



Your Role in the Harvest-Part 6

Workers Who Keep First Things First

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I want you to grab your Bibles, we're going to get to the last five verses of this 10th chapter of Luke that we've been working on studying. And we've called this series your role in the harvest—certainly started with a very strong emphasis on getting into the harvest of representing the gospel. And we've seen variations of that theme and various aspects to that theme that I hope have been helpful in implementing a desire to be involved in evangelism as a Christian, and I hope that's been front and center in your mind, in your heart, and in your practice the last few weeks.

But it's important that we make some careful distinctions about having that in place in your life. It's not just enough to locate that as a Christian discipline that's important—a responsibility, something we're called to do—and have that as a part of our Christian life. It's not quite enough. And I was reminded of that when I was making a transition at an airport—whether it was Dallas or Atlanta—and trying to make that connecting flight. And you know how that is, especially at those big airports—Chicago or Denver, wherever you are—and you come down the jetway, and all you care about is what's the gate that you're going to have to fly out of next.

So you go down the jetway, you come out into the terminal, and then you never know which way to choose. But you choose right or left and you're looking for the big screens and you find them and all the people gathered around those screens, and they're looking at those screens and you want to find out, "Where's the gate for my next flight?" And the temptation is just to go up to those screens and try and locate where you're headed. Where's the city I'm going to? And you find that. And by the way, have you noticed that those screens now are very active? They flip around. If you find the city that you're going to and then it flips and goes somewhere else, and you have to track it—and where did it go?—and it went up five spaces and down three spaces. And so you've got to be careful that you don't just try to find the city and then look at the gate next to it.

I remember I did that last time I was trying to get a connecting flight—knew where my gate was—and then I spent all that time and I found it. "Okay, it's C27." And then I looked up and I realized I'm standing under the screens that say they're arrivals. And now if you think about it, I thought, "There's no reason for you to list the arrivals and all the gates they're coming to, is there?" Give it some thought. Why would I need to know where I've arrived? And there's nobody there with flowers behind security waiting to figure out where their friends are coming through. I just don't know why you would need to know that. I need to know departures—I'm trying to get out of here. Give me, you know, all the ways I can get out of here.



Well, okay, so then I realize I'm in the wrong place. I found the city—it's the wrong board. So I go to these boards over here. And these screens—I find the city as they're flipping around, up and down. And there it is—there's the city—and you want to quickly again just look at the gate that's next to it. And then you realize, "Well, I better be careful because that one's United, and I'm flying on American, and that one's Delta." So it's going to the same place, but it wouldn't take me to the right gate. And then, once you get that before it flips away, up or down, then you realize, "Well, I found the right city and I found the right board and I found the right airline, but this one's two hours later." So don't go to that gate. Because a lot of these airports, you know, the gate you're told to go to is three miles from where you're standing. And then if you go to that gate, you take all that time to get there, it's another mile the other direction. And if you try to go to both gates, you'll have no time. So you better make sure that you go to the right gate by looking at the right destination city under the right board connected to the right airline leaving at the right time. And then you can get that Z99 gate that you're going to and make your way through the huge airport to find that.

It's important that you make some discerning distinctions when you're looking for where you're headed, because you don't want to go to the wrong place. Now, in the Christian life, we want to head down the path of being faithful to Christ and more like Christ. And so I just want to make sure I've got evangelism in my life. And then you might learn about prayer, as we're going to do in chapter 11, and make sure that's in your life. And then Bible study—make sure that's in my life. And you start saying, "Well, I'm living a good Christian life, and things are where they're supposed to be." And then you find out, "Well, I wasn't really distinguishing or discerning certain things." And you get to the end of this, and instead of hearing "Well done, good and faithful servant," you get a rebuke from Christ.

Which, by the way, must be exactly how Martha must have felt, at least to some extent, in the passage I've turned your attention to. Here she is doing something—and I think too many of us are too quick to throw her under the bus—you have to sympathize with her. She's got the physical Christ there at her house. And she's fixing a meal, and her lazy sister, it seems to her, is not willing to help her. And so she appeals to Christ. And that whole scene that you're familiar with—we're about to read it—I mean, you've got to know this is a very godly and good and very hospitable thing: to prepare a good meal for the King of kings and Lord of lords. I think that's very understandable. But instead of having a "Well done" from Christ, she gets this rebuke.

Take a look at it with me, beginning in verse number 38—five verses to the end of the chapter, Luke chapter 10, Luke 10:38–42:



Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village, and a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. 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." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."

Now there's a lot in this, even though we easily remember the story. Many people around the block in the Christian life—very familiar story. And you've heard it preached in many settings, I'm sure, and taught to you, or even contemplated in your own devotional reading. And you think about it in a certain way. I want to make sure that we don't misread this. I want to be very careful to make the distinctions that we should make—not just the obvious ones, but some that aren't quite so obvious. And let's make sure that we can see not only evangelism, but serving and giving and Bible study and everything else the Christian life is composed of—a good, obedient Christian life—and make sure that we don't just see those things, but we make sure that we execute those or engage in those in the right way. And that's going to take some subtle and nuanced distinctions to be made in our own minds. So let's work on that here together.

Let's start with the first two verses, 38 and 39. "Now as they went on their way"—now, let's think this through. All the way back to chapter 9, "on their way" we know is moving from the northern region of Israel called Galilee. It's called that because it's in and around the Sea of Galilee. Then you've got the Jordan River, you've got the Dead Sea. They're moving the ministry from the northern Galilean ministry to the southern Judean ministry in the area of Judea, which is surrounding Jerusalem. They're moving the ministry down there, because Jesus is set and intent on that, because that's where his ministry on earth is going to wrap up in His first coming. He's going to die just outside the gates of Jerusalem, and he's going to be resurrected there in Jerusalem. And so it's all going to end there. And that is his focus. He's moving everything south.

