

*Are You a “Mary” or a “Martha?”*

Luke 10:38-42

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Prayer of Illumination: *God of Wisdom, still our hearts and quiet our distractions. By your Spirit, help us hear your Word, and give us courage to respond. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*

Many of us, if not all, have heard the story of Mary and Martha—two sisters who open their home to Jesus, offering the customary hospitality. But the story has stirred up arguments over the years, as it seems to pit the two against each other on women's roles in the church.

Before diving into the story, let me ask you: Are you a “Mary” or a “Martha?” Who do you identify with?

So here's what happened in this story that has fueled so much divisiveness and resentment. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem when he stops in a village where Mary and Martha live. Martha welcomes him into her home and immediately gets to work, preparing the best meal she can. As a Palestinian Jew, Martha is anxious to ensure that her honored guests—Jesus and the disciples—feel welcome, feeding them well. In first-century Palestinian culture, hospitality was everything. Martha is doing precisely what was expected.

But Mary does something unexpected. Instead of helping in the kitchen, she sits at Jesus' feet and listens like a student would sit before a teacher. In that time and place, this was unusual. Women were expected to help with the meal, not join in theological discussion.

Eventually, Martha has had enough. Overwhelmed by the workload, she's frustrated that Mary isn't helping. She's going through what we might now call *an invisible mental and emotional overload*—the unseen cognitive and emotional toll of managing daily life, relationships, and responsibilities. It's the constant thinking through the details and taking care of the logistics to make sure everything runs smoothly, and everyone's needs are met. Every community, including churches, usually has someone who keeps everything running smoothly. But it can lead to stress, anxiety, and burnout.

Women are much more likely to experience mental and emotional overload.

In our story, Martha, who's clearly reached her breaking point, speaks up. But instead of confronting Mary, she turns to Jesus, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

Poor Jesus—he seems caught in a sibling rivalry. We can almost hear him rebuking Martha: "Why are you asking me? Talk to Mary directly and stop triangulating me into this." Jesus isn't always a good guest. But Jesus has a point. As a guest, he shouldn't be responsible for settling their household dispute. Why is Martha putting the issue of hospitality on him?

Jesus ultimately tells Martha that Mary has chosen the better part. However, Jesus' actions also bring up a point of tension. Why is Jesus, who has just told the parable of the Good Samaritan, which talks about meeting physical needs and serving others, now saying that sitting at his feet is better than serving him? Does he think the contemplative practices of Christianity (prayer and study) are better than the active practices (hospitality and service)? Should we think that, too?

Some interpreters wrongly pit Mary against Martha, as if the text praises Mary's contemplative faith while dismissing Martha's active service. But this is misleading. Luke's Gospel often honors those who serve Jesus. The Greek word used for Martha's work is *diakonia*—from which we get the English word "deacon." Throughout the New Testament, *diakonia* is typically translated as "ministry." It's no surprise that John Calvin rejected the notion that contemplation is superior to service. Likewise, many feminist scholars challenge the idea that Martha's embrace of traditional roles reflects spiritual failure. In contrast, Mary's pursuit of learning, a man's role, is seen as success.<sup>1</sup>

Pitting Mary against Martha poses a false and unhelpful binary. It reinforces traditional gender roles and stereotypes, writes Presbyterian minister Stephanie Sorge. Instead, the story about Mary and Martha, she says, "can

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<sup>1</sup> See Matthew L. Skinner, "Exegetical Perspective: Luke 10:38-42," in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 3: Pentecost and Season after Pentecost*, (Louisville: WJK Press, 2010), 263.

be a call to ministry beyond gender roles, inviting balance, love, and deeper faith.”<sup>2</sup>

Still others say it’s a critique of “busy-work Christianity”—the idea that Martha is so caught up in chores or “in many things” as Jesus puts it (v. 41b) that she misses the deeper spiritual moment.<sup>3</sup> They think Martha represents religious people who are constantly organizing events, baking pies for church fellowships, or running meetings—always busy with church life, but lacking deep devotion. They say Jesus, therefore, says to Martha, “Stop being so busily religious and start being more spiritual.

This interpretation fits today’s preference for being “spiritual but not religious.” We hear many people today say, “You know, I’m not into organized religion. I don’t believe in institutional Christianity. That’s just playing church.”

While we can understand those sentiments, they seem lacking in depth. True, the institutional church can be corrupt. Organized religion may have hijacked Jesus’ teachings, but as Thomas Long explains, that doesn’t take away from the fact that the Christian faith is not just an inner feeling or abstract belief—it is embodied. God’s love took flesh in Jesus, who taught, healed, touched, ate, suffered, and rose again. Jesus shows that God is present in the physical and messy details of life.<sup>4</sup>

Long has a point, for as the Gospel of John declares, “God so loved the world” (John 3:16). God cares for the material and the mundane, not just the heavenly or spiritual.

Martha was not being hospitable in the abstract. Her hospitality wasn’t trivial. Authentic hospitality means someone has to boil water, cut vegetables, slice onions, and set the table. Her work was **sacred**, too.

