

Fed by Grace | Food in the Gospels

Lazarus, Martha and Mary

Luke 10.38ff; John 12.1-11

3.23.14

Luke 10 Now as they were traveling along, He entered a village; and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home.³⁹ She had a sister called Mary, who was seated at the Lord's feet, listening to His word.⁴⁰ But 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."⁴¹ But the Lord answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things;⁴² but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her."

John 12 Jesus, therefore, six days before the Passover, came to Bethany where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.² So they made Him a supper there, and Martha was serving; but Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with Him.³ Mary then took a pound of very costly perfume of pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of His disciples, who was intending to betray Him, said,⁵ "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to poor people?"⁶ Now he said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it.⁷ Therefore Jesus said, "Let her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of My burial."⁸ "For you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have Me."⁹ The large crowd of the Jews then learned that He was there; and they came, not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He raised from the dead.¹⁰ But the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death also;¹¹ because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and were believing in Jesus.

We've been looking at food occasions in the life of Jesus Christ in the four Gospels. There are many, many episodes and events in which Jesus gets with people over food... He was even criticized for how often He did this (Luke 7.34). It was His strategy for getting next to people where they really lived their lives ...so at meals He engaged them...AND, as we've seen, He also used food, eating, banquets, hunger and thirst (as in last week) as symbols and illustrations of spiritual things.

This week we see Him being entertained at the home of friends in a suburb of Jerusalem. And as they extend hospitality to Him, something ...goes awry. There's an awkward moment at this dinner party and it becomes a teachable moment. Jesus Christ teaches indirectly about HOSPITALITY but more directly about what God really wants from us. If we had to boil it all

down...all the commands and callings and obligations – what is the WILL of God for your life? Is there a way to answer that question in a universal way, for everyone? Can we say, no matter who you are or WHAT your circumstances, THIS is God’s #1 priority for you?

Last week we asked, “Who’s THERE and what do you want?” and this week, “Who is God and what does HE want? What does He want from YOU?”

And you MAY think the preacher is going to say, “God wants you to give money to this church...” or “to invite people...to evangelize...to love...to help and serve...” BUT you may be surprised to know it’s none of those...and yet it enables and COMPELS all of those and more...and it turns all of these obligations into things we WANT to do...into passions...into delights and joys – obeying because we really WANT to! So what is this UNIVERSAL calling and how does it change the very nature of life, obedience, obligation and motivation?

Let’s look at 1) Hospitality 2) Hearing and 3) Heroism

The whole section in Luke revolves around hospitality. Luke chapter ten begins with the Rabbi sending His students to do their “field work”. They’re to go in faith and looking for God to provide for them. They bring NO stuff, no change of clothes or money – NO “PLAN B”! And they are to look for hospitality. “If anyone receives you...well, stay there.”

Then they return and they report amazing and miraculous results. Signs of God’s Reign/Kingdom were everywhere; people are healed and liberated ... and some cities were... unreceptive ...inhospitable. And Jesus mourns over those cities that would not receive His emissaries.

Then a man approaches – a most likely to succeed type of guy and says, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” and Jesus, KNOWS WHERE THIS SELF-SUFFICIENT, SUCCESSFUL man is “coming from” says, “Keep the Law”... AND RIGHT ON CUE, he responds, “Yep! I’ve done that...” So, Jesus asks, in effect, “Wow! You’ve loved your neighbor as you love yourself?”

And the man, looking for a loophole, asks, “Well, who IS my neighbor?” And Jesus answers with the parable of the Good Samaritan. It is, of course, a story about a victim of a violent crime, left for dead and the religious people pass by him...and because the victim may be dead, may be a Gentile, may be unclean...the religious folks leave the man alone because they are trying to ...obey God.

Then a Samaritan comes and simply scoops the victim up and offers him hospitality at a local hotel. And Jesus asks, “Who is my neighbor, you ask? Well, which person acted like a good neighbor to the victim? ANSWER: the one who showed hospitality!”

