

## Significant Lessons from a Surprising Visitor

Luke 10:38-42

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**Summary:** When Jesus visited the home of two sisters, they each demonstrates faithful, but different acts of service toward Him. As theologians and Christians have read the Gospel of Luke, many criticize Martha and commend Mary for their behavior, but the truth of the matter is much more complex. The reality is both sisters exhibited faithful devotion to Jesus, and both utilized their spiritual gifts, albeit through different expressions of love. There is much to be learned from both Mary and Martha today.

I have read that on the occasion of Queen Elizabeth II visiting the United States, she brought with her just about every possible thing she would need.

She brought four thousand pounds of luggage, which included two outfits for every occasion, forty pints of plasma in case of an emergency; her own hairdresser, two valets, and a host of other staff members to attend to her.

I have read that even a brief visit of royalty to a foreign country can cost more than twenty million dollars.

Philip Yancey, [The Jesus I Never Knew](#) (Zondervan, 1995)

You can imagine all the planning and scheduling and security involved in her visit. Every place she would visit would have plenty of advance notice, speeches

would be prepared; all the VIPs would angle for the best spot in the photo shoot.

It made me wonder: what if she decided to come to your neighborhood, drive up into your driveway and knock on your front door? Would you even answer the door?

Maybe you have had a surprise—totally unexpected—visitor in the past.

Not too long ago a church member showed up one night at our front door with a dozen doughnuts. By then I was in my evening apparel: sweatpants and an old shirt. Do I answer the door? Did I mention doughnuts? Of course, I can smell them!

But imagine if royalty came visiting, if the entourage is out on your front lawn, what would you do?

What would you do if the Lord showed up at your home unexpectedly—without any advance notice—and knocked on your door? You’ve had no time to prepare.

One little kindergartener was a pretty bright kid to be so young; his Sunday school teacher was teaching them the account of Jesus visiting a home unexpectedly and she asked the children, “Now what would you do if Jesus came to your home?” A little boy raised his hand and said, “I’d put a Bible out on the coffee table.”

Smart kid.

Something like this actually happened in the record of Scripture. The unexpected visitor was not a neighbor, or the queen of England, it was the King of the Universe—the Lord Himself.



How do you prepare for an unexpected guest? Do you prioritize hospitality and cleanliness? Or is communication and quality time what matters most?

Let me show you how two sisters responded and what we can learn from them both.

We’re back in the Gospel by Luke, chapter 10 and now at verse 38.

I want to break down this surprise visit into three scenes. We’ll call the first scene:

## The Invitation

### Now verse 38:

*Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house.*

*Luke 10:38*

This phrase, “**as they went on their way**” could be translated, “As they were traveling along, Jesus entered a village.”

Luke is setting the stage here for an unannounced visit.

We’re not told if he came with His 72 disciples, or His 12 closest disciples, or if He came alone.

Charles R. Swindoll, [Insights on Luke](#) (Zondervan, 2012), p. 282

And the comment here by Luke that she welcomed Him into her house doesn’t mean the disciples had to wait out on the front lawn.

She is more than likely single, living with her single sister and their brother Lazarus, who is not mentioned in this scene. Mary seems to be the matriarch of the household.

And she is inviting in the guest of honor, someone she already knows and believes in, because she will call Him Lord here in a moment.

When she welcomes Him, she effectively welcomed the entourage that was traveling with Him.

By the way, the fact that Martha is soon frazzled indicates that she was involved with preparing for more dinner guests than just Jesus.

Now let me pause here long enough to make the comment that Martha is all-too quickly criticized for complaining to the Lord when she should be commended for welcoming the Lord.

She opened the front door, and she would have cared if the house was a mess; she would have immediately done a head count and calculated how much food she probably didn't have; but listen, she still put out the welcome mat.

When she invited the Lord into her home, her mind would have raced through a million details all at once.

Let me tell you, this is another account in the Gospel of Luke that is often misunderstood. We're so quick to criticize her for complaining that we miss the context, and we overlook her contribution and then make the wrong application.