To get from the Galilean area to the southern area, he has to go through that no man's land called Samaria—that was the focus of the last parable, the "Good Samaritan." It was where the 72, they were being sent from the north, and even Samaria, as they were dispatched to the south to go to all these villages and towns surrounding Jerusalem in Judea. So they're on their way down there. And they enter a village. Now, Luke doesn't name it, but John does. It's the city of Bethany. John covers much more about Mary and Martha. And we know that's two miles just outside of Jerusalem. If you've been there with me, or with someone traveling in Jerusalem, you know that's just over the hill of the Mount of Olives. So if you're looking east of Jerusalem—here, you're looking east—you've got the upslope there where Jesus often sat, and David sat in our DVR recently, and they worshiped up there, and he left town that way. On the other side, on the downslope—the eastern slope—is the city of Bethany. It's very important in the narratives of Lazarus and Mary and Martha, because that was their hometown. This is their encounter with them.



“Jesus enters that village, and a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house.” Now, don’t forget what happened. They sent two-by-two the evangelists into the harvest field of the south. Mary and Martha had been harvested. In other words, they had been converted. And by that I mean the ones that went to say, “Prepare—the kingdom’s coming, and the King’s about to enter your town.” You had people that rejected them, and they were supposed to knock the dust off their feet and move on. But then there were some that would embrace them. They’re supposed to stay there in those homes and share about the coming Christ. Well, these people had been prepared. When Christ came to town, he was going to stay in somebody’s house. And so he’s going to come, and he’s going to set up some teaching time in the house of Mary and Martha. But it’s not just—you know, he’s not doing door-to-door evangelism here. The two who’d come into Bethany had already prepared their hearts with the message.

And just like John the Baptist was preparing hearts for the coming of Christ there initially in the ministry, these people were preaching the same message: repent. You need to see your sin for what it is. You need to turn from your sin. And then you need to trust in this one—as John said—whose sandals I’m not even worthy to untie. So the King is coming and be ready. So Mary and Martha, we know, had already embraced that message, because now their house was the one that was being opened up to host Christ. “So they welcomed him into her house”—“her house,” because I don’t know, we don’t know—we’re speculating—but we assume she’s either a widow, never married, she’s got her own house. She’s the head of the household here. And Mary is her sister, introduced in verse 39. “She had a sister called Mary. Mary sat at the Lord’s feet, listening to his teaching.”

So Christ comes in, we can assume his entourage is with him, at least the Twelve. You’ve got Mary and Martha, and we assume Lazarus, though he’s not a part of this scene. You’ve got other people, I’m sure. And they’re there in this home. And Christ is teaching. You see here our initial distinction. And I want to start with the thing that incorporates both Mary and Martha. Mary and Martha had both accepted the message of the kingdom. They had both embraced and brought into their home here the King. So they’ve already accepted the message. But there’s a distinction that’s drawn in the passage that becomes very sharp by the end of this passage between the kind of reception that they have, at least in terms of the physical presence of Christ. We’ve got one that’s busy, distracted—what are the words there in verse 41?—“anxious and troubled about many things.” “Distracted” is the word in verse 40. And then we’ve got one that is fixated, it seems—focused, rapt attention on Christ—looking at Christ, listening to the teaching of Christ.

So we have a distinction. Let’s make the distinction under these two headings. Number one, we need to distinguish between—let’s call the first category, of which they’re both qualifying—acceptance. And



then the second category here—let’s call it devoted. There’s a distinction between acceptance and devotion.

Now, once you write that down, please listen carefully to this. If you’ve heard me preach for any amount of time, you know that I rail against and preach against—if you’re around long enough—this kind of artificial bifurcation of Christianity into two camps: between the varsity Christianity and the sophomore, or barely-in-the-camp Christianity; between what they used to call the regular Christians and then the disciples; between those that just trust in Jesus to be saved and then those that get serious about obedience—kind of the underlings and the real hardcore Christians. And even, quote-unquote, serious theologians have tried to divide these with theological phrases in terms of those who receive the kingdom and those who have an inheritance in the kingdom. And I’ve tried to preach against this throughout my ministry. It is just not a biblical distinction. There’s not a criteria to get into the kingdom and then another criteria to be like a Letterman-jacket-wearing Christian. There’s no difference there. The criteria is the same: repent of your sins, see yourself as devoid of any merit before God, embrace Christ completely and fully. That’s how you become a Christian.

So when I use the word “acceptance” here—which I don’t generally even use—I’m talking about the fact that they accepted the message that everyone was being told if they’re going to receive the King: see your sin for what it is, repent of your sin, and then bear fruit in keeping with repentance. Christ is coming; he’s the King; prepare your heart for the coming kingdom. They had both accepted that—both Mary and Martha. And even without stretching the words too far here, the word that’s literally used to “welcome” him into their home is a very big biblical word, talking about people welcoming the message. I’ve used this distinction before: there are two words in the Greek language for accepting or receiving. One is the basic word *lambanō*, which means to receive something, and then there’s that word *dechomai*—you’ve heard me talk about *dechomai*. I talked about it when Simeon takes the Lord Jesus into his arms as an infant on the Temple Mount and praises God for the Messiah being born—he welcomes him. And there’s just this way that it is received. In the early church there in First Thessalonians, they were praised because they welcomed the word not as the words of men but as the words of God. That’s the word used here, even with a compound on the front—*hypodechomai*. That is the word, and it says she’s welcoming.

