

## WITH MARY AT THE FEET OF JESUS

The Japanese introduced a tree to the world that is called a Bonsai tree. It is measured in inches instead of feet as other trees are measured. It is not allowed to reach anywhere near its full growth potential but instead grows in a stunted miniature form. The reason for it growing in stunted form is that when it first stuck its head out of the ground as a sapling, the owner pulled it out of the soil and tied off its main tap root and some of its branch feeder roots and then replanted it. By doing this, its grower deliberately stunted its growth by limiting the roots' ability to spread out and grow deep and take in enough of the soil's nutrients for a normal growth. What was done to the Bonsai tree by its owner is what Satan has purposed to do to the believer, if he can. He is going to try to tie off our tap root of faith, prayer, praise, worship, fellowship and service. He wants to limit our receiving the blessings of grace and all that God supplies for our spiritual growth.

What a sweet, peaceful picture is brought before the mind's eye, as we read the words, "Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus." John 11:5. Bethany was situated less than two miles from Jerusalem. Apparently these sisters were unmarried and were living together in the little village. Since Luke represents Martha as the mistress of the home (Luke 10:38), likely she was the older of the two. Her Aramaic name means "lady," which may indicate that she came from a fairly wealthy circle.<sup>1</sup> We see a quiet home in the little town of Bethany, the "house of dates," where Jesus was a welcome guest, and where with the brother and two sisters He could find rest from the things that daily beset Him. Love reigned in that household, and there Jesus had always a home. From various glimpses in the New Testament we are able to see Lazarus at his work. Martha "cumbered with much serving," and Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus, and looking intently up into His face as He talked, that she might not lose a single word. So great was Christ's affection for these three congenial souls, that when Lazarus fell ill, Martha did not think it necessary to ask Jesus to come to see him, but merely sent the message, "He whom Thou lovest is sick." One who had only a superficial acquaintance with Jesus would suppose that the members of this family must have been peculiarly good, since Jesus loved so

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<sup>1</sup> *Marta* is the feminine form of *mara* 'master.'

much to be in their company. Such a thought shows forgetfulness of the fact that Jesus came “to seek that which was lost,” to call, not the righteous, but sinners, to repentance. He went willingly to be the guest of sinners, and often sat at the tables of those whom “the better class” of Jewish society, the leaders in the church, looked down upon with scorn, and from whom they would shrink back in disgust.

We are plainly told what had been the character of one member of this family. We are told that “it was that Mary which anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick.” John 11:2. The Scripture tells us that she was “a woman in the city, which was a sinner.” Luke 7:37. She was well known by reputation to the Pharisee in whose house the feast was held, and the fact that Jesus would allow her to touch Him, raised a doubt in his mind as to the standing of Jesus. To himself the Pharisee said: “This Man, if He were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth Him; for she is a sinner.” Luke 7:39.

She was the sort of woman that Christian philanthropists in this generation will approach near enough to “rescue,” and for whom they will provide a “home,” otherwise an asylum; but whom they would by no means visit or receive into their own homes as guests on equal terms with others. Even though they were personally willing to do so, they could seldom endure the social ostracism that such a course would involve. But Jesus had a character of His own, so marked that He was not obliged to consider what people said or thought of His actions. However, though He associated with the outcasts as freely as with those highest in the social scale, none of the poor unfortunates ever thought that His character was in any wise like theirs. They loved Him, and felt at home with Him, because He did not upbraid them, did not assume to be above them, and yet brought to them the purity of heaven, and opened to them the door into the highest and holiest.

One day He went into a little village called Bethany, “And a certain woman named Martha received Him into her house.” Luke 10:38. Thou favored of women! What a glorious privilege! The Son of God enters her humble home and sits down! You can almost feel the thrill of joy that fills her heart, and can see the eagerness with which she seeks His side to ask questions and listen to His gracious words.

Contrary to rabbinical custom, Jesus not only accepted the hospitality of Martha’s home but also taught His message to her and

her sister. Just as “people pressed upon Him to hear the word of God” at the Sea of Galilee (chap. 5:1), so Mary took a seat at His feet and eagerly listened to the word.<sup>2</sup> (“To sit at someone’s feet” was an idiomatic way of saying “to study under someone.” As a young man, Paul was educated “at the feet of Gamaliel” in Jerusalem [Acts 22:3]. To sit at a teacher’s feet suggests the humble position of the learner. The Jewish rabbi Joezer of Zerediah is reported to have said: “Let thy house be a house of meeting for the wise [recognized teachers], and bedust thyself with the dust of [i.e., sit at] their feet, and drink with thirst their words.”<sup>3</sup>