But back to the question: Why does Jesus praise Mary and defend her against Martha? Martha’s core issue wasn’t her actions themselves. Her problem is that she is **distracted** by many tasks while serving. This is

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<sup>2</sup> Stephanie Sorge, Looking into the Lectionary: Luke 10:38-42, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, July 20, 2025.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas G. Long, “Mary and Martha,” *Day1 Weekly Program*, July 22, 2007, [https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002664/mary\\_and\\_martha](https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002664/mary_and_martha)

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

evident when Jesus rebukes her, stating, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things."

New Testament scholar Matt Skinner notes that the Greek verb translated as "distracted" signifies being drawn away or diverted. Martha's criticism of Mary, and subtly of Jesus, reveals her judgment of their differing activities. This suggests her practice of hospitality is overshadowing its true purpose. As Skinner indicates, "anxious and troubled" hospitality (v. 4) loses its focus. This aligns with Jesus' warnings against worry in the Sermon on the Mount, where he warns against worrying, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing."

Jesus does not contrast Mary's listening with Martha's serving. Instead, Jesus praises Mary's singular devotion to him. True Christian discipleship, whether contemplative or active, requires focusing on Jesus or God as the sole object of devotion. Martha's issue is a **misplaced focus**, as her service deviates from its rightful object. On the other hand, Mary prioritizes God above all else—a choice that endures.

But let's not be too harsh on Martha. As we have pointed out, Jesus doesn't pit the two sisters against each other. The two women embody different aspects of Christian discipleship.

There's a well-known legend about Martha of Bethany that became popular in the Middle Ages. After Jesus' resurrection, Martha becomes a traveling preacher and eventually arrives in a small town in France. But this town has a big problem—a dragon called *Tarasque*—has been terrorizing the people.

Martha fights the dragon, defeats it, and in doing so, converts the whole town to Christianity.

According to the same story, her sister Mary is with her on the journey. While Martha faces the dragon, Mary chooses a quiet life in the wilderness, where she starts a monastery.

The point of the legend is that both sisters live out the roles assigned to them in Christian tradition: Martha *acts* and Mary *studies*. Martha represents an active, service-oriented faith; Mary, a contemplative faith.

As Jesus' followers, we both serve God and listen to God's word. Sometimes we "slay dragons"—tackling challenges; at other times we "start monasteries," engaging in quieter, more contemplative work. Our faith involves two interconnected aspects: **listening** to God and **serving** God in the world. Sundays offer a time for worship, where we hear the Spirit through Scripture, music, sermons, prayer, and meditation. We seek God's guidance, correction, challenge, hope, and encouragement. We then carry this renewed faith into the week, living as witnesses to God's redeeming love and justice for all. This active service, however, must stem from a divine vision. Without this, service can become draining, leading to worry, distraction, anger, or frustration, much like Martha's experience. Therefore, both **contemplative** and **active** forms of faith are essential; they are not separate.

In his book, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, Thomas Long tells the story of Grace Thomas. Grace was the daughter of a streetcar conductor in Birmingham, Alabama. But when she married in the late 1930s, she moved to Atlanta and worked as a clerk in a state government office. Through her work, she developed an interest in law and politics. Although already a full-time mother and a full-time clerk, she enrolled in night law school and earned her law degree after years of part-time study.

Her family wondered what she would do with her law degree. They were shocked when she announced that she would run for governor in the 1954 election. There were nine candidates for governor that year, eight men and Grace, but there was only one issue. In the famous *Brown v. the Board of Education* case earlier that year, the Supreme Court declared racially "separate but equal" schools unconstitutional, thus paving the way for the integration of the public schools. Eight of the gubernatorial candidates spoke out angrily against the court's decision. Only Grace thought the decision was fair and just and should be welcomed. Her campaign slogan was **Say Grace at the Polls**. Not many did; she ran dead last, and her family was relieved that she had gotten this out of her system.

Well, she had not. Eight years later, in 1962, she ran for governor again. By then, the civil rights movement was gaining momentum, and her message of racial harmony was hotly controversial. She received death threats, and her family traveled with her to provide protection. She finished last again, but her campaign testified to goodwill and racial tolerance.

One day, Grace made a campaign stop in the small town of Louisville, Georgia. In those days, the centerpiece of the town square in Louisville was not a courthouse or a war memorial but an old slave market. Grace chose the slave market as the site for her campaign speech, and as she stood on the very spot where slaves had been auctioned, a hostile crowd of storekeepers and farmers gathered to hear what she would say.

“The old has passed away,” she began, “and the new has come. This place,” she said, gesturing to the market, “represents all about our past over which we must repent. A new day is here, a day when Georgian white and black can join hands to work together.”

This was provocative talk in Georgia in 1962, and the crowd stirred. “Are you a communist?” someone shouted at her.

Grace paused in midsentence. “No,” she said softly. “I am not.”

“Well, then,” continued the heckler, “where’d you get those damned ideas?”

Grace thought for a minute, and then she pointed to the steeple of a nearby church. “I got them over there,” she said, “**in Sunday school.**”<sup>5</sup>

Grace Thomas had spent time listening to the Word of God. What she heard changed her life and launched her on a specific mission.

The reductive question I asked earlier, “Are you a 'Mary' or a 'Martha?’” presents a false choice. There’s no division in how we live our faith. As Jesus’s followers, we are to minister through **word and service**. It’s a dynamic interplay of **listening and action, being and doing**. The Christian faith is both active and contemplative. May this be true for us. **Amen.**

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Preaching From Memory to Hope* (Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 2009), 19-20.