What criticisms have you heard about Martha and how she handled this situation?

One Protestant commentator gave his interpretation of this scene by writing that Mary was the one who represented the genuine believer, so we should model her.

Does that mean genuine believers don't cook, or clean, or take care of dinner guests? They only spend time studying the Bible and praying?

Ironically enough, his interpretation happens to be the interpretation of the Roman Catholic Church, which uses this passage to try and prove that monks who enter the monasteries to pray and fast and study all day are more spiritually minded than everybody else.

It's interesting to connect this event with what happened earlier in Luke chapter 7, where Jesus had been the invited dinner guest at the home of a Pharisee. The Lord eventually rebukes him for inviting Him to his home but then not greeting Him kindly, not providing for the washing of His feet and other treatments given to dinner guests—which effectively was intended to insult the Lord.

It wasn't wrong for Martha to serve in the kitchen; after all, somebody had to do it, or no one would have eaten that night.

Bruce B. Barton, [Life Application Bible Commentary: Luke](#) (Tyndale House, 1997), p. 286

The Lord doesn't correct Martha's service as much as He corrects her spirit. Her preparation was not the problem, her priority was.

So here at the outset of this scene, don't overlook the fact that Martha's service

was based out of love for the Lord, just as much as Mary's attention to the Lord.

**Notice verse 39:**

*And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching.*

*Luke 10:39*

In these days, to sit at the feet of a respected Rabbi or teacher was the official position taken by a student or disciple.

Clinton E. Arnold, general ed: Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Volume 1 (Zondervan, 2002), p. 417

We're told in Acts 22:3 that the Apostle Paul was educated at the feet of Gamaliel, referring to an official education.

So, when you read this phrase that Mary is now **sitting at Jesus' feet**, this means that Jesus is now beginning to teach.

This isn't light conversation over the punch bowl, this is an official session of the Lord teaching; we might call it a lecture. And at this point, everyone would have sat down to listen, and Mary is among them.

Another misunderstanding in the typical treatment of this text is that Mary never helped Martha do anything at all. She was never in the kitchen to begin with.

She was just so enraptured when Jesus showed up that she sat down at His feet as soon as He walked in the door.

That's not what happened. There was some sort of transition where Jesus moved from being welcomed—no doubt having his feet washed off He would have been greeted by the household with the traditional greetings and kiss on the cheek, which Jesus also rebuked the Pharisee for not doing—and then, after all the introductions, Jesus shifted into an official teaching mode.

And we know that this transition has occurred because of Martha's complaint.

So, let's move into scene two and we'll call it:

## The Interruption

Verse 40 opens by showing us what was going on in Martha's mind and heart. For starters, notice just the opening line:

*But Martha was distracted with much serving.*

*Luke 10:40a*

Now again, people typically read this and say, "She was wrong to be so busy serving the Lord."

Really? In that case, many of us are in deep trouble.

The truth is, the Lord commends us for serving. In fact, He created us to serve Him with good works (**Ephesians 2:10**). The Apostle Paul told Titus to teach the believers to be eagerly devoted to doing good deeds (**Titus 3:8**). In **Romans 12:13**, the believers are commanded to "practice hospitality."

That's what she's doing. Again, the problem wasn't Martha's action, the problem was her distraction.

The word Luke uses here for Martha being **distracted** literally means to be dragged away, to be pulled along mentally and emotionally.

Swindoll, p. 283

Martha's actions weren't wrong; her attitude was.

Up to this point, Mary has been helping Martha with all the immediate needs of hospitality. If she was cooking a traditional meal, it would have involved several hours of hard work.

Grain would have to be ground to bake bread; meat would have to be boiled and vegetables would need to be cleaned and cut and then added to a stew for a traditional evening meal in the days of the Lord.

Edwin M. Yamauchi & Marvin R. Wilson, *Dictionary of Daily Life in Biblical & Post-Biblical Antiquity* (Hendrickson, 2017), p. 719

And somewhere between chopping the cabbage and cleaning the carrots, Martha became aware that Mary has disappeared.

Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *The Great Physician* (Fleming H. Revell Company, 1937), p. 226

She goes looking for her and then she spots her, of all places, sitting down. Listening to Jesus.

Well, that's just too much. She literally walks over and interrupts the Lord's lecture; she just stops everything here in **verse 40:**

*And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me."*

*Luke 10:40b*

*She was working with me and then left me to take care of all of this by myself; tell her to come back and help me.*

Now here's a very important element to this context that will help us understand this better: Bible scholars point out that this event is taking place during the Jewish Festival of Booths or just prior to it.

This was an annual time when everything was simplified.

The faithful Jews would build little lean-tos out in their courtyards where they would spend their evenings reflecting on God's amazing deliverance from Egypt and His provision for them when they lived out in the open.

This was not the time for a traditional meal; this was, as one author wrote, the time for a sandwich.

But Martha is driven by her nature and her temperament and what we would call "her wiring" to put on a feast; she loves doing that for others. This is evidently what she does to show how much she cares; she just can't throttle it back to a sandwich. She thinks, *my dinner guest is the Lord of the universe. We're not having crackers and cheese.*

During this festival week, the typical meal was a simple serving of fruit and vegetables, things that were simply and easily and quickly prepared.

But because Martha's allowing her flesh to govern her gift, she's pressing full-steam ahead and missing this signature moment of learning at the feet of the One who had come to finally and fully deliver them.



In what ways can you sympathize with Martha in her reaction to Jesus coming to her house here in this text?

But there's another problem buried in Martha's complaint that surfaces in our own lives to this day.

She says, "Lord" — **verse 40 again** — "tell her (Mary) to help me."

In other words, shoo her back into the kitchen.

David E. Garland, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke* (Zondervan, 2011), p. 453

*What she's doing is not as important as what I'm doing; you need to make her serve You like I am; Lord, you need to make her see the need like I do; Lord, she needs to think like I do.*

Earlier in this chapter we saw the Lord telling his disciples to pray for laborers to join them in the field; but we need to be careful here that when we're asking the

Lord for others to help us, we're not complaining, in reality, that the Lord needs to get people to think like we think and see the need like we see it.

Whatever and wherever that is in the world that you're passionate about serving, "Lord why don't other people see it like I see it? Why don't they see the need like I see it and serve like I serve?"

We are effectively complaining to the Lord, with the spirit of Martha, that He isn't making our brothers and sisters think like us and serve like us and see the need like us.

Instead, the Lord has created us uniquely—Warren Wiersbe writes in his commentary on this text—with personalities and gifts, given to the church for service.

Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Compassionate: Luke 1-13* (Victor Books, 1988), p. 118

I have often described to my church membership class the operation of spiritual gifts and how different they are because of how different God made us and how we all make different contributions as a result.

As the apostle Peter wrote in ***1 Peter 4:10: "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied (literally, multifaceted) grace."***

We see things differently because God made us that way and He then moves us into multifaceted service that He prepared for us to accomplish.

I've used the illustration of imagining we're all gathered in a nearby restaurant for soup and salad after church. We're all over there in line and then a lady with her bowl of soup stumbles into a chair and falls down; soup is spilled all over her as she sits there on the floor.

The person with the gift of mercy would immediately go over and sit down with her and wipe off the soup and tell her, "I'm so sorry this happened to you, I'll stay here with you until you're ready to get up."

The person with the gift of administration will ignore the woman while standing there thinking how the chairs need to be set up next time to make it less likely someone will fall.

The person with the gift of teaching will say, "Now everyone listen up, there are three reasons why she spilled her soup and I want you to write them all down."

The person with the gift of giving is standing there waiting to give this woman their bowl of soup.

The person with the gift of helping isn't even around, and that's because they've gone looking for a mop and a bucket so they can clean it all up.

That's how God made them see the same event and think entirely differently about what was needed most.

But listen if their flesh governs their gift: the person with the gift of mercy will wonder why nobody else seems to care

about people; the person with the gift of giving will wonder why they never get to eat any soup; the person with the gift of teaching will be bothered that nobody is writing any of this down; and the person with the gift of helping will be complaining all the way down the hallway that they seem to be the only person who volunteers to clean up the mess.