Although there is no evidence that there was a formal teacher-student relationship between Jesus and Mary, such as existed between a rabbi and a talmid, our Lord did not hesitate to impart His teachings to her and to her sister. In Judaism, women, as a general rule, were not allowed the privilege of studying under a rabbi. George Foot Moore says: “Some of them may have been taught by their fathers or their husbands at home to read the Bible, but since this involved the learning of the ancient Hebrew language, it is probable that such cases were rare. . . . Instruction of women in the unwritten law was still more rare.”<sup>4</sup> Some of the rabbis were strongly opposed to efforts to teach women. Jeremias cites two sayings of Rabbi Eliezar (c. A. D. 90), whom he describes as the “tireless upholder of the old tradition.”<sup>5</sup> “If a man gives his daughter a knowledge of the Law it is as though he taught her lechery.”<sup>6</sup> “Better to burn the Torah than to teach it to women.”<sup>7</sup> Jesus was not bound by such Pharisaic notions, but enjoyed discoursing with women who hungered for spiritual food.

It seems evident from Luke’s account that Martha, as well as Mary, loved to sit and listen to the teachings of our Lord. However, while Mary sat at Christ’s feet and listened to His words,<sup>8</sup> Martha became distracted by domestic interests.

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<sup>2</sup> Greek, *logon*.

<sup>3</sup> Aboth 1.4.

<sup>4</sup> George Foot Moore, *Judaism*, vol. 2, p. 128.

<sup>5</sup> Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, p. 373.

<sup>6</sup> Sot. 3.4, quoted in Jeremias, *loc. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> J. Sot. iii.4, 19a 7.

<sup>8</sup> The aorist tense of *parakathestheisa* means, “having taken her place at the Lord’s feet”; *ekouen*, however, is the imperfect, suggesting her persistence in listening.

We read that her sister Mary was so anxious to improve this opportunity that nothing could tempt her away from Him. She sat at Jesus' feet, and gladly drank in every word. But Martha was so cumbered with much serving, so anxious to get a fine dinner for her Guest, that she could not take time to come and talk about the more important things. She had done well to invite Him in, but how neglected and grieved He must have felt when she could not take time to visit with Him. She was so taken up with her cares that she thought that Mary also ought to come away to help.

Martha is busy being the hostess with the mostess and before long she notices that she's doing all the work, which knowing Martha was what she wanted but she wanted it on her terms. You understand there's a difference between doing everything after someone has offered to help and you've turned them down, and doing everything and nobody even offered to help. And it would appear that Mary hadn't even offered, she just plopped down at Jesus' feet and became engrossed in what He was saying. And Martha was not in the least bit impressed.

And this is where things get ugly. She came to Jesus and said, "Lord, doesn't it seem unfair to you that my sister just sits here while I do all the work? Tell her to come and help me." Luke 10:40. You can almost picture her standing there, a towel over one shoulder, a smudge of flour on her nose and her hands on her hips. She's not a happy camper. She felt worried and fretful, and even blamed Jesus because He did not command Mary to go and help her.

You see Martha wanted to do things for Jesus but Mary wanted to spend time with Jesus. Mary didn't want to do things for Him. She wanted to allow Him to do things for her.

In contrast to Christianity, the other great religions of the world want to do things to get right with God. The Muslim prays and does good deeds and hopes these outweigh his bad deeds to earn his salvation. The Jew keeps the law to justify himself before God. The Jehovah's Witness believe he earns his way to heaven by talking to enough people in the week about his religion. The Mormon earns his salvation, so he believes by evangelizing his faith. But this isn't God's way.

Notice the tender rebuke from her Saviour: "Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things." Luke 10:41.

Martha Stewart has made America beautiful. She has made homemaking and gardening into an art form. Women today

compliment each other for their “Martha Moments” of grace and simple elegance. Yet with all her grace and skill, Martha has experienced troubles and trials. These are not “a good thing.”

In her recent interview with Larry King, Martha Stewart described last Christmas as “the saddest holiday ever.” “You have no idea how much worry and sadness and grief it causes.” I do not want to put Martha Stewart down. Nor is my point to badmouth her. But like the rest of us, even Martha who always looks picture perfect, has worries and concerns.

What is on your worry list? Persistent attacks of doubt, Gnawing thoughts of regret. Regret has three sisters and they all live inside your head. Sister #1 Coulda—I could have done things different Sister #2 Woulda—Had I only known, I would have. Sister #3 Shoulda—I should have said something.