AND THEN...this little vignette, only fives verses long but a real living parable for OUR day...a story of ostensible hospitality and obedience but with something else under the surface.

Let's look at Martha's hospitality. The old writer, Matthew Henry said we could say at least two things about it. **FIRST**, and we don't want to MISS this, it was **COMMENDABLE**. It really was.

Jesus was becoming more and more controversial. And to host Him was to be labeled "one of **THEM**" but Martha was courageous enough that she could handle that. She believed in Jesus. That's a big deal.

And it would have been a considerable expense. Jesus traveled with a group. "Honey, I brought a friend home for dinner...and HIS 12 students!" Food was not easy to GET and this required a lot of food and a lot of work!

And she was a good hostess and ... you know... things have to get done. "Nothing's easy" and she is a hard working person who knows that hospitality is work!

But these two passages today are all about contrasts and Martha is a contrast to herself. Her hosting is commendable but also (according to Matthew Henry)... **CULPABLE**. She is said to be distracted (v.40) and she is diagnosed/described by Jesus Christ in v. 41 as "worried and bothered about so many things". Some say that's a reference to an "elaborate spread", to a degree of preparation that was unnecessary (too fancy).

The words suggest... double-mindedness... she sees that God is in her dining room...she wants to be near Him but she also knows that things have to get done...She looks from the kitchen; she sees Jesus Christ there and she's missing out (though she's sure He appreciates all her hard work)... She's doing what she knows she's supposed to do...looks right/left/right...

AND THEN, she blows a gasket! She sees her sister, sitting like a ...like a MAN! Like a disciple and HE is allowing it...and maybe He's not appreciating all her work after all! And she snaps: she gives Jesus Christ a piece of her mind! "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone?!"

So...her hospitality (which IS commendable!) is also culpable and blameworthy. She's accusing and she commands her guest, "Then tell her to help me!"

Now, TWO initial conclusions: 1) Even people who really know God...really belong to God and have really received grace by faith...can become... ugly. Their (okay, "OUR"), **OUR** obedience can become very cold and calculated and measured.

If you have been turned off by some Christian and THAT'S why you're NOT a Christian yourself, let me urge you to see this. Christians are being renovated. We quite often start the renovation process in a more messed-up condition than most people and that's what convinces us we need help. And even when we get the help, it's like a horse becoming a Pegasus (to steal a C.S. Lewis

illustration) and it takes many years for the wings to be flight-worthy and in the meantime they just look like they stubby feather type appendages...really awkward and self-conscious and kind of repulsive.

But, second, ...to commend Martha a little more ...most of us would just stuff it. We might be boiling mad inside and just going through the motions with this fake smile (thinly covering our pouty lip!) and thinking no one noticed...but making everyone else miserable.

At least Martha let it out and was VERY open and honest with Jesus Christ...and because of that honesty we have the story...which is a HUGE help to modern doers... who often become heartless in our doing! You may be really good at stuffing it... that's probably NOT going to help you and that may mean that **YOUR** self-sufficiency and your ability to fake it is even more stubbornly entrenched than Martha's.

Now, in contrast to Martha's hospitality is Mary's HEARING. She was seated at His feet and listening to His word. **Martha received Him into the house**, Mary into her ear and head/heart...she heard...was receiving.

She looks passive but listening...real listening is anything but passive. It's one of the most demanding activities there is. Simone Weil said, "To pay attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity." She was giving Jesus Christ the ONE thing that He wants – her ear, her attention, her trust.

She looks ...bawdy or vulgar or unladylike (in that culture she was really bending the rules!) but she was showing that kind of desperation we've been seeing in the Gospels – people who believe are always desperate. God was dispensing grace from the mouth of Jesus Christ and she wasn't going to miss out. And He defends her along those very lines, "She has chosen the one necessary thing...the thing I always want for my people – to listen – to receive My grace by listening with faith. I WILL NOT LET ANYONE TAKE IT FROM HER. Her heart is not divided.

He is affirming Mary and He is challenging Martha. He loves Martha (that's why he repeats her name! Sounds patronizing to us but in that culture it was a sure sign of deepest affection.)

