

*Choosing The Best*  
*By Jason Huff*  
*Proverbs 8:1-11, Philippians 4:4-9, Luke 10:38-42*

Today's third Scripture reading is from the gospel of Luke 10:38-42. Listen now to God's Word. "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."

Distraction. Worry. Anxiety. Depression. It's the American way! According to a USA Today survey taken in 2001, two thirds of Americans often feel stressed. 60% think that their time is crunched, and over half feel significant pressure to succeed and feel overwhelmed in their daily lives. This was before 9/11, before the Iraq war, and before the auto failures and bank bailouts of recent memory. We live in a time that is incredibly nerve-racking! It's all around us, everyday; we can't escape it. This is the natural course of our lives, and the only way we can live without worry and anxiety is to decide for ourselves to intentionally avoid them.

But the church can be just as big a source of anxiety for people as anything in our work lives or social lives! In the last few weeks, we've heard how Jesus sent His followers out to proclaim the Kingdom of God. Last week, we studied how to follow in the steps of the Good Samaritan on how to be a good neighbor. The things we have learned together are good and true and biblical. But somehow, the more we try to practice them, the harder it seems to do them! That can lead to one of the worst kinds of stress – God anxiety. Have I done enough to please God? Is God angry with me because I didn't share my faith with someone new this week? Did I make a mistake not stopping to help that guy with the flat tire last night? Granted, I don't know how to fix a flat tire and I don't have a tire jack and so I'd probably get under there and get run over with my legs hanging out the side 'cause I'm so clueless, but does God hate me for not trying? That kind of performance anxiety can make us so crazy with worry that we leave the church altogether, because we just can't handle the pressure.

As it turns out, stress is nothing new to our modern era and no stranger to those who want to follow and serve Jesus. As our passage shows, it's incredibly easy for us to get wrapped up in worry – but there is a solution. That solution may be painful for us at times, but it's a solution that will truly bring us lasting peace and help us be far more effective in the work that Jesus has called us to do. We're going to learn that solution today.

As the passage starts, we meet Mary and Martha. The gospel of John lets us know that these two are the sisters of Jesus' good friend Lazarus. In all the four gospels say about them, it seems that Martha was the outgoing one and Mary was much more a homebody. That's what we see here as Martha is the one who actively invites Jesus to stay in their home during his travels. She's the "doer" in her family; she makes the plans and carries them out. She's a type-A personality who is going to have order and civility and hospitality. All good things.

But to have someone like Jesus and his disciples in town was no small thing. In that day, the village would need to be invited to hear the man of God who'd come to town – anything less would have been an insult. Meals would have to be prepared, perhaps lodging for Jesus' companions...it would have been a lot of work. But these forms of hospitality were also expected from the women in the home; they were the ones who in Jesus' day would have done the tasks necessary so that the men had time to focus on spiritual things. This was very much a cultural expectation that Martha readily accepted.

So when Mary sits at Jesus' feet and listens to him teach, Martha is beside herself. She's already going crazy trying to make sure everything's prepared for Jesus. She wants to serve Him! So much to do, mind going every which way, and now Mary's sitting listening to Jesus. What is she doing? That's something men do, not women! Can she do that? And even if she can, she shouldn't be. She should be cooking, cleaning, making sure that our guest doesn't need anything, multitask multitask multitask! If she's got to listen to Jesus, why can't she do it while she's beating the rug outside the window or getting the falafel made? I'm so busy, I'm so rushed, I don't know if I can do it all, I should have been more forceful with Mary, I should be making the bread, did I invite cousin Mordechai? I've got so much to do! And all of a sudden, it's not about Jesus any more. All of Martha's thoughts are on herself. And when she goes to Jesus in a huff – yes, I know how to take my own name in vain – she shows it. “Lord, don't you care that my sister has left *me* to do the work by *myself*? Tell her to help *me*!”

