

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
September 27, 2020

One Thing

Luke 10:38-42

In C. S. Lewis's book *The Screwtape Letters*, a senior devil gives advice and instruction to his nephew, a junior devil, in the art of temptation. According to Screwtape, one of the keys to distracting Christians and leading them away from God is noise. Screwtape says, "The way we're going to do it is to make the world so noisy that people will not be able to hear their hearts. We have our best specialists working on it but we're not quite there."¹

One person has written an updated version of some of Screwtape's instruction, which includes this piece of advice:

It is down-wrong delicious that you are able to entice your assignments into believing that quiet and solitude are boring and a waste of time. We must be the demon in the whirlwind, invading their private space, cluttering their innermost being with commotion and non-stop entertainment. Remember: our greatest ally is constant and pervasive stimulation.

Make these loathsome creatures feel empty without an iPhone in hand or a TV blaring in the background. Tune their alarm clock to a raucous station with bombastic DJs. Convince them that they need to watch *The Today Show* to keep up with the news. Arrange birthday parties for their urchins at Chuck E. Cheese and for adults at Dave & Buster's. Call their cell phone on their way to work and especially during meals. Put TV screens in restaurants, waiting rooms, and airplanes—anywhere humans might have time to sit and reflect. Make sure every restaurant serenades them with the latest pop tunes, and turn up the volume so it's impossible to have a quiet dinner and a focused conversation.²

In today's text from Luke, it looks like Martha might be a tool of Screwtape, who wants to distract Mary from her devotion to Jesus. Just when Mary is trying to give her full and undivided attention to our Lord's instruction, Martha is in the kitchen rattling pots and pans. At first, Martha tries working a little louder, hoping to get Mary's attention. She even lets out a couple of throat-clearing grunts, thinking Mary might notice and get up off her butt. But Mary doesn't budge.

So Martha decides to take a more direct approach. You might think she would go straight to Mary and say, through clinched teeth, "Hey Sis, would you mind coming in the kitchen and giving me a hand with dinner?" But instead, Martha takes her case to Jesus, and expects him to intervene on her behalf. Maybe Martha thinks that since Mary is so good about paying attention to Jesus, she'll listen if he tells her to go and help make dinner. Or maybe Martha thinks that Jesus himself is the distraction in this situation. He's the one keeping Mary from more pressing duties in the kitchen. Whatever her exact thinking, Martha says to Jesus, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" (v. 40)

"Martha, Martha," answers Jesus, in a gentle yet scolding tone. "You are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her" (vv. 41-42). There has certainly been plenty of debate

and discussion about exactly what Jesus means. It's not easy to sort out why he praises serene and silent Mary over hectic and hardworking Martha.

After all, Martha is only doing something that's appropriate and expected in that day and time. She's practicing hospitality. She's welcoming and showing kindness to strangers. As Luke says, "Jesus and his disciples were on their way..." (v. 38). And remember that earlier in this same chapter, when Jesus sent out his followers, he said, "When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is set before you" (10:8). So in our passage, he's doing what he told his disciples to do. He's accepting hospitality. And Martha is working hard to show hospitality. In this way, she's supporting the mission of Jesus. That's a good thing.

We need to be careful about coming down too hard on Martha for her busyness in the kitchen. She's just being a good host, in a culture where hospitality was highly valued. But in this particular case, Luke describes her as "distracted" (v. 40). And Jesus says that she's "worried and upset about many things" (v. 41). Earlier, in the parable of the sower, Jesus spoke about seed that falls among thorns, representing those who don't receive the word because they're preoccupied with "life's worries, riches and pleasures" (8:14). Maybe Jesus thinks that Martha's flurry of activity in the kitchen falls into that category.

Andoni Luis Aduriz is considered one of Spain's most influential chefs and creative restaurateurs. His restaurant has been ranked as the fourth best restaurant in the world and his kitchen credited with many advances in the culinary world. In an episode of the Netflix show "The Final Table," Aduriz talked about his pursuit of innovation and described an unorthodox approach he takes to his work, namely, that he closes his restaurant for a third of the year. He said, "We close the restaurant [Mugaitz] for four months a year. We realize that if we wanted to do something truly important we have to stop, reflect, and discover new ideas."³

Hospitality is good and important, but at this point in the evening, Jesus would probably recommend that Martha close things down in the kitchen, or at least step aside from what she's doing for a while, in order to reflect on matters that are even more important. This story is less of a condemnation of what Martha is doing and more of a commendation of what Mary is doing. While Martha busy is preparing to feed her guests, Mary is busy receiving the food that Jesus is serving, the nourishment of the word of God.