I don’t want to make too much of the word because it’s used in reference to her bringing Christ into her home. But clearly, the idea that that is in her heart is the same as Mary’s, which is: we receive the King, he’s our King; we receive the message of our guilt and our sin; we’re guilty—he’s the solution, he’s the Savior. So that’s Christianity across the board. You’re not a Christian without that perspective. I’m not trying to make two versions of Christianity. But within that camp of people that accept and embrace the message and the King and the Christ, there is a variation and a spectrum of devotion to Christ—at least as I’m trying to define it in this particular passage.



Look at it there again in verse 39. Mary's described as sitting at the Lord's feet and listening to his teaching. Now, all I can do is draw parallels to our Christian life today, because I can't take you into room 412 down the hallway and say, "I've got Jesus here—come sit at his feet, listen to his teaching." He's not physically here. No Christian can do this. We can only do it metaphorically—you would agree with that, right? So to what extent do we see a variation among real Christians of people who "sit at his feet," fixate on the person of Christ, and receive what he says? Well, I do see a variation there. And as a pastor, seeing all kinds of Christians, I see a broad spectrum of really saved, legitimately converted—through the portal of the real gospel—who have all kinds of variations on that scale. And in this text you're going to see some real distinction between Mary and Martha based on that kind of orientation: a focus on Christ and a receptivity to his teaching. That is something I want to talk about under the banner of devotion—devotion to Christ.

Now we're all devoted to Christ because we've received Christ as the King, we've embraced him by faith, we've repented of our sins. But there's a kind of devotion that sees Christ, as best we can make the parallel here, as the person that we serve, as the person that we love, as the person that we're devoted to.

Now follow me on this. If I think about where we've been in the topic we've been discussing—evangelism—it is easy for us to begin to look at that task of sharing our faith as trying to convince people to join our team, to be a part of our theology, our philosophy, our way of life—to abandon that because it's wrong and embrace this because it's right. And it becomes, in our thinking sometimes, if we're not careful, that we're winning them to a cause. We're winning them over to a position. We're including them on our team. They put our uniform on, they're part of our band, and I'm out there trying to get people to see the problem is that side and the rightness of this side, and I want them to join Christianity and be a part of this thing.

I just want to move in the direction of saying: real devotion to Christ—the kind of devotion that's fixated on the person of Christ and receptive to the teaching of Christ that I think is depicted in this picture of Mary—is the kind of person that doesn't see the gospel as a cause to win people to, but frankly and really as a person that we're winning people to; that we're really not presenting a position or a way of life; we're presenting people a person that we want them to embrace. He is a person, after all. They will one day see him face to face. Philippians 2 says one day they will bow not before a kingdom, but more literally before a King. They will confess him as Lord.



I want to personalize this—not to over-sentimentalize our evangelicalism, as so many have done. And you’ve heard me go off on rants on that too, have I not? And you patiently endured me ranting about the kittens and the flowers and the fuzzy hearts, and “It’s all ‘Jesus loves you’” and all this very sentimentalized, gooey, you know, sickly sweet Christianity. It’s all subjective and existential, and it’s all about “Jesus is all in my gooey feelings,” and “He walks with me and talks with me, and when I’m in the garden alone,” and all that—you’ve seen all that, you’ve heard all that. And I’ve said, “Yuck—that’s not biblical Christianity.” He’s not some kind of cool friend, or as they say, you know, “Jesus isn’t your homeboy.” That I think we’re glad to get away from.

But in moving the pendulum away from the over-sentimentalized Christianity, sometimes good-thinking Christians like you and I will move the pendulum so far over, it is a cause that we’re winning people to. Matter of fact, the thing we relate to is a theology. The kind of mentality we have is Christ as a solution, as opposed to the person. We need to re-image in our minds the fact that we are relating to a person. We are presenting a person—even in our evangelism. We are having God—a person—appeal through us to have people reconciled to God through Christ. These are the persons of the Godhead.

Follow me now. If you think about the commission to make disciples—even inherent in the word “make disciples”—I’m making a learner or a follower of a person. When he ends that command, he says, “Remember this: I will be with you always, even to the end of the age.” He makes it personal: when you go out into the harvest field, I will be with you. Now if you’re really careful and technical about that, you know what he means by that. He defined it in the upper room just before he was betrayed and crucified, and that is: “I’m leaving, but I’m not leaving. I’ll be with you.” What kind of double talk is that? It’s not double talk—it’s the tri-unity of God. He says, “I’m leaving—literally leaving. My fingernails are leaving, my eyebrows are leaving, every follicle on my head—I’m leaving.” And he’ll leave there in Acts chapter 1. “And I’ll go up and leave, and I’ll be seated at the right hand of the throne. But I’m not going to leave you orphans.” Remember the discussion in the upper room, John chapter 14? “I won’t leave you orphans because I’m going to send another, and the ‘other’ will not be a physical personage with fingernails. It’ll be the third person of the Godhead called the Spirit. And that ‘other’ will be with you—the *Paraklētos*, the Helper—and he will be with you always. Matter of fact, you’re going to be sealed in him until the day of your redemption. That will be your contact with the Godhead.”

Therefore, if we think about it, we are not only relating to a person, who we desperately want non-Christians to relate to, but we are in our own lives interacting with that person every single day. And there’s something about a person that’s much different than a cause. There’s something about a person that’s much different than a solution that we inject or administer. That person is made with intellect, emotion, and will. And we have no problem, I suppose, thinking about intellect and will. It’s the emotional part that really does personalize anything that we call a person who’s not a thing but a person. How does that work?