There's a principle to learn here: our service to others and to Christ can be spoiled so quickly by a wrong spirit.

John Phillips, [Exploring Luke](#) (Kregel, 2005), p. 162

And at this moment, that's Martha.

"Lord, there's stuff to do; make Mary see what I see and respond the same way."

Now, the original construction of her complaint here implies that she's expecting a positive response from the Lord. She's anticipating the Lord saying, "Yes, I *do* care, so Mary, go back and help your sister."

Darrell L. Bock, [Luke: Volume 2](#) (Baker Academic, 1996), p. 1041

But instead, the Lord offers this in response; and this moves us into scene three—we'll call it:

## The Instruction

### **Verse 41:**

*But the Lord answered her,  
"Martha, Martha, you are  
anxious and troubled about  
many things, but one thing  
is necessary."*

*Luke 10:41-42a*

**One thing is necessary**; one thing matters more than many things.

Now follow this: Martha's problem was focusing on something that didn't matter **as much as** something else.

He's not telling her, "Look, everything that you have been doing doesn't matter"; no, He's effectively saying, "Everything that you've been doing is now distracting you from something else you ought to be doing at the moment."

There's a balance in working and worshipping.

This isn't a problem with her activity, this has become a problem with her priority.

Beloved, there will always be a thousand responsibilities that try to pull you away from one relationship.

Martha demonstrated that here.

Martha's preparations for their gathering overshadowed the purpose for their gathering.

It wasn't just about the meal she was cooking—as helpful as that was and they are going to enjoy it—it was about the meal Jesus was delivering, at that moment, through His words.

Although embarrassing to her, no doubt, that the Gospel of Luke has included this scene, it's included because the Lord knows we have the same tug-of-war within our own hearts and minds.

It's a tug-of-war, one author wrote, "between sitting with Christ and serving Christ."

Balancing responsibilities with that relationship.

Being occupied *for* Christ and never being occupied *with* Christ.

J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ* (Zondervan Academic, 1981), p. 303

**Notice what Jesus says next in verse 42:**

*"Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."*

*Luke 10:42b*

It's interesting that Jesus does a play on words here; the word for portion is the same word used for a portion of food (Septuagint: Genesis 43:34; Deuteronomy 18:8).

Garland, p. 454

Martha, you need to know that while you were focused on our meal, Mary was focused on a meal as well. And the food that I'm providing will sustain you in life; it will last forever.

We're not told what happened next, but we have every reason to believe that Martha was moved by the tender instruction and invitation from the Lord, and she sat down next to her sister and received this meal—the Word—from her Lord.

Did she learn to serve Him with gladness? Did she learn from this moment to serve

Him without expecting others to do the same in the same way?

We have a clue that she did.

In fact, the last time Jesus visits their home, John's Gospel records that Jesus shows up and His 12 disciples are with Him; Lazarus has joined his two sisters this time.



How should we balance working for Jesus and communing with Jesus? What is the proper relationship between those two things?

So, all 16 dinner guests are packed in there for supper.

**John writes:**

*So, they gave a dinner for him there. ... Martha served. ... Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment ... and anointed the feet of Jesus.*

*John 12:2-3a*

Martha was still Martha and Mary was still Mary.

Different, unique, both lovingly served, making gracious contributions to the life and ministry of the Lord.

And in this text, Martha gave not one word of complaint.

When work and worship are balanced, a joyful spirit will be the result. We will serve Him with gladness (Psalm 100:2) in the way He created you, with the gifts He's given you, for the needs you see and want to solve.

Serve Him with gladness.

Charles Wesley, the hymnwriter, penned some lines of poetry, taken from this scene here where Wesley called for balance, adopting the best of both Mary and Martha's service. He writes:

*Faithful to my Lord's  
commands,*

*I will choose the better  
part—*

*Serve with Martha's hands,*

*And listen with Mary's  
heart.*

Adapted from Wiersbe, p. 118

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