What is on your worry list? My boss. My bills. My kids. My job. My car broke down. My house is a mess. My marriage needs help. My reputation is held hostage by false accusations. My oh my! The list can go on. But who’s problems are they? Are these things really yours? The Bible says that this isn’t the case.

“But one thing is needful: and Mary has chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.” Luke 10:41, 42.

“But one thing is needful,” and “Mary hath chosen that good part.” What could He mean? He answers this question in Matt. 6:33; He had been telling the people to take no anxious thought for their lives, what they should eat, or what they should drink, or wherewithal they should be clothed. Then He closes with these wonderful words: “But seek ye FIRST the kingdom of God, and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.” Matt. 6:33.

Ah, Mary was seeking Jesus *first*. She believed that if she should take the necessary time to find Him and His righteousness, He would not allow her to suffer for these other things. To her Jesus was the all-important need of her life. She believed that man could not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. She would rather be certain that she was at peace with her Maker, than have all the good things of this life.

Jesus did not mean to infer that it is wrong to work, or wrong to gather that which He has strewn for our sustenance. “It is necessary to faithfully perform the duties of the present life, but Jesus would teach His children that they must seize every opportunity to gain that knowledge which will make them wise unto salvation.” He would have

us clearly understand that a man may gain the whole world and yet lose his own soul. He would have us know that a little with Him is better than much without Him. He would have us not feel afraid to take time to “seek *first* the kingdom of God and His righteousness.”

Martha Stewart has four chow chow dogs. Their names are Zu-zu, Paw-Paw, Chin Chin and Empress Wu. These precious animals know the hand that feeds them. And they don't bite it! They know who cares for them. Despite all Martha's stress, pressure, and legal woes, do you think that her dogs worry? Do you think that Empress Wu is worried about getting her walk? Do you think that Paw-Paw is plagued with the possibilities of “what if”? What about Zu-Zu? Or Chin Chin? Are they concerned about where their next meal will come from, or where they can get fresh water? I don't think so! These thoughts of worry don't even cross their canine consciousness!

Jesus invites you, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.” Matt. 6:33.

If Jesus should now enter our homes and schools and places of business, as He then entered the home of Martha and Mary, what would He say to us? Would He find us, like Martha, cumbered with much care, taking no time to talk with Him or become better acquainted with Him? Or would He find us, like Mary, sitting at His feet every day, taking time to seek *first* His kingdom and His righteousness?

Have you ever heard of the saying, “Idle hands are the devil's plaything”? Some people even believe it is Scripture. Although this saying is not Scriptural, there are passages that teach about the dangers of idleness. We often take the wisdom and twist it to serve our own desires. We have allowed our culture to drive us to think that busyness is virtuous and that we're behind if we're not at least as busy as our neighbors.

We somehow have placed a sense of worthiness on how busy we are. Have you ever been engaged in a conversation and you both seem to be rattling off a list of things you have to be doing for that day or that week? It's almost as if we're trying to out-do the other person or evoke some degree of sympathy from them. Why do we do this? I catch myself doing this all the time. I can't overemphasize how detrimental our crowded lives are to our time with God. The evil one knows that if we're busy with the activities of a secular life, we are not

about the business of our heavenly Father. To me, it's clear that the busyness of life is a lie of Satan.

We've cluttered our lives with secular things that we feel are important. But, I ask you to take an eternal view of your busy life. What in our lives can be taken away and what cannot be taken away? What do we fill our lives with that will last forever?

What in my life will not be taken from me? How often I hear people say "what I would give to be able to go back and. . ." I don't want to get to the end of my life as a Christian and wish, with all my soul, I had spent more time in His presence and less time being distracted by the worries and upsets of many things—the expectations of others and the things of the world. Do you?

Jesus told us, "Do not be worried about the food and drink you need in order to stay alive, or about clothes for your body. . . Do not start worrying, 'Where will my food come from or my drink? Or my clothes?' (These are the things the pagans are always concerned about)." (Matt. 6:25-32, GNB).

Our modern malls are the temples where "the pagans" come to worship; more and more architects are designing them to resemble great houses of worship. And even for many who say they worship the Lord, the true God, the malls are the places to go in order to while away the hours, fun to be "concerned" about. The malls feed our robust modern economy, which in spite of the daily horrors of war has never before reached the heights of the Dow Jones and Nasdaq readings. But the culture is basically pagan!

Then Jesus adds (in the KJV), "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness. . . ." (vs. 33). It's probably for centuries that "we" Christians have understood that to mean, Make sure of your own soul's salvation in the kingdom of God! I can remember as a child hearing the elders tell me that the most important question for me is my own salvation.