Well, when I really think about feelings—now that there are feelings in God’s personality—all of a sudden now that becomes much more of a personal encounter in my own heart regarding how I relate to that person. For instance, the Bible says so often, from beginning to end—we could survey the whole Bible and say, “Think about how often the Bible presents God as a God who has feelings that are affected by how we behave, how we act, how we respond to his commands, how we respond to his commission.” In our DVR, we were reading recently the high drama of David taking this beautiful girl that he sees across the street from the top of his palace. He has her husband killed, and you know all that. Well, that chapter ends, you might remember—we read it on our DVR just recently—and it says he ended up marrying her after knocking off her husband and all of that, and they had this child. And then you think the verse is going to be over, and there’s another little sentence at the end of that verse, and it says, “And the thing that David did displeased the Lord.” If you looked at that Hebrew word on your Bible program and you said, “What is that all about?” you’ll find it translated—even the ESV translated—“sad,” “hurt,” “deeply hurt,” “grieved.” Think about that. The idea of the God in heaven looking at an ancient Near Eastern king, watching him do something here subversively and deceitfully and immorally—that thing hurt the God of the universe. So much like Genesis 6:6 I often quote: God looks down, he sees everybody in their wicked thoughts, always thinking bad things, and it says, “The Lord was grieved to his heart that he had made man.”

New Testament equivalent: the person you interact with every single day, the person who is trying to prompt you, guide you, enable you to share the gospel with a non-Christian so that they can relate to the person of God through the person of the Spirit, is a person that you can grieve. And Paul says in Ephesians that you and I—chapter 4—should not grieve him, because you’re sealed with him till the day of your redemption. You are now stuck in a relationship with the Spirit of God, and I want to make sure I don’t do anything to hurt him. Now, it’s not because he’s weak. It’s not because we’re supposed to over-sentimentalize the Godhead. He’s powerful, he’s strong, he’s intelligent, he’s wise, he’s omnipotent—all of that’s true. But he’s also a person. And when I think about my service to a person, I start to recognize he needs me to give him attention because he’s a person. I’m not relating to a thing or a cause. It is a cause—the kingdom is a thing. But the one I’m concerned about is a person.

You ever go to a restaurant, you look at a couple across the way, and you notice after you’ve eaten your chips, you’ve ordered your burrito, you’re halfway through your burrito, and you look over there and they haven’t said a word to each other the whole time? You realize that sometimes some people think, “What kind of marriage is that?” A quiet, peaceful marriage, you might think. But it’s really not a marriage I hope that you want. You hope to have companionship. You hope to have relationship. You’d hope to have everything enriched by one another. Do you understand the Bible continually from the very beginning says, “I’m concerned that my covenant people will forget me.” Don’t go into the land of Canaan, get all fat with all that’s going on in there, and forget the Lord. Think about how you can hurt God just by forgetting and neglecting and ignoring him.



You start to think that way. You start to realize there's something about the person that's devoted to Christ who sees Christ not as a cause, not as just a solution, but as the person that they love; the person that they're concerned about; and the person that they want to please. That's really important—and important for us to personalize the person of the Godhead—the persons of the Godhead, to be more exact. Very important for you to realize that in the terms in the Bible—James 4:8—you don't do this with a cause: "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you." The relational ways that it's described in our Christian life for people that are really saved and embrace the message of the gospel—how close are you with this person today? How relating to him are you today? How intimate is your relationship with him today? Not to over-sentimentalize it, not to become interior and subjective—I'm not saying that. I'm just saying: don't forget who we're serving. We're serving a person. And there's something about the attention that Mary gives to the person of Christ, as opposed to the things that need to be done, that is going to come into sharp contrast as we continue this study.

Let's move on to the next one. And you can see—look carefully at the verses next to the point—you've got your worksheet out. We're going to make three distinguishing acts here. And you see the verses; they're kind of chain-linked together in that the verses overlap—38 and 39, and then it's 39 through 41, and then it's 41 and 42. So these all overlap. And we'll look at how these overlap here starting now: verse 39, "And she had a sister named Mary"—reading that again—"who sat at the Lord's feet." Now here's what she's doing: listening to his teaching.

Now, usually, sometimes we talk about these words because they come up in various ways, but *didaskō*—"I teach"—that's the word you usually see, or *didaskalia*, the noun you see in the Bible that usually translates the word "teaching." That's not the word here. Not even sure why the ESV translators translated it that way. It's the word that you know—*logos*. It's the term the Bible likes to use for even the written Scriptures—that the *graphē*, or the writing of God, is often called the Word of God. And in this case, it's interesting that it's described that way. She's sitting there and she's listening to the *logos* of Christ—that's the idea, literally, of this. "But Martha"—as the *logos* of Christ is coming out of his mouth—"was distracted with her much serving." That'd be worth highlighting or underlining: "was distracted." Martha was distracted with much serving.

"And she went up to him—to Christ—and said, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things.'" Now there are three words here. You should connect these two words—"anxious" and "troubled"—to the word "distracted." We know what's going on in Martha's head. A distraction—literally that word means "to drag away," "to pull away." I'm trying to establish now a picture and develop the picture of what it means to be devoted to the person of Christ. Now we've got Martha described with these two words in verse 41—"anxious" and "troubled." Even that



word has the idea of your mind being pulled in different directions. But literally, from the object with that first word “distracted,” the object—or in this case, the person—is being pulled away from Christ by her much serving.

So whatever that is, it doesn’t sound good. And because it doesn’t sound good, most preachers get up and pontificate on this passage in ways that are not biblical. They start saying things like this: “Martha was all about working for God. She’s all about effort and activity for God. Mary was that more devoted person, which means she’s more resting and contemplative, and she sat and maybe even put her pinky and long finger together—maybe she’s so meditative and much more—her blood pressure was much lower, and she just enjoyed time basking in the fountain of grace at the feet of Christ. And over there, Martha was going, going, going and frenetic. And you know, those kind of Christians are always working, they’re always going,” and they make this contrast in this sermon by saying “contemplative life is the spiritual life; activity—oh, that’s bad. That’s those people. They’re trying to work, work, work for the Lord. The Lord doesn’t need your work. Stop working for the Lord. Rest in the palm shade of grace and love. Enjoy the Lord. Relax. Tranquil.” You’ve heard that sermon before.