What ever happened to ol' Martha... well, she was on the way to becoming a Pegasus. It was slow-grow and often awkward (like it is for everyone undergoing this renovation called GRACE) and when we meet her in the second passage she is once again serving...I'm sure, not without some issues! Our obedience is never spotless on this side. But she was learning and growing...

And Mary...what did all that listening get her?

Well, Mary was a little further down the road... further than Martha... in fact further than all the disciples. By listening and giving God the one thing He wants (the "one necessary thing...the

better part that will not be taken away”) by hearing with faith, Mary knew that this meal, in John 12 was the last she would see of Jesus Christ. He would go from that house into the City where they were waiting to arrest Him and crucify Him.

He had been telling all the disciples that this was coming ... but they really weren't listening with faith. But she was.

Because she gave her ear...because she listened and believed, she knew what no one else knew. She knew that Jesus Christ was going to the altar, like a lamb, a sacrifice for the sins of God's people, FOR HER SINS!

And that's why she pours out this perfume worth some \$15,000. It looked excessive. It was highly impractical...not just to Judas who was a thief but to the believing disciples (in Matthew and Mark they all protest that her act of devotion was wasteful!) And Jesus defends her, first against Martha, then against those practical disciples because HER act not only showed that she was listening and that she GOT the Gospel, but the act itself was a kind of emblem or symbol FOR the Gospel!

The other accounts say that this bottle was sealed and could only be opened by breaking it. And when Jesus Christ, with this perfume all over Him, when He went into the Passion Week, riding into Jerusalem, in the Garden of Gethsemane, perhaps even when He was whipped and hanged on the Cross...during that week, the fragrance of her devotion was rising from Him...it was reminder that as the bottle had to be broken in order for fragrance to fill the house, SO I MUST BE BROKEN for the fragrance of grace to fill the earth.

The point is – by hearing, by simply listening and believing, Mary gained a kind of disposition and insight that actually reminded Jesus Christ of His mission and I believe was a help to Him as He faced the horror of judgment. Heroic love from Mary's believing heart.

This is the thing, if I can kind of slip into our third point: **people are able to change many things about their behavior and conduct.** We can often **make** ourselves do the right thing... but when our obedience is motivated by cultural obligation (Martha believed a woman's place was in the kitchen and that she had to present “many things” – her culture imposed that on her and she dutifully tried to fulfill her role) and when our parents or church or society impose things on us and we just DO IT because we're afraid NOT to...eventually, we come to resent it. We're responding to fear and eventually we'll resent people who aren't pulling their weight and resent those who are making us do this...dumb stuff...

But GRACE which is received by hearing, by believing, by faith, GRACE enables a NEW kind of obedience.

When I become convinced that He loves ME (even me!) He loves me enough to endure HELL for me... and I am ransomed by Him and HE IS INFINITELY committed to me and my renovation... and will, in fact MAKE ALL THINGS new...when I see that, and I welcome it into my heart...it enables me to pull battered victims from ditches (like the Good Samaritan) and to pour out money without a measured stinginess... I get past the Lawyer's question "What must I do to get eternal life – give me the exact specs!"

And instead my obedience becomes like being in love...it becomes what I want to do. It's no longer motivated by fear but by security and freedom.

Look, low-quality, life-less obedience is very common; I see it in myself quite often (and it's there a lot more than I even see it!) but God does really care NOT only THAT we obey but HOW we obey.

What MUST come before we open our house is that we open the ear... We must first become hospitable to the gospel by humility and faith... We repent and believe. We need grace to fuel a new and beautiful kind of obedience that is NOT common. In fact it's not even possible in our own doing (deadly doing).

The kind of obedience that really helps a world in need, a kind of heroic obedience "that's lived lightly and cheerfully, without the enormous baggage of bluff and bravado that the self-assertive lug around to mask their weakness... It is energetic, confident, alert, relaxed. The issue is not *whether* things get done but *who* gets them done, God or me." (Eugene Peterson, *Earth and Altar*)