Jesus sees right through it. He isn't mad at Martha. But He also knows that she needs a bit of redirection. She needs to realize that Mary has chosen the best thing she could possibly do, to sit and listen at the feet of the Son of God. So he talks to her in a gentle way, repeating her name twice, Martha, Martha. He tells her exactly what her problem is...it's not her faithful service to Him. It's that she's worried and upset, not just about His visit but many things. Her life is a giant ball of stress. But Jesus says there's only one thing necessary. And that's spending time with the One who made Himself a guest of saints and sinners alike and learning from Him. Jesus isn't going to stop Mary from doing just that. It might be countercultural, it might surprise His listeners, but Jesus doesn't care. Each and every one of us has the privilege to sit at His feet and learn from Him.

It shows us just how important it is for us to be in communion and fellowship with our Lord Jesus Christ. For us now, to sit in the place of Mary, we need to meditate, or think carefully about, the Word of God we have in Scripture and learn from it. When Job made his case before the Lord after suffering greatly, he said, “I have not departed from the command of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food.” (Job 23:12) Deuteronomy 8:3 was taught the people of Israel, and it says, “He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.” Jesus echoed this in Luke 4:4 when He was tempted by the devil. Martha was the one cooking the bread, making the meal, which is important...but it's not the one thing we must have. We must have the Word of God in our minds and on our hearts, drawing us closer to God, bringing us nearer to Him. Because it's when we are at peace with God and know that He has saved us from sin and cleaned up our unrighteousness that we can serve with a grateful heart and not be worried. We can do the things God asks because we'll be empowered by His Word.

It's a spiritual rest that gives you the ability to keep moving in God's direction. It's kind of like what I've been reading recently about napping. Now I've got to tell you...I love naps. Middle of the day, a little after lunch, been reading some deep books on theology, in the comfy chair in my office...and boom, 25 minutes disappear. It's a good thing nobody's caught me yet; my picture would probably be plastered all over the bulletin boards in the fellowship hall. Tell you what...if you can ever get a picture of me napping in my office, then I have the right to take a picture of you from up here during the sermon and we'll all be even! But what I've found is that hundreds of studies have shown that taking a short nap in the afternoon actually makes you more productive. That half-hour of non-activity actually makes the rest of your workday so productive and creative that it doesn't just even out – you get 37% more done, on average! Now this might not be the best time in the world to tell your boss that you want a nap break each day, but that rest during the day is a natural part of our rhythm. Apparently, other research has shown that every animal on earth naps. It's the way God made us, to rejuvenate us. In the same way, God wants us to come to Him through reading His Word and having conversation with Him in prayer. He wants to give us rest through these things.

Now we don't usually think of reading the Bible as easy; we think of it as hard work, and it *is* hard work. Parts of it take time to read and don't make much sense without further study. And if that wasn't bad enough, prayer stumps us because we don't know what to say, and when we do pray, we often get stuck on our own needs and we get worried all over again. Next week, we'll be talking about the Lord's Prayer and what Jesus told us to say, so we'll solve that problem soon enough. But remember that while your active mind shuts down for a bit during a nap, lots of different parts of your body and your subconscious mind are wide awake working to get you ready for the rest of your day. The rest that we find by sitting at Jesus' feet is not one where we do nothing; it's one where God gives us peace and stillness and calmness as we read and as we pray. We get that serenity from knowing that we, as Christians, have been called His children. He gives us the peace of knowing that through faith and repentance, salvation is ours! Nothing can harm us! We don't need to fear what other people think or say or do! God has become the very air we breathe and the food we eat and the living water we drink! We can rest in that and be rejuvenated to do God's work!

