



Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 97

Martha and Mary

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Thursday, 22nd April, 1993**

Text: *“Now it came to pass, as they went, that He entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus’ feet, and heard His word. But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to Him, and said, Lord, dost Thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me. And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: but one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her” (Luke 10. 38-42).*

This is the vital point in real religion, that one thing, and only one thing, is needful: the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. If our religion is real, if the new birth has ever taken place, if we have ever been called by God’s grace, then there will most surely be one thing, and it will be this: we shall feel our need of the Lord Jesus. Now I would hold you fast there. When the new birth takes place, there are many things which will happen. But whatever does happen or does not happen, there will always be this: that you will feel your need of the Lord Jesus. “Let us here begin; O do I feel my need of Christ, to save my soul from sin?” The Holy Spirit will teach that lesson well, that we need a Saviour. That is the *one* thing we need; that is the *only* thing we need, if ever we are going to come to heaven at last.

I affectionately ask you, how many of you have been brought to this point that you feel your need of the Lord Jesus? “Other refuge have I none.” “Thou, O Christ, art all I want.” We need the Lord Jesus to save our souls. We need Him as a divine, almighty, gracious Saviour. We need the Lord Jesus to prepare us for heaven. We need the Lord Jesus to forgive our sins. We need the Lord Jesus to cleanse us in His precious, sin-atonement blood. It is not just at the beginning of a work of grace that one thing is needful; it is just as needful for the dying saint stepping down into the swellings of Jordan. “One thing is needful.” And the emphasis is the uniqueness: *one* thing; none but Jesus; only *one* way to heaven; only one

Saviour; only *one* foundation; only *one* fountain open for sin and for uncleanness. “*One* thing is needful.” And if our religion is real, we shall feel this and realise it.

And beloved friends, it will have an effect in our lives. It is no use you saying you have been brought to this point, one thing is needful, and your life goes on as before. Your life will never be the same again. But whatever stage of experience you are at, whether you are still in the dark, whether you are seeking, whether you have found what you seek, whether you are in the enjoyment of the Saviour’s love, if you are in this place where one thing and only one thing is needful, it will have an effect. And the effect will be this: “Seek ye *first* the kingdom of God and His righteousness.” It will affect the things you do, the way you behave, the places you go. It will bring you out of the world, give you a daily, hourly concern, give you secret prayer.

“One thing is needful.” Of course, this was the blessed point that Mary knew. “One thing is needful.” But let us be abundantly clear, Martha knew it as well, didn’t she? Martha knew just as well as Mary that one thing is needful, but in this chapter she did not behave as if she did. You are not going to throw any stones at Martha, are you? *You* know that one thing is needful. Yet you do not always behave, and I do not always behave, as if one thing is needful. Sometimes we behave as if ten thousand things were vital, ten thousand things were necessary; these daily burdens and concerns and interests. Now Mary knew this. Martha also knew it.

There is very much in this chapter that was wrong with Martha, and that was wrong with Martha’s religion, and was wrong with Martha’s exercises. But we are told this, that “Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus.” And that is the thing which matters, isn’t it – if we are the objects of the Saviour’s love, so unfit, so sinful, so unworthy of it, but to be objects of the Saviour’s love? Mary very blessedly showed it in this chapter. But don’t forget, Martha did as well, because, “a certain woman named Martha received Him into her house” – a certain woman named Martha whose name was in the book of life, a certain woman named Martha, who was loved with an everlasting love – “received Him into her house.” When the world did not receive Him, when the rulers of the

people did not receive Him, when the scribes and the Pharisees and the Sadducees did not receive Him, Martha did.

“And a certain woman named Martha received Him.” That is what faith is, and that is what faith does, because if the new birth has taken place, there will be a place in your heart, an empty place, and none but the Lord Jesus can fill it. By nature your heart is closed, completely closed against the Lord Jesus, like the crowded inn at Bethlehem. But when the new birth takes place, your heart is no longer closed. There is that sense of need, your heart opened like Lydia’s, that place in your heart that none but the Lord Jesus can fill. So in the day of His power you are made willing to receive Him. It is a wonderful thing if you are made willing to receive the Lord Jesus.

Beloved friends, in reality it comes down to points, that every person who hears the gospel either receives the Lord Jesus or rejects the Lord Jesus. There is no in between. “He is despised and rejected of men,” still despised, still rejected of men. But if the new birth takes place, then you will not reject the Saviour. You will be made willing to receive Him. There will be the fears, the unfitness, the unworthiness, but you will be made willing to receive Him, and the great point will be, will the Lord Jesus receive me? That will be a good word to you: “This Man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.” You will be made willing to receive the Lord Jesus, and your great desire will be that He will receive you at last. But that is what faith does. “He was in the world, and the world was made by Him, and the world knew Him not. He came unto His own, and His own received Him not. *But* as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name.” And John goes on to show the secret, the reason: “Which were born” – that is why they receive Him – “which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.”