Not the sermon I’m going to preach to you, okay? But it’s nuanced, and you need to catch this. If you think about these two words at the bottom of verse 39, you have to bracket these and define them. Do not take this out of context. You cannot read any passage of Scripture without seeing what these words and ideas mean in their context. “Had a sister named Mary ... sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to”—two words—“his teaching.” If I’m reading this for the first time and I don’t know Jesus, I’m going to ask a question: What is his teaching? What kind of thing did Jesus teach? I guess he taught—if he’s going to praise this girl—to rest and frolic in the shade of the palm tree of love and just become contemplative, maybe get looser-fitting clothing, and just chill out more and meditate more and don’t work so much. No. That’s not what Jesus taught.

What does Jesus teach? All kinds of things that related to all kinds of ways to live. Matter of fact, if a lot of people listened to Jesus, more or less, he was always telling people, “Do this, do that, change this, and work at that, and go after that.” And he’s done preaching—even ends sermons this way: “If you hear my words and do not put them into practice—man, you are like a foolish man who builds his house on sand; your house is going to fall.” He’s the kind of Lord who teaches and says, “Don’t sit around meditating, saying, ‘Lord, Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I say” (Luke 6:46). So clear is the Bible on this. In the book of James, it looks back on all that has been written and all that has been said and all that Christ has taught and says, “If your religion—your relationship with God—is all this interior, subjective faith and love and resting in Christ, and it does not produce works—can that faith save you?” James asks rhetorically. And the answer, of course, is no. That faith without works is—we’ve got a word for it—dead. It’s dead; it can’t save you.



“Yeah, but we want to be Marys—always going, going, going.” You know what? It’s exactly what Paul said. He says, “You be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord.” Epaphras—he worked so hard he worked himself to be ill for you. What a great hero of the early church. Paul said, “I’ve gone all out; I’ve been to the place where I’ve been absolutely at the brink of exhaustion. And I’m willing to keep going—to spend and be expended for your souls.” Oh, you’ve got to be like an athlete. You’ve got to work hard. You’ve got to be like a soldier and suffer hardship. You’ve got to be like the farmer and sweat it out and keep working and endure to the end.

Don’t pit tranquil, interior, contemplative Christianity with working Christianity. You cannot pit those—not based on this text. Because if you say that, you don’t know his teaching. At some point, Mary—sitting at the feet of Christ—is going to hear Christ talk about service. She’s going to hear him talk about putting his words into action. She’s going to hear him talk about being hospitable—just like Martha is doing right over there. Matter of fact, if you don’t believe that, here’s the summation of the New Testament teaching: Romans 12:13—you want to “seek to show hospitality.” First Timothy, chapter 5—this one’s even more of a stinging passage. First Timothy 5:10 says your grandmother cannot be put on the widows’ list at the church to get any financial help from the church unless she is known for being hospitable—having the Christians in her home and even going out there and washing their feet from traveling into her house. If she’s not that kind of person who puts on that apron and is going to work to be hospitable, don’t even put her on the widows’ list.

That’s pretty harsh. It is harsh because God expects people who hear the teaching of Christ to work. And one of the things they’re supposed to do is be super hospitable—open up their home, have people in the house, and work hard to make sure while everyone else is sitting around eating that they’re there—even washing their feet. That’s not needed today—so don’t offer to wash my feet when I come to your house. But if you prepare a meal, or you work on getting everything ready, and you put nameplates out—totally good, totally godly, totally biblical.

Well then, what’s the problem? I had you highlight the three words. It’s not that Martha was serving. It’s not that Martha was serving hard and working hard. It’s not that she was going to be an excellent hostess. That was not the problem. The problem is: she was distracted with all of that—distracted from all that with all that; that she was, because of all that, anxious and troubled about all of that.

Now, here’s the thing you’ve got to catch. Keep this in mind: Mary sits long enough at the feet of Christ, she’s going to be told by grace to get up and serve. Martha’s serving would have been fine had she been able to serve—somehow maintaining what Mary had going on, which is the focus on the person of Christ, devotion to Christ, the reception of the word of Christ. But in this case, her serving



kept her from doing all of that. Her serving kept her from receiving the teaching of God. Her serving kept her from loving, in her service, the person of Christ.

Number two: we have to distinguish between service and distraction. Just like we saw acceptance was something we all do, devotion is something we need to do in greater degrees. In this case, service is good—but service is good until it becomes a distraction. Sin, of course, is a distraction. But what I’m trying to say is that good and godly things become a distraction when they’re not done in view of Christ.

Think about what the Bible says—think of Colossians talking about your work ethic: “Whatever you do, do your work heartily.” Period? Bible scholars, is that how it ends? “Do your work heartily, as unto the Lord.” Do you see the combination? I’m supposed to be always abounding in the work of the Lord. But I better not be abounding in the work of the Lord devoid of that whole focus and receptivity to the Lord himself. I better not be working heartily “as unto the Lord” without really working unto the Lord. When my work and my focus and my activity somehow extract the person of Christ and are not a part of that, or in some way inhibit my connection to the teaching of Christ—that I no longer receive it—then it’s wrong.