So why don't we choose the best like Mary does? What keeps us working in the kitchen rather than stopping for a while and listening at Jesus' feet? It's fear. While we keep working away, even if we don't get anything really accomplished, nobody can say we weren't doing anything. We've got to look busy! Because inside we're afraid that God really is going to judge us on how much we achieve and that somehow we've got to measure up. But God's love isn't based in achievement. God doesn't care how many brownies you bake or Sunday school classes you lead. God loves you because your sins have been wiped away by His Son's death on the cross, and when you turn to Him in repentance, He loves you as His own son or daughter. Think about it this way. Let's take a couple people here today...Ed and Dave. I could work for them...I could fix their roof and take out their garbage and mow their lawns and go do whatever jobs they have to do, and yet I could never earn my way into becoming their sons. Can't happen. They could adopt me, I guess, but nobody could make them do it, and working for either one of them round the clock can't force them to do it. But God wants to adopt us, and He doesn't require work. When God has tasks for us to do, we don't do them out of obligation. We do them to say, "Thanks, Dad, for giving me new life."

But getting close to God also means risk. Because when you read the Bible, you find out that you're not a very good person. You find out that every good thing you do, your own righteousness, is called filthy rags in the sight of God. Not your worst things, not your most horrid sins, but your own righteousness! It's because all the things that we do apart from God, no matter how good they may seem, are still tainted with our own sin. You find out that God will judge sin, and that without faith in His Son, you will be judged and condemned. Reading the Word of God is painful! Hebrews 4:12 says that "the word of God is living and active. It's sharper than any double-edged sword, and it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." It's so sharp that just touching it just the slightest bit will give you a fierce cut. You read the Bible for just a little bit and you'll realize that it cuts to the heart; it makes your heart hurt because it shows you your sin and brokenness. It's not easy to sit at Jesus' feet and hear your real self exposed for what it is, full of sin and darkness. But the Bible also helps us experience God's love and forgiveness and mercy. It helps us realize that Christ died on the cross so that we might have life, that we might not have to live with the weight of fear and regret and worry and judgment on us. We can live lives of thanksgiving! Because once the truth is out, there is nothing we cannot confess. There is nothing we need to hide. We were once sinners, but God has set us free!

Now as your pastor, I'm the one to take the lead on confessing sin. Paul the apostle said this was a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. That means I get to be the chief sinner here and the chief repenter too. You want to go tell people about Jesus and our church, you can say, "You know, yes, I'm a bad person, done bad things, but you've got to meet my pastor, he's our chief sinner!" And what I have to repent before this morning is that I haven't been resting in Jesus like I should have this first year here. When you're a first-year pastor, you're just learning the ropes. Seminary teaches you how to think about God, but not how to be a pastor. And so a lot of times in the past year, I've thought, I've got to do all these things, I've got to be at all these committees, I've got to write these sermons and plan worship and do this and do that. In the midst of it all, I didn't make enough time for God. I didn't meditate on the Bible enough and didn't find time to read a lot of godly books that would help me on the way. It was too much me and not enough God, and for that, I repent. In the coming year, with the Lord's help I will rest in Him more. And if this passage holds true, which I have no doubt it will, it will only help our church grow and mature.

And in that same theme of repentance, I encourage you to get involved with a Bible study or the membership class or something here at the church where you can feed on God's Word and rest in Him. A lot of people say, "You know, I've never been in Bible studies, I don't have the answers." Well, that's the point! I had to keep going to school because of all the stuff I didn't know! When you go to seminary, usually you think you've got faith figured out and that you can teach the professors a thing or two. You sit there for four years and you learn Hebrew and Greek at the level of a three-year-old and learn about the history of the church and all the teachers and scholars and thoughts from over 2,000 years, and just about the time you realize how little you know, they give you a Master's degree! If that's the way it works, think about how little the people with doctorates know!

It doesn't matter how much you know or how long you've been a Christian...come rest at God's feet. Learn a little. Get to know Him. And then you will have the strength to do the things God asks of us joyfully. As 1 John 5:3-4 puts it, "God's commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world." And if you're entangled with too many things in the world that take up your time and just make you nervous and worried, get untangled. Choose the best over the urgent and the godly over the merely good. Jesus invites you to get close and have a listen. As James 4:8 says, "Come near to God and he will come near to you." And just like Mary found, once you have found that deep love of God from resting in Him, it will not be taken away from you. Let's pray.