“And a certain woman named Martha received Him into her house.” If you receive the Lord Jesus into your heart, then you will receive Him into your house. And there will be a gracious effect there. He will be a welcome visitor there. The dear Lord Jesus was always welcome at Bethany.

“And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus’ feet, and heard His word.” That is the most blessed place on earth. Now

Martha was not there, and you and I are not always there, are we? But Martha knew that one thing was needful just as much as Mary. Martha *received* the Lord Jesus, but Mary was at Jesus' feet, and Martha was not. Well, let me appeal to your own experience. You can look back to times in the past when you sat at Jesus' feet, and you can look back to other times when you did not sit at Jesus' feet. Now we are not always there. This is the place of humility. You know, we need to be brought low, and we need to be kept low, because that self inside us (and I would not speak inadvisedly) is like those jack-in-the-boxes that children have; you can push them down a thousand times, and they will still jump up. I would not speak lightly or irreverently, but we need the Lord to put us down and keep us down, because self will be something and we like to be well-thought-of.

“At Jesus' feet.” Every time we read of Mary, in joy or sorrow, it is at Jesus' feet. “Yea, He loved the people; all His saints are in Thy hand: and they sat down at Thy feet; every one shall receive of Thy words.” O to be amongst them! The place of humility, the place of nearness. We do not always live near to the Saviour, do we? Our hymnwriter says, “Nearer, nearer, to Him clinging, let my helpless soul be found.” We do not always live near to the Saviour. Sometimes, like the prodigal, we go off into a far country. O that place of nearness! “A people nigh unto Him.” We want to be “made nigh by the blood of Christ.”

“At Jesus' feet.” It was the place of love. She experienced the Saviour's love and she loved Him in return.

“O that I might for ever sit
Like Mary at the Master's feet;
Be this my happy choice.”

The place of love.

“At Jesus' feet.” It is the place of repentance. You cannot be so near this holy, holy, holy Saviour and not realise your vileness and guilt.

“Love and grief my soul dividing,
With my tears His feet I'll bathe.”

“At Jesus' feet.” It is the place where we listen to His voice. It is the place where we learn as disciples; it is the place where we are taught. And it is the place where we shall be chastened. We do not hear so much

about chastening today, and we do not see many with that humble, chastened spirit, do we? O but at Jesus' feet, that place of chastening!

“At Jesus' feet.” It is the most sacred place, the most blessed place on earth, and Mary was there, and Martha was not. I wonder how many of us are there – or is it how few of us are there? Or have we ever been there? Or do we want to be there? You see, this is real religion, isn't it? John Berridge says,

“When I can sit at Jesus' feet,
And He anoints my head.”

“But Martha” – one of those solemn, awful *but*s of Scripture. “But Martha was cumbered about much serving.” Do you find this speaks to your heart, perhaps a loving reproof, perhaps a gentle condemnation: “cumbered about much serving”? And as we have it later on, “careful and troubled about many things.” O the things which draw us away from the Saviour, which draw us away from His feet, which intervene, which have a deadening effect. You do not need to go into the ways of pleasure, sin and wickedness to get this deadening effect. It comes easily enough, doesn't it? When you are about your daily tasks, your daily duty, during the week, coming in contact with the world, coming into contact with earthly things, let me appeal to you, do you not find the contaminating effect, the deadening effect upon your spirit?

I want to linger on this point for a moment. I want to take you right back to the red heifer burnt with ashes in the wilderness. You say, What has that to do with Mary and Martha? Now listen. That red heifer, without blemish, upon whom no yoke had ever come, was slain, and burnt, and its ashes kept. If a person had come into contact with uncleanness, if he had touched a dead body, if he had stumbled across a grave, he was contaminated, ceremonially unclean, rendered unfit for worship. And you and I are continually coming into contact with dead things, and they defile and contaminate and unfit us for worship. But the Lord in love and mercy made this provision. If a person were defiled, he went to the priest and confessed it to the priest, and the priest was to take some of these ashes and mingle them with spring water and sprinkle them on the person, and that took away the defilement and rendered him ceremoniously clean. That was the provision under the law.