Unique that I work here at the church, and I’m surrounded by—and have the privilege and opportunity to humbly lead—my team here at the church and sit around with all these people. When I meet with the whole staff on Wednesday, I look around that big table. And we’re all there. We share a staff lunch on Wednesdays. And we talk about life and all kinds of ministry issues. And I look around and I see these servants giving themselves to God’s work, and they are working hard. And if I sat there and went around the table and said, “Hey guys, just let me ask: how are you doing with your relationship with God? Hey, tell me about your time in the Word. Tell me what you’re learning in Christ.” And if I had answers like, “Oh my—I’ve had no time for that. I haven’t spent time in the Word for, I don’t know... Related with Christ? I don’t know... It’s been so long... I haven’t given that much thought.” I mean, there’s not one person around that table I couldn’t say isn’t abounding in the work of the Lord. But if that work, at any point, becomes a shield or a blind or some kind of barrier to me in my relationship with God, then it’s become a stumbling block.

Remember the old line? I do remember, at least, when I was a new Christian and picked up a big, fat, leather-bound, worn Bible and some old-time preacher said: “You know what guys? This book will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from this book.” You heard that line? Tweet that one out, right? Now, that’s a good line. That’s a good one-liner. But when you think of sin, what do you think of? Well, I think part of what’s defined as sin is whatever keeps you from that book.



When does serving Christ become sin? When that service to Christ keeps you from that book. You're supposed to go out, by the way—Christian husbands and fathers—be the leader of your home and provide for your family. That's a good and godly thing. If you don't provide for your family, you're worse than unbelievers. That's a godly thing. When does that godly thing become a sin? When I come up to you—just like I come up to the people at that imaginary staff meeting you just thought of—and say, "How's your time in the Word?" "Time for that? All this traveling at work—all this stuff going on—I'm just so busy." "How's your relationship with Christ?" "I don't know... I haven't really checked. I guess it's where it was a year ago." Then that good thing you're doing—it's become a sin. It's kept you from the growth that you should be having in Christ.

Our theme verse for Partners—what is it? 1:10–12. Great passage. Listen to it: "Walk in a manner that's worthy of the Lord"—I want to do that. I want my life to be characterized by things that are biblical and right—"fully pleasing to him"—I love that: the person in view; please the Lord—he has feelings—"bearing fruit in every good work"—I'd like to be full of a portfolio of good, rich good works, that's great—"increasing in the knowledge of God." Now think about that. If activity somehow puts that to a stop, that's a problem.

Moms, it's a godly thing for you to raise those kids, disciple those children, shape that character, build character—do all those things with those kids in that busy home that you have. That's a good and godly thing. But if I came up to you and said, "How's your relationship with God's Word—'increasing in the knowledge of God'?" "I just... Come on... You don't know my kids. I just have no time for that." You've got a good and godly thing—now that's become a barrier to your relationship with the person and your growing knowledge of the person. Something's keeping you from the book.

Okay—here's the twist. Ready for a curveball? Here it comes: the book itself can become a barrier to the person. No—just stay on track with the sermon and understand it. The book itself—the book itself—can become a barrier to the person. Jot the reference down if you would: John 5:39–40. John 5:39–40 is a great statement that typifies the problem with the Pharisees. Remember the Pharisees? Jesus didn't get along very well with the Pharisees. Read Matthew 23 if you want a good dose of how much he did not like the Pharisees. He didn't like the Pharisees not because they weren't well-versed in the Bible or spending time in the Bible. Oh, they knew the Old Testament. They were in it; they read it; they memorized it; they had a lot of activity with it. But they were very selective about the reading of it and their application of it. And because of that, they failed to connect to the person that the book was pointing to. Connected a lot with the book—a lot of debates about whether there was a resurrection or not, a lot of debates about a lot of things—but when it came down to the person behind it all, it wasn't there.



He said, verse 39: “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life.” And I’m thinking, “Don’t we?” Well, we do. But there’s the centerpiece of that all—this eternal life in a person. That’s the next verse. He says, “And yet that book—those Scriptures—they bear witness of me. They speak of me. And yet you refuse to come to me so that by me you might have eternal life.” The problem for some of us, even in our religious duties, is that we don’t even connect with God when we’re spending time in the Bible. It becomes another busy task that we do. And instead of doing that to the Lord—working unto the Lord—in this case studying unto the Lord—it’s just study.

Here’s another one—going to get real complicated now. I’m about to tell you something, and I think it’s very important. It’s the third question on the discussion questions on the back of the worksheet, and it’s very important for you to analyze that and get into that. But even prayer can become a barrier. What I’m about to tell you is this: prayer can become the best diagnostic to prove whether or not you’re just engaged in activities or really serving the person and connecting with the person. In other words, if I’m finding I have a prayerless Christian life—well then, of course, how can you be relating to the person of Christ, devoted to the person of Christ, loving the person of Christ through your activity—your evangelism, your service, your Bible study, whatever it is? Well, you can’t if you’re not talking to him. That’s why I look up the First Thessalonians passage—we should be praying often, all the time, connecting. I don’t want to sit there, go through my Christian day, and not talk to God.

But James chapter 4 reminds me that sometimes I can be praying, but I’m praying about all the wrong things—things that are about me. Now follow this: in my evangelism, I can be, in my evangelism, going into an evangelistic encounter—I want to share Christ with my coworker—and I’m praying, but I’m only praying really, if you analyze my prayers, about things that relate to me: “God, I don’t want to not have the answers here. I don’t want to look like a fool. I don’t want to, you know, not be able to respond to everything he says.” I really am not concerned about introducing a person to this person and saying, “I want them to rightly receive that.” I’m thinking about how I’m coming off as a messenger, and do they think I’m going to be stupid? All my prayers—even in the subtlety of that—become more focused on me. And now all of a sudden all my prayers are about me. And in essence, my prayers about me are trying to use God to make my life advance and be better, as opposed to seeing myself as a servant of Christ advancing Christ and his cause. So prayer is a very helpful diagnostic as to whether or not I’m serving a person or just engaged in activity. And yet even prayer itself, if it’s not rightly done—thankfully we’ll study this for several weeks coming up—can be something that I realize, “Hey, this is just a distraction too,” as I’m first praying about things that make God the commodity in my life.