But is this egocentric concern what Jesus meant? When He spoke of "the kingdom of God," could He have been referring to the issues of the great cosmic controversy between Christ and Satan? Is it possible that mall-centered Christians can "henceforth be no more children, . . . but . . . may grow up into Him in all things" and learn to share with Christ the burden of heart which He carries?

Yes! Jesus appeals especially to those who have at least some awareness that we are living in "the time of the [world's] end" (Dan. 12:4) and of the great "Day of Atonement." He begged Peter, James,

and John to stay awake and “watch with [Him] one hour” while the fate of the world (and of the universe) was in the balance (cf. Matt. 26:40). But no, they slept soundly through that most solemn hour!

Hasn't the time come for us to “overcome” even as Christ did, and take our position with Him on His throne, to share with Him the state affairs of “the kingdom of God” (read Rev. 3:20)? Let no one despise the unprecedented invitation that is pertinent for us today!

It was because Mary spent time at the feet of Christ that she did not hesitate to anoint his feet with the expensive perfume. She did not worry what anyone else thought of such an extravagant gift, nor of the breaking of social convention by untying her hair and wiping his feet. It would not be taken from her. It was because of time spent at the feet of Christ, listening to His voice, that enabled Mary and Martha to be at the foot of the Cross as He died—at the feet of Jesus. So what if it was not the social norm or expectation. So what if people talked about them—it would not be taken from them.

The wonderful Bible truth is that God takes the initiative in saving us. He is not, as many conceive of Him, standing back, His divine arms folded in disinterested concern while we wallow in our misery. He is not saying, “Well, I did My part long ago; it's up to you now. You must take the initiative. If you want to be saved, come and work hard at it. If it seems hard to you, you just don't have what it takes to get to heaven.” No. A thousand times No! But many feel that way about God. And some shy and timid ones think God has plenty of good people ready to take my place—He doesn't need me, and I'm not really sure He even wants me.

In contrast, Paul helps us see the divine initiative at work for us: “Do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?” (Rom. 2:4). Today's English Version says He “is trying to lead you to repent.” The goodness of God is actually taking you by the hand and leading you toward repentance as surely as a fireman tries to lead a victim out of the smoke and haze of a burning building. If you don't stubbornly resist, you will be led all the way to heaven. Astounding as it may seem, that's the message.

Sometimes we pray agonizingly for some wayward loved one, assuming we have to beg the Lord to wake up and please do something. The idea is that He is divinely indifferent until we touch His pity somehow. But the goodness of God is already working, leading your loved one to repentance. The trouble is that we often



thwart what He is trying to do because we haven't understood that goodness, mercy, and forbearance of the Lord in their true dimensions. We're horrified to realize it, but we pile stumbling blocks in our loved one's way to heaven. We don't realize how the selfishness and inconsistencies they see in us block their access to God, or shadow their concepts of His character. And it is true, not everybody repents. Why? Some "despise" this goodness of God. Stubborn, they break away from that leading. Let's grasp this tremendous insight! The sinner may resist this love, he may refuse to be drawn to Christ; but if he does not resist he will be drawn to Jesus. A knowledge of the plan of salvation will lead him to the foot of the cross in repentance for his sins.

A famous actor was invited to a dinner party. After the main course, the actor was asked if he would be willing to recite a piece of poetry for the guests. The actor readily agreed and asked if someone at the dinner table would like to suggest what he should recite. There was a deadly hush until an old clergyman raised his hand and said: "May I ask you to recite the 23rd Psalm?"

The actor was rather taken back but agreed, saying: "I will recite Psalm 23, if you will recite it once I am finished". The clergyman rather reluctantly agreed.

The actor then recited the 23rd Psalm with as much passion as he could arouse. His voice was perfect. His intonation was flawless. The audience was spellbound. When he finished, he was met with rapturous applause.

The old clergyman then stood up to speak and recited the Psalm. But his voice was rough and broken from many years of preaching. His diction was anything but polished. But when he finished there was not a dry eye in the room.

Then the actor got up from his seat came over and put his arm around the clergyman and said: "Ladies and Gentlemen, I know the 23rd Psalm. This man however knows the Shepherd." Jesus is the Great Shepherd—and the actor hit the nail on the head. Christianity is all about knowing Jesus.

Have we opened the door and let Him in? Oh, then, let us not grieve Him any more with our neglect, but take time to visit with Him. Is He still standing outside knocking? Then let us take time to let Him in.