

## **“Contemplation vs. Action”**

July 20, 2025

First Christian Church

Scripture Text: Luke 10: 38-42 (25-37)

While on His way to Jerusalem with some of His disciples, Jesus is welcomed into the home of a woman named Martha. While Martha is busy fixing dinner and being a gracious host, her sister Mary is sitting with the men, listening at the feet of Jesus. Of course, that was not a woman's place. Mary was supposed to be in the kitchen helping Martha, and when Martha asked Jesus to nudge Mary her way, Jesus manages to offend all the hard-working people of the world with the statement, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, but few things are needed—indeed only one. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

This story has traditionally been used to separate people in general, but more specifically women, into two categories: Marthas who are active doers, and Marys who are contemplative be-ers. And in this story, Jesus looks at the Marys of the world and says you have chosen the better part. When it comes to Jesus, God in our midst, the best possible thing you can do is sit and breath in every drop of wisdom and beauty. There is nothing better than to just be in God's presence and soak up as much holy as you can. Call it learning. Call it worship. Call prayer. Call it the contemplative life. Call it whatever you like, but don't miss the opportunity.

That is what this story is all about. But before anyone gets too puffed up because they are doing it right or offended that Jesus got it wrong, I want to call you back to your Bible. Let me read to you the passage that comes just before this one. I am still in Luke 10, starting in verse 25.

An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself.” And He said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

But wanting to vindicate himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and took off, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him, and

when I come back I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

The passage starts with a very learned person. He asks Jesus what must he do to inherit eternal life, and when Jesus turned the question back at him by asking “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” he gives the right answer. He shares what we call the great commandment. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself.” The guy knows what he is talking about. He has spent time in the Scriptures. He has put forth the effort in study and prayer. He has sat at the feet of Moses and prophets and absorbed their wisdom and beauty. But he wants more knowledge, so he asks for clarification. “Who is my neighbor?” Help me better define that. So Jesus tells him the parable of the Good Samaritan in which a priest and a Levite, people whose lives are defined by contemplation, study of the Scriptures, worship and prayer, walk by the injured man. And a Samaritan, who everyone knew to have incorrect knowledge, a misunderstanding of both Scripture and sacred tradition, and didn’t even know the right place to go to worship God; stops and helps the injured man. And to the learned man’s question “what must I do to inherit eternal life”, Jesus points to the ignorant man who stopped and helped and served, and says, “Go and do likewise.”

Now what I want us to notice is, these two stories – the good Samaritan plus Mary and Martha – are told back to back, but have exactly opposite messages. To the lawyer who spent his life studying and had already put together the Great Commandment before Jesus told him, Jesus says go and do. Get out of the study, stop thinking salvation will be found in more knowledge. It has to be lived out in serving others. Knowledge without action does not lead to eternal life. Then to Martha who is working so hard serving other people that she is missing the opportunity to sit in the presence of God and soak up His teaching and His presence, Jesus says stop and sit. Your service is commendable, but without the knowledge of Jesus, without the time spent with Jesus, without focus; it does not lead to eternal life.

Independently, the two stories have completely opposite commandments. One says go and do. The other says stay and be. But together, they are two stories which illustrate the great commandment. The lawyer is loving God but failing to love his neighbor. Martha is loving her neighbor, but failing to love God with her heart, soul and mind. Neither just loving God nor only loving neighbor fulfills the Great Commandment and thereby fulfills what is needed for eternal life. The answer is always both.

This needs to be true on the church level as well as the individual level, and it has always been a challenge. The Book of Acts tells the story of the Holy Spirit and the early church. The Holy Spirit came and the Church was born in chapter 2, and by chapter 6 the topic was already on

full display. Some were complaining to the disciples that the food distribution, especially among the widows, was not being done fair or well. The disciples started to address the problem and give it their attention, but the time they spent serving food took away from time spent spreading the gospel. Which was more important? Servicing and doing like Jesus told the lawyer or focusing on the stories and wisdom of Jesus like Mary was doing? The solution was to select the first deacons who would be in charge of the food distribution which freed the disciples to spread the news of Jesus. Both are essential. It is like inhaling and exhaling. We breath in Jesus and breath out service. We breath in the love God has for us, and breath out that love for others. We breath in acceptance and breath out forgiveness. We breath in the Spirit and breath out energy and time and gifts that lift up those around us. You can't keep breathing in without breathing out, and you can't keep breathing out without breathing in. The answer is always both.

I was talking to a young couple a while back about why they no longer felt church was an important part of their lives. Their age is not really relevant to the story, except that they were people who grew-up with the internet, social media and smart phones. They returned my question with a question of their own. They asked "Why? Why go to church?" If they have a question about God or Christianity, they can just google it and get a better answer than they could get from any Sunday School teacher. And when it comes to service to the poor and the broken, to helping in disaster relief, and feeding people, there are much more efficient service organizations than the church. If you are just looking at dollars donated to dollars spent on those in need, the church has huge administrative costs. And what they said is true. I have had a little time to reflect since that conversation, and I wonder how long what they said will be true. Probably 90% of the people and funding for those truly effective and efficient service organizations are Christians – people who sat at Jesus' feet through Sunday School, worship and Bible study. It is true for our county's Habitat for Humanity, compassionate healthcare, United Ministries, housing assistance, and food pantries. I wish I would have asked them the last time they actually googled a question about God or Christianity. Do they spend an hour a week doing it? A minute a week? The reality is we are changed when we sit at the feet of Jesus. And unless we sit there, we have no questions to google. We have no interest. We are content to be like everyone else – just trying to get through the day. The only thing that matters is me and mine. My feelings and my pocketbook dictate what is important. Without sitting at the feet of Jesus, we are just like every other animal in the animal kingdom, except with air-conditioning. How incredibly sad. For then we will die like every other animal in the animal kingdom. No resurrection. No returning to God. No eternal life.

We are created to breath in the very Word of God and be changed by it. To sit at Jesus' feet and absorb the beauty and wisdom that empowers us to be a gift to each person we meet. Having truth available to us does not change us. We have to intentionally sit and be and absorb it in order to be changed. Simply reality, we are not servants by nature. If serving one another

out of love was natural, if serving one another was our default happy setting; we would go on our tropical island vacation and the staff would be sitting by the pool in their lounge chairs as we paying customers bring them drinks and fan them when they got hot. It would make us so happy. But that ain't right. Our nature is to want others to serve us. Yet that is not the way to eternal life. The way to eternal life is service. "Go and do likewise." And you will not figure that out or maintain the focus to do it unless you sit at the feet of Jesus and breath in deeply.

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