

## CHAPTER ONE

# ONLY ONE THING IS NEEDED

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Had Martha known her temper tantrum would wind up in Luke's Gospel, she probably would have kept a lid on it. But her embarrassment is our gain, for in Luke 10:38-42 we discover one of the most essential (and most neglected) keys to intimacy with God.

The story opens with Jesus and his disciples journeying through the town of Bethany, just two miles east of Jerusalem. It's here, as Luke describes it, that "a woman named Martha opened her home to him."

Now Luke doesn't say, but I'm assuming that Martha opened her home to the disciples as well. Which means she had a minimum of 13 extra place settings to worry about. And it's unlikely that she had an advance schedule of Jesus' itinerary. Every indication is that this was a spontaneous, unexpected visit.

Put yourself in Martha's sandals...Suppose your pastor and twelve of his buddies pulled into the driveway late one afternoon and said, "Jack! Betty! Good to see you! We were just driving by and thought we might stop in and have dinner with you." How would you respond?

You would try to look enthusiastic. "What a privilege!" you'd say, a smile frozen on your face. As they came in you would start apologizing for the sink full of dirty dishes, the lawnmower parts spread out on the living room floor. At the same time you'd be mentally rummaging through

““ When we fail to wait prayerfully for God's guidance and strength, we are saying, with our actions if not our lips, that we do not need him.<sup>1</sup> ””

— Charles Hummel

the cupboards, wondering how you were going to stretch one box of Hamburger Helper into a full-scale banquet.

Can you just see Martha? She's not running a restaurant—she's running a home.

**For Further Study:**

John's Gospel reveals Martha in a better light. See John 11:17-27 (confession of faith) and John 12:2 (new attitude toward serving)

If the town of Bethany had a Chinese restaurant or Pizza Hut, she might have tactfully pointed Jesus and his disciples down the street. But that wasn't an option. Martha now has an unexpected crowd for dinner. And though she probably had the best of intentions, it's almost inevitable that some kind of struggle was going on inside her.

Being a sincere and industrious woman, Martha buckled down to make a serious meal. It's a fair guess that she assumed her sister Mary—probably her younger sister—would join her in the kitchen. So imagine her reaction when she sees Mary sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to him teach. Here's Martha, sweating over this herculean task of

**1** If Mary and Martha's case came to court and you were on the jury, who would you side with? Why?

hospitality, while her sister is relaxing, unaware and unaffected. Do you think that may have tested her attitude just a little?

By this point dinner wasn't the only thing boiling in Martha's kitchen. What began as a genuine act of kindness has taken an unexpected turn. She's now angry, and doing her best to project guilt onto Mary.

"Lord," she snaps, interrupting Jesus' teaching, "don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

Obviously, this was not a polite exchange, and Martha, of course, had no idea it would go on biblical record. But at this point she's a frustrated lady, reacting sinfully to what she felt was real insensitivity.

Martha's reputation has suffered over the years, so let me add this in her defense. She learned from the Lord's tactful and gentle correction, as later accounts in the Gospels make clear. Also, she is to be commended for serving. Serving is a theme emphasized throughout Scripture. It was her sinful attitude, not her serving, that got Martha in trouble.

In seeing activity as a higher priority than listening to the Lord, Martha erred on three fronts.

**1. She charged God.** "Lord, don't you care...?" To my regret, I have said or thought the same thing many times. If we fail to develop a lifestyle of listening, we inevitably begin to doubt God's love. We become highly susceptible to false interpretations of our circumstances, and are likely to be governed by our emotions.

When we haven't been waiting on God and listening to his voice, we easily become suspicious of his care. Yet few

**Meditate on Romans**

**8:32.** Could God have done anything more convincing to reveal his care for us? See also 1 John 4:10.

**2** Do any of the following circumstances tempt you to say, “Lord, don’t you care...?”

*(Check those that apply)*

- You’re still single...with no prospects in sight
- You’re waiting for the Lord to fulfill a promise he made years ago
- You’re married but haven’t been able to conceive children
- You were overlooked for a promotion at work
- You’ve spent the last decade praying and fasting for relatives who still aren’t saved
- You tithe faithfully but haven’t prospered
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Meditate on Romans 8:28.** Don’t leave this passage until you are convinced it’s true!

**3** Bible teacher Charles Simpson quotes his father as saying, “Anxiety is a mild case of atheism.” What three-word command does Jesus give repeatedly in Matthew 6:25-34?

“ \_\_\_\_\_ ”

things grieve God more than being accused of not caring. Do you know why? Because there isn’t anyone who cares for us like God does. No one cares like the Lord. We will become aware of and secure in his constant care as we study Scripture and listen to his voice.