From the standpoint of the Christian life, both are necessary. Sometimes being a faithful disciple and showing devotion to our Lord means acts of mercy and deeds of compassion. Remember that our text follows right on the heels of the parable of the Good Samaritan, which Jesus concludes by telling an expert in the religious law, "Go and do likewise" (10:37). Then we get the story of Martha and Mary, where the accent is on slow down and pay attention. Side by side, these stories remind us that in the life of a disciple, active ministry and life-giving Word, serving and being served, go hand in hand. As one commentator has summarized it, "There is a time to go and do; there is a time to listen and reflect."⁴

In pandemic circumstances like the present, it may feel like the stress is more on listen and reflect. After all, so many of the things that we're accustomed to going and doing are either canceled or closed. Though various parts of our lives have reopened to some degree, we're still in more of a stay-at-home, keep-your-distance mode. Sadly, one of the great losses during this period has been scaled-down hospitality. We've missed out on a lot of family gatherings, restaurant parties, church fellowship meals, and other sorts of opportunities to open our hearts and our homes to others. What to do when we've got all this extra time and space to sit, think, and reflect?

This is where technology often shows up with an answer. You may be spending more time at home, but thanks to high tech, you can do so much more from home. You can work from home, shop from home, go to school from home, socialize from home, worship from home. While the situation may be far from ideal, we can be thankful that we have these tools to help us continue with many of our daily activities, tasks, and relationships.

But at the same time, technology creates some of the greatest opportunities for distraction. The same tools that enable us to work, learn, create community, and do business can also divert, deceive, and distract us from some of life's most pressing and important business. Rather than attending to the most significant matters before us, we often end up clicking link after link in an endless chain of electronic information that may very well not lead to the kind of transformation we need most.

Author Andy Crouch tells about a period when he spent several weeks away from all the screens in his life. The desktop, laptop, tablet, email, television—he set all of them aside, though he kept his phone for messaging his family and friends. He says that compared to his normal life, “in which a rectangle is glowing in front of me seven to nine hours a day, it was a dramatic and initially disorienting change.” As one writer has summarized Andy's experience:

You might expect Andy's description of this time away from screens to focus on what he missed about all the things he gave up. Instead, Andy's recollections are about everything he gained during that season. He worked on his piano skills for the first time in twenty years. He exercised more and read great books. He finished some projects around the house. But the biggest blessing of this season was “a small measure of attention,” which Andy describes this way: “an ability to calm the noise enough to read and cry over a story, or to listen with a friend to one short passage of Scripture read over and over, four times with long silences in between. And the prerequisite for that kind of attention—though I would not want to exaggerate how much I managed to attain it—was a sense of my own smallness.”⁵

There in Martha's house, with pots and pans rattling in the background, Mary laid aside everything else, sat at the feet of Jesus, and experienced that blessing called “a small measure of attention.” Undistracted, undiverted attentiveness to the teachings of our Lord.

What Martha was doing was valued and necessary. But in that space and moment, what Mary was doing was most necessary. Food and hospitality were important, but the bread of the word was most important. Jesus tells Martha that “only one thing is needed.” That one thing is actually more than just a thing. It's a person. It's Jesus himself. He is the one thing needed.

In this season of uncertainty, when we've been forced to slow down, step back, and surrender some of our busyness and sense of control, there are still plenty of things that clamor for our attention. Just because we're living through a pandemic doesn't mean that all the noise has vanished and our culture of distraction has gone away. Now as much as ever, we need to be discerning. We need to be feeding on the word that enables us to distinguish between right and wrong, between truth and falsehood, between wisdom and foolishness, between what's passing and what's eternal. We need to be able to recognize not only what's good but most of all what's best. We need to be able to differentiate between what's just an appeal for our momentary affection from what's worthy of our lasting love. In an atmosphere where we're constantly bombarded by many, many things, we need to focus on the one most needed thing, our Lord himself.

¹ Quoted by Robert Spitzer, “Distraction & Discernment.” Spitzer Center Blog. Accessed September 23, 2020 <<http://spitzercenter.org/distraction-discernment/>>.

² Jeffrey D. Breshears, "The Kingdom of Noise: A Screwtape Letter for the 21st Century." The Areopagus website. February 14, 2013. Accessed September 23, 2020 <<http://www.theareopagus.org/blog/the-kingdom-of-noise/>>.

³ Netflix's "The Final Table," Episode Two, Season One.

⁴ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox, 1990) n.p.

⁵ Trevin Wax, *This Is Our Time* (Nashville: B&H Books, 2017) n.p.