What about under the gospel? Well, we have this same need – continually defiled, continually contaminated, meeting with these things that have a deadening effect upon our spirit. Now this is the gospel: “If the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh” now this is it – “How much more shall the blood of Christ, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” That is what the Marthas need. You feel the contaminating, deadening effects of everyday things. And you need what is signified by the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer:

“Let the water and the blood,
From Thy riven side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure,
Cleanse me from its guilt and power.”

To be set free from the deadening effect and the contamination and the defilement, the unfitness for worship.

“But Martha was cumbered about much serving.” Now the point I want to emphasise is this: Martha was not doing anything bad; Martha was not doing anything wrong; Martha was doing something excellent; Martha was seeking to serve the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Well, what was wrong? It is this: beware of anything, however good, however lawful, which comes between you and the Saviour. Beware of anything, however good, however lawful, that separates you in spirit from the Saviour. You say, What could be better than Martha being so concerned for the welfare of the Lord Jesus Christ? Well, “one thing is needful,” and at this moment Mary painfully felt that she needed the Saviour. Martha was trying to do something for Him. You could almost say there was a bit of legality in dear Martha. “Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus.” “But Martha was cumbered about much serving.” Watch those seasons when you have not got much time to pray, much time to read the Word of God. All these things you are doing are excellent things, but are they impeding you, hindering you in the heavenly race?

“But Martha was cumbered about much serving.” More than that, she got in a wrong spirit. You will not get in a wrong spirit at Jesus’ feet. Mary was not in a wrong spirit. We do need to pray to be saved from a wrong spirit. We need to pray that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ will be with our spirit. Mary was right here, and Martha was wrong, but

Martha did not think so; Martha did not realise it. She was sitting in judgment on her sister, Mary. She even went as far as to complain about her own sister to the Lord Jesus. She even requested the Lord Jesus to rebuke her sister. It was Martha who was in a wrong spirit, and she was sitting in judgment on this dear, godly sister who was sitting at the Saviour's feet. If you sit at the Saviour's feet, people will misunderstand you and people will condemn you, but the Lord Jesus will not condemn you.

“Martha ... came to Him, and said, Lord, dost Thou not care?” What a terrible thing that was! “Lord, dost Thou not care?” – to suggest that the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ did not care! We need to watch our spirits when we say things like that, or think things like that, or imagine things like that, that the Lord Jesus does not care. I wonder if Martha really knew what she was saying. “Dost Thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me.” And dear Martha received a solemn shock. The Lord Jesus did not rebuke her sister; the Lord Jesus rebuked her. Beloved friends, sometimes, oftentimes, it is you, it is me, who need the rebuke, not this other person. I need the rebuke, not this other one I think the Lord should rebuke.

“And Jesus answered.” What a loving, tender, gracious rebuke it was! “Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: but one thing is needful.” Let us be clear, the many things Martha was careful and troubled about were good things; they were excellent things. The many things Martha was careful and troubled about were religious things, godly things, serving the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. But they were coming between herself and the Saviour. She was not sitting at the Saviour's feet. Beware even of religious things that keep you away from the Saviour's feet. Beware of anything that keeps you away from the Saviour's feet. “Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things.”

Do not forget when the Lord Jesus spoke that solemn parable of the sower, one kind of ground was that which had the thorns, briars and brambles which strangled the growth. The Lord Jesus opened up what they were. He said two or three things, but this: the cares of this life. We shall always have the cares of this life all our journey through. Sometimes especially there will be the cares of this life: the cares of your home and

the cares of your family, the cares of your finances, the cares of your business, the cares of the church of God. O but beware of being swallowed up with these cares. They will choke the growth. Mercifully the Lord Jesus prescribes a remedy, but unbelief never yet used it and never will. It is this (O may you and I this evening walk it out): “Casting all your care upon Him; for He careth for you.” Now that is the remedy.

“‘Cast,’ He said, ‘on Me thy care;
'Tis enough that I am nigh;
I will all thy burdens bear;
I will all thy needs supply.’”

Cast all your care upon Him, spiritual and providential, family, church of God, business, finances, everything. Cast all your care upon Him. And may you have that sweet witness: “For He careth for you.”

I rather think one new year’s day, before I came to Bethel, I preached from just those four words: “He careth for you.” What a blessed word for the beginning of the new year; what a blessed word at any time! “He” – this almighty, loving, tender, gracious Saviour – “He careth for you.”

“Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: but one thing is needful.” Martha knew it, but she was not at the time walking it out. And you and I know it really, don’t we? One thing, only one thing really matters, but we are not always walking it out, not really in the experience of it. All these things which are bothering us tonight, what will they matter in one hundred years’ time? We shall either be in hell or in heaven. “One thing is needful.” May it be well engraven on our heart.

“And Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.”