**2. She became distracted.** The American Heritage Dictionary defines “distracted” as “suffering conflicting emotions; distraught.” When we don’t make time to wait before God, we are easily distracted. Our perspective becomes distorted, our emotions churn, and anxiety begins to build. Martha couldn’t have fit that description any better.

And don’t think Martha is alone in this—everyone is well-acquainted with distraction and worry. Because when we stop listening, we start worrying,

and worry is a serious affront to God. In effect, it says, “I don’t trust you, Lord.” But when we worship and wait on God, worry is rarely an issue, because in God’s presence we receive assurance of his sovereignty, wisdom, and care. Though circumstances may remain unchanged, we now have an eternal perspective which removes the worry from the heart and replaces it with peace.

**3. She accused and condemned her sister.** Failure to wait on God and listen to his voice often culminates in criticism of and comparison to others. We are often tempted to resent others, particularly if they appear “more spiritual.” But if we’re honest, we’ll admit that we sometimes react sinfully to

others in exactly the same way Martha reacted to Mary. What this reveals, among other things, is that we haven’t been waiting on God.

I’m affected by the way Jesus responded to Martha. He might have stood up and declared, “Do you have any idea who you are talking to? How dare you command me! I created you!” Instead, he sat there, waited until she had finished exposing her sinful heart, and simply said “Martha, Martha.”

(By the way...if the Lord uses your name twice, brace

### PSALM 23, ANTITHESIS

The clock is my dictator, I shall not rest.  
It makes me lie down only when exhausted.  
It leads me to deep depression.  
It hounds my soul.  
It leads me in circles of frenzy for activity's sake.  
Even though I run frantically from task to task, I will never get it all done,  
For my "ideal" is with me.  
Deadlines and my need for approval, they drive me.  
They demand performance from me, beyond the limits of my schedule.  
They anoint my head with migraines.  
My in-basket overflows.  
Surely fatigue and time pressure shall follow me all the days of my life,  
And I will dwell in the bonds of frustration forever.

— Marcia K. Hornok

#### For Further Study:

What does it mean to "keep in step with the Spirit" (Galatians 5:25)?

finished work of Christ, it is important that we cultivate a relationship with God by practicing the spiritual disciplines (worship, prayer, studying Scripture, etc.). In this, let us endeavor to imitate not Martha, but Mary, who in the words of Christ chose "what is better, and it will not be taken away from her." To imitate Mary in her devotion to the Lord is to choose not only the better thing, but the eternal.

yourself for a rebuke. It's time for all seat backs to be placed forward and tray tables to be returned to their original, upright position.)

"You are worried and upset about many things," Jesus told her. "But only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Please note that Jesus didn't empathize with Martha. Despite the zeal with which she had served, he didn't excuse her attitude in the slightest. For Martha's activity, although zealous, was neither led by the Spirit nor motivated by God's grace. Rather, it was a work of the flesh, which can snare the Christian in fruitless legalism and dead works. Quite often the result is self-induced frustration, anger, and discouragement.

Once we've been reconciled to God through the person and finished

**4** According to Jesus, what is a distinguishing mark of a believer? (John 10:3-4, 16, 27)

### A Radically Different Approach

What does it take to please God? To know him more intimately? To discern his will? To serve his purpose? First, it takes a listening heart, for discipleship begins with contemplation, not action.

If you are not regularly hearing God's voice, ask yourself, "Am I regularly making time to listen?" If your

“ I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me....My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.<sup>2</sup>

”  
— Jesus Christ

**Meditate on Matthew**

**4:4.** What place does God’s Word have in your daily diet?

uninterrupted, undistracted time waiting on him. (Jesus instructed us to find a room where we can go and shut the door behind us.) Yet many Christians consider prayer a time to talk *to* God, if not *at* him. But *he* has much to say *to us*, and we can only hear him if we’re listening instead of talking.

**5** In which of the following situations would you sense a need for God’s wisdom? (Check all that apply)

- Should I finish this chapter or watch some worthless sitcom?
- Should I marry him/her?
- Should I practice family planning?
- Should I share the gospel with my co-worker?
- Should I relocate to accept a higher-paying job?
- Should I buy hamburger or tuna fish for dinner?
- Should I attend church this Sunday?
- Should I go into debt to buy a car?

**Meditate on John 1:1-2.**

Why is it significant that John describes Jesus as “The Word”?

schedule reveals that you haven’t made listening a priority, you shouldn’t be surprised that you are not having fresh, intimate encounters with God.

Listening requires that we spend unhurried,

At the other extreme, we can become overly intense, trying to *make* God speak. As you wait on him he *will* speak. He has promised to speak. He is a communicating God who desires to teach. Remember, we didn’t discover God; he revealed himself to us. There is no divine reluctance to communicate that we must overcome by sheer force of effort—as if that were in our power.

