.

The narrative now turns to Mary. Secretly she is told that Jesus has arrived and is asking for her. Perhaps to avoid any consternation amongst the mourners. She quickly goes out. Interestingly, Jesus has not approached the house any further, keeping out of the way of the mourners. However Mary’s abrupt departure causes many to follow her, thinking that she must be going to the tomb to mourn there. So they follow her to where Jesus is. Mary, I think a person who is rather demonstrative, falls at Jesus’s feet – a place she is often to be found when Jesus is around. And wails the very words that Martha used to greet Jesus.

These are the only words of Mary that are recorded. Interestingly it is her actions that are the focus of the accounts regarding Mary, and the words for Martha.

We know the rest of the story. There is an interesting interaction with Martha. Jesus tells the people to remove the stone from the front of the tomb. Martha objects because Lazarus has been dead for 4 days and his body is now decomposing.

Jewish belief was that the spirit hung around the body for three days, and if there was no sign of life after then, the person was truly dead and the spirit had departed. Lazarus was really dead. Perhaps Jesus’s delay related to this belief. The resurrection of Lazarus was no natural recovery.

¹² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Jn 11:25–26). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

¹³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Jn 11:27). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

⁴⁰ Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?”¹⁴

“You” is singular and so addressed to Martha. What happens is now a present disclosure of what Martha believed.

In this account, of the two sisters, Martha is the focus and shows herself to be a woman of great faith. Mary appears overcome with the immediate, Martha shows great confidence in Jesus.

This account is not one of conflict, but of complementarity. As in the account of dinner held in honour of Jesus.

Painting *The Raising of Lazarus*, by Duccio, 1310–11

How do we get one with people who are different from us?

Different personalities and preferences.

Value of doing a personality type indicator test is not just in knowing about yourself, but in knowing and appreciating that other people are different from you, and that is not a moral issue.

Some live by rules or saying – “A place for everything, and everything in its place” DO you know that being untidy is not a moral problem. It may cause inefficiency but it is not morally bad to be untidy. However, if your mother or father tells you to tidy your room and you don’t, that is a moral issue. It is one of disobedience.

Some people need to get away by themselves – private prayer time, others like to be with others.

Aware of what’s around them, others are more abstract.

Some people act on their values, others like to think through the matter

Some people like to complete something before going on to next, others will move from task to task without feeling they need to complete what they are doing.

We need all these different people in the church

The NT different gifts. People who have one gift should not despise those who have another – Tongues.

²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But earnestly desire the higher gifts.

¹⁴ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jn 11:40). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

And I will show you a still more excellent way.¹⁵

If the question begins with μή, the speaker expects a negative answer.¹⁶

In the early days of the church, people did not always get on.

Paul rebukes Peter publicly,

¹¹ When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.

¹³ The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

¹⁴ When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?”¹⁷

Paul and Barnabas fall out. Barnabas had been a great encourager of Paul, but they fall out when Paul takes a harder attitude towards a nephew of Barnabas who had deserted them during one of their journeys.

³⁶ Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.”

³⁷ Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, ³⁸ but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. ³⁹ They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, ⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹ He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.¹⁸

Despite these differences, we are encouraged to do all we can to remain united.

³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.¹⁹

We are called to tolerate each other in love

¹⁵ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#). (2016). (1 Co 12:29–31). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

¹⁶ Mounce, W. D. (2019). [*Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar*](#). (V. D. Verbrugge & C. A. Beetham, Eds.) (Fourth Edition, p. 362). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁷ [*The New International Version*](#). (2011). (Ga 2:11–14). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁸ [*The New International Version*](#). (2011). (Ac 15:36–41). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁹ [*The New International Version*](#). (2011). (Eph 4:3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

²Be always humble, gentle, and patient. Show your love by being tolerant with one another.²⁰

Tolerance over matters of personality and personal preference is important:

Active vs contemplative,
emotion vs mind, (feeling vs thinking)
formal vs informal,
spontaneous vs prepared, (Spirit led)

Other matters to be tolerant – cultural and social differences

But over matters of basic belief – faith – and moral conduct, tolerance is not appropriate.

Spend a minute thinking of people you find it difficult to get on with in the church.

²⁰ American Bible Society. (1992). [*The Holy Bible: The Good news Translation*](#) (2nd ed., Eph 4:1–2). New York: American Bible Society.