Much more I could say about that, but time has—we have a time warp—it sped up during this. Not for you, I realize, but for me things are going quickly here.



Number three: verses 41 and 42—let’s read that again. “But the Lord said, ‘Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things.’” That’s the problem. “But one thing is necessary.” Now, it seems like a lot of things are necessary if we’re going to have lunch, right? That would be the sarcastic response, I suppose, to grace. “Now, there are a lot of things that are necessary—if we don’t get this meal done, none of us are going to eat today.” But he says, “One thing is necessary, and Mary—your sister—has chosen the good portion.” Underline that. I know we use that word sometimes about meals. This Greek word is much more clearly in the category of meals. Mary has chosen a meal. I know you’re busy working to get a meal, but the meal—the portion of the meal—she’s chosen is the better portion. And I’m not going to take that portion away from her. That’s the good portion.

And here we have one more time the tie between food and the *logos* of Christ—the word of Christ. Here’s Mary feeding on the word, relating to the person of Christ, who eventually would teach her to get up from his feet and serve. That’s true—it’s coming. It would come eventually, inevitably. Right now she’s feeding on that word. And that’s more important than even the food we would eat at lunch. Is there any other question? The little one that comes to mind—Sunday School graduate—right out of the gate: where do we see that contrast where Jesus starts metaphorically talking about food in terms of evangelism and the meal that was sitting before him—the real food? John chapter 4—woman at the well. We brought that up early in the series. They bring lunch. They come in from Sychar to feed Christ. Christ is sharing with the woman at the well. They say, “Why don’t you eat, Rabbi?” And he says, “I have food you know nothing about.” See, the food that really sees the service to the Father—in our case, the service to Christ—is the kind of food we want to feed on. And sometimes that food is seen as the most important food of all. And sometimes other important food—that means priorities, things that are good—those need to fall off the table. That’s the problem with priorities: priorities always pit one thing against another, and one thing is going to win and another thing is going to lose.

And because this is not, you know, so overly simplified that we’re starting to think, “Well, Christianity is about choosing good things and not choosing bad things.” No—real, thoughtful Christianity is recognizing it’s always a decision between better and best. We’re always making distinguishing features between good things. And so we have to decide, “What’s the best thing?”

Number three: we need to—as I often say—we need to distinguish between what’s urgent and important. The urgent may be good. Was it good to serve Christ a meal? Yes. How good was it? Super good—super important. But there’s something more important, and you need to be able to prioritize that.



Now again, this is a historic situation. Christ is physically there. He has real teeth. He's going to eat real food in that house. And through those teeth and with that tongue he's speaking to Mary—and hopefully Martha, if she'd pay attention to him. That would be going on. And that's not something you're going to have an opportunity to do this week. But if we did—if we did—it would change your schedule, I hope. I hope you don't think we play golf all week and work on the weekends. You know that's not true. We could only play golf on Monday if only we were not tired. And then—if we got good at golf—but we don't. At least I don't. And most of the guys on the staff I've golfed with certainly don't. So we get a little rest at the beginning of the week—most of us at least. And then the week ramps up. And really, if you want to see the church just at its frenetic craziest, drop in on a Friday. Usually Friday, things are going crazy. We're getting ready for the weekend. And things are nuts. So all the activity.

And I thought about this as I'm trying to hit my deadlines on Friday—which are discussion questions and then summary statements and emails to home fellowship groups and all the things we're doing to get ready for the weekend. We've got a funeral on Saturday; we've got all kinds of things going on on the weekend. So there's a buzz of activity—it is frenetic all over the campus. And as I'm coming out to get my worksheet proofread, I'm thinking about the fact that, hey, you know what—can you imagine if what I'm here about to preach about were to actually happen? Christ were to show up on some, you know, bus or motorcycle—or however you envision him coming in—and he comes in, and I say, oh, hey—through the intercom (which we never use, but we have; I could really have fun with that). But let's just say I used it: “Boom—hey company—staff—people—Jesus has just pulled up. He's going to be in the conference room. He's going to start teaching in five minutes.”

Now, there were so many people running around here on Friday—crazy—full-time, part-time, volunteers—it was nuts. And if I said, “Christ is going to teach in five minutes in the Compass Room,” I hope that you would be hearing a sermon today without a worksheet. I assume that a lot of things wouldn't have got set up. I would think a lot of things for the Focal Point dinner on Friday would not have happened. Because we would recognize there's something much more important here right now. It's obvious. The literal physical Christ is here. Leave those very good things that in any other context would be very important and very good—but let those die so that this priority—that's the ultimate priority—can win.

Now, I can't preach—because I have no time right now—on all the ways we distinguish that, but let me give you some biblical examples—three verses. Throw them out there—don't look them up, but write them down if you would—that show there are many really good things that sometimes you need to leave and say, “Forget it.”



Classic one—Sermon on the Mount—Matthew chapter 5. Matthew 5:22–24. Jesus says it’s so important that you’re not in sin in your relationships and have something you could resolve—it’s within your power to be at peace with your brother—and you’re not at peace because you know you’ve got to solve that but you didn’t want to solve it. But you right now are next to bring to the priest your offering. Now there’s only one huge altar there at the Temple Mount. Jesus is giving an illustration they could all envision: Herod’s temple, all this stuff—one big hibachi, if you will; one barbecue in the middle of all this—why going to church in the Old Testament smelled so good. Anyway, you’ve got your animal and you’re going to bring that animal—which is going to feed the Levite and their kids and all of that—and it’s your turn. Your turn. And the priest turns to you. And the Bible says you’ve got your offering and you’re next to go to the altar. And you’re there. And if you remember that you’ve got this problem, it says, “Well, finish because you’re next in line.” Then maybe you can make sure to put it on your Day-Timer to go figure that... No. “Leave your gift there at the altar and go.” Even if you’re there and you have the most pressing thing, and it’s right there, and you could do it and it’s godly and it’s biblical—leave it, because there’s something more important.