A primary aspect of listening involves the reading and study of Scripture. I believe the Holy Spirit desires to apply specific parts of Scripture to the life of each Christian on a daily basis. This is one of his main ways of communicating with us. At any given time, each of us—if we are spiritually healthy—should be able to identify distinct truths from the Bible

that the Lord is revealing or emphasizing to us.

Through Scripture, creation, the church, and by his Spirit, God fills the world with his voice. The only issue is, “Are we listening?”

So let’s be provoked by the Lord’s example (Mk 1:35), and not just in the practical aspects such as reading the Bible in a year or praying 30 minutes a day (as good as those disciplines are). Let us also be aware that God has spoken through his written Word and desires to speak by his Spirit. We have the opportunity to hear our Father’s voice—rich with wisdom, guidance, and affection—if we will simply devote time to listening and waiting on God.

Intimacy with God cannot be rushed. Just as every

**6** Give one practical example of how God speaks through his...

Creation:

Word:

Spirit:

People:

deep human relationship is the product of much time, so it is in our relationship with God. Jesus maintained his intimacy with the Father by meeting with him privately and frequently. Surely if the Son of God needed this, how much more do we.

Let's conclude by looking closely at our Lord's response to Martha. He may be saying the same to you.

**1. "Only one thing is needed."**

What an astonishing statement! How regularly we need to be reminded that waiting on God and listening to his voice deserve our daily attention.

We're talking top priority.

Like our Lord, who had more than a few demands on his life, consciously refuse each day to rush into activity. Instead, devote quality time to expressing

your dependence on God and deepening your intimacy with him.

**2. Make a choice.**

Martha may have thought Mary was being lazy and

selfish, but listening is far from effortless. It involves discipline and diligence. As Jesus explained to Martha, "Mary has *chosen* what is better" (Lk 10:42). Each day (if not more often), each of us faces a choice. The more we choose as Mary did, the easier the right choice becomes.

**3. Recognize what's eternal.** Martha's home cooking was forgotten by breakfast time; Mary's taste of the Bread of Life will last for eternity. She wisely invested in intimacy with God. And as Jesus said, "It will not be taken away from her."

Tomorrow you will make a number of decisions, investing your time and energy in various pursuits. Scripture tells us that one day God will assess our lives. Of the investments you've made today, some will remain, and some may be taken away.

If you follow our culture's advice, you'll invest in a wide portfolio of temporary pleasures. Listening to the voice of the Lord will be low on your priority list. Instead, you will seek to acquire the latest and best material possessions. You will pursue career interests with a blind devotion that neglects family and church. You will indulge in every available form of leisure. And in the pro-

““ Man is impressed by activity. God is impressed with obedience.

””  
— Terry Virgo

### THE TYRANNY OF THE URGENT

Prayerful waiting on God is indispensable to effective service. Like the time-out in a football game, it enables us to catch our breath and fix new strategy. As we wait for directions, the Lord frees us from the tyranny of the urgent. He shows us the truth about himself, ourselves, and our tasks. He impresses on our minds the assignments he wants us to undertake. The need itself is not the call; the call must come from the God who knows our limitations. "...The Lord pitieth them that fear him. For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust" (Psalm 103:13-14). It is not God who loads us until we bend or crack with an ulcer, nervous breakdown, heart attack, or stroke. These come from our inner compulsions coupled with the pressure of circumstances.<sup>3</sup>

— Charles Hummel

cess your faith will become that low-cost, convenient, cultural form of Christianity which—tragically—is the norm today.

God's alternative is radical. He is raising up men and women in local churches who are radically different in their passions and pursuits. Radically different in regard to materialism. Radically different in their career goals. Radically different in their use of leisure time. Radically different! Not motivated by legalism, mind you, but in response to his amazing grace. He isn't depriving us of pleasure—he's giving us fullness of joy in his presence! And he is fashioning us into a people who reflect him in order to reach this culture.

As we daily practice the spiritual disciplines, we choose what is better, that which will not be taken away. We will experience the one thing that is truly needed—intimacy with God.

Just like Mary. ■

### GROUP DISCUSSION

1. If you were granted a face-to-face meeting with God, and were allowed just one question, what would you ask?
2. When was the last time you found yourself frantically busy? Could you have avoided the rush?
3. Describe one situation where you received a clear word from the Lord.
4. Can you identify with the distorted "Psalm 23" on page 4?
5. Name two things that make it hard for you to hear God.
6. What should motivate us to be radically different from our culture?

7. How can the spiritual disciplines help us hear God?  
*Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* by Donald Whitney (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1996)

**RECOMMENDED** *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* by  
**READING** John Piper (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1986)  
*The Spirit of the Disciplines* by Dallas Willard (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991)

#### NOTES

1. Charles E. Hummel, *Tyranny of the Urgent* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1967).
2. 2 John 10:14, 27
3. Charles E. Hummel, *Tyranny of the Urgent*