What does that tell me? That tells me that I don’t care if you’re about to share the gospel with someone—if you’ve got outstanding sin with a brother, which means you’ve got a sin with God and it is not resolved—that takes priority. There are things like that all over the Bible.

The Lord’s Supper—1 Corinthians chapter 11. 1 Corinthians 11:27–28 says that, “Listen, if you’re sitting there about to take the elements of the Lord’s Supper—remember the death of Christ—and you have not examined your life, wait. Examine yourself first. Spend time talking to God. Solve that issue with the person of Christ, and then you can partake in the meal.” The good thing has to wait.

Luke chapter 9:59–60—we studied this not long ago. So important was it for us to care for our aging parents that if we didn’t, we’re worse than unbelievers. The Bible says in the desert, at the base of Mount Sinai, adult Jewish people were told by God in the Ten Commandments—it wasn’t a Sunday school lesson to the second graders—“Honor your father and mother.” What does that mean? You’ve got aging parents—take care of them. So important was that to the Jewish moral ethic and the command of God, you would think there would never be anything that would get in the way of that. Here’s a man saying, “My dad... I’ve got to nurse him at the end of his life—he’s going to die. I’ve got to take care of that.” And Jesus says, “I told you to go and proclaim the kingdom. Let the dead bury their own dead.” There are times when the command of God cannot be accomplished while you do those good things.

Is it good to raise your kids? Is it good to be at ballgames? Is it good to make money for your family—pay the mortgage? Is it good to do this, that, or the other—add anything good you want on the list—but



if there's a problem between you and God, that you would be disobedient to a command—that there's an outstanding sin—that a confession needs to be made—even the most godly act needs to lose in that battle between urgent and important.

Speaking of relationships—you've heard the story of the newlywed husband who heard his precious bride sneeze and jumped into action, right? "Oh! Are you sick? Are you okay? Let me get the tissues. Oh—let me go—I'll get some thicker socks. I don't want you to get chilled. Let me rub those feet. Are you all right?" Five years later—it's not that way though, is it? "Sounds like you're coming down with something. Yeah—hope you're all right. If you need something let me know." Fifteen years into it—she sneezes: "You okay? You sound sick. Sick... You've got to take more vitamins. Are you taking your vitamins? I'll pray for you, honey." Thirty years into the marriage—she sneezes: "Come on, man, cover your mouth when you sneeze! You want to get the rest of us sick in this house? Come on! You're sick all the time—what's wrong with you?" I hope that's not the reality in your marriage. Because we need to—we all need to—remember we're married to a person with feelings. They have a need. We love them. We ought to cultivate enough of a love and attention to the person that if they do have a need, we want to meet the need. It may not be quite as, you know, grand as a newlywed sneeze, but I mean at least I want to recognize, "Hey, I care about you. I'm not going to worry about myself in all of this."

Now, of course, technically speaking, Christ has no needs. Understand that. But he does "need" (air quotes here) us to go into the harvest field. He prayed for that. He said we ought to be praying for that—pray the Lord would thrust people into the harvest field. That's the need. There are people in our harvest field that you work next to, office next to, neighbors next to. He wants you to get involved in that. I hope you love the person enough—when that need has been surfaced in this series—to not say, "Yeah, I'll get to that," or "That's going to cause me problems," or whatever it might be—anywhere on that spectrum away from, "You know what? If that's it, I want to step up and meet that need," because I love the person. Not a task or a duty—it is those things—but it's more than that. We should love Christ enough to do what he asks us to do because we love him and care about him.

If you feel like you're somewhere away from the 5-, 10-, or 20-year point with your Christian life, it may be that you need what Christ had to say to the Christians at Ephesus in those postcards in Revelation chapter 2. He said, "You left your first love." Used to be different. I'd say something—there was something in the Scripture—you read, you responded. But you're not doing it anymore. "Remember the height from which you've fallen." Remember how it used to be when I sneezed. "Repent and do the deeds you did at first." And when you're rushed, try to meet that need. And maybe some of us do, and we say, "It's not like that anymore." Maybe you're Martha in that regard—just running around trying to check the boxes, and it's not about the person anymore. I pray that might change based on the sermon today.



Let's pray.

God, thanks for this crew hanging with us through this series—talking about something that's very challenging for us to go out on a limb and be vulnerable and share the gospel with people. And we've learned a lot about that and talked a lot about it. But I pray as we end this with five verses that could be applied in a number of topics—I mean, serving is the topic on the table—but certainly applies to our evangelism as well. We want to engage in it for the right reasons—doing it as unto the Lord, doing it with you in view, doing it because we love you; doing it not because it's a distraction or we're troubled or anxious over it, but because we do it out of a great zeal and devotion to you.

So develop that more in our hearts this week as we draw near to you—praying more often and praying for the right things, knowing that we're here for you to advance your cause, not vice versa. I know you love us—you do great things for us. But God, let us remember we're bondservants of Christ. And let us live that out in very practical ways this week. I pray one of them is—obviously and markedly and clearly—that we're willing to speak up for you in the non-Christian world in which we live.

Thanks. So we're going to turn our attention to prayer here in the next chapter. Make that a great series that will help us to be much better at praying and speaking to you the way we ought to—speaking to you more often. Thanks for your word that's living and active—it's sharp; it changes our lives because it discerns the thoughts and intentions of our hearts. Dismiss us now, God, I pray, with clarity about your word. In Jesus' name, Amen.