



ADULT STUDY

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 3

Qualities of Discipleship: An Adult Lenten Study

Disciples Take Time to Learn from Jesus

Introduction

The previous two sessions have recounted dramatic experiences that tested the disciples' faith and resolve as they left home, family, and livelihood behind to follow Jesus. This session turns to the faith experience of people who did not leave home and family to become disciples of Jesus. The story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38–42; John 11:1–12:8) does not take place on a storm-tossed sea but in a quiet home. These two women disciples were not named among the twelve core disciples, and yet they were also devoted followers of Jesus.

The story of Mary and Martha augments the Gospels' story of the pattern of discipleship in several ways. First, Mary and Martha demonstrate that sometimes the disciplines of listening, learning, and worshiping are more necessary than doing, teaching, and serving. Second, these two disciples did not travel with Jesus; they ministered from their home. They allow a glimpse at the early Christian house churches. Third, they are examples of women who followed Jesus.

The Gospel of Luke: Disciples Who Both Listen and Serve

When Mary and Martha welcomed Jesus into their home (Luke 10:38–42), Mary listened at his feet (in the posture of a disciple) while Martha served. The word

used for Martha's service (*diakonia*) is the same as the one that describes ministry and discipleship elsewhere in the Gospels and in the letters of Paul, when some of Paul's coworkers are described as "deacons" (*diakonoi*). Mary's role of listening (*akouein*) illustrates another important aspect of discipleship: hearing, sitting at Jesus' feet to learn from him. To "sit at the feet" of a great master was to be a disciple. The word "disciple" (*mathetes*) literally means to be a pupil. Jesus often pairs "hearing" and "doing" in the Gospel of Luke. He redefines his family as those who "hear the word of God and do it" (8:19–21, emphasis added). He exhorts crowds of people that they must both *hear* and *do* God's word (6:46–49 and 11:28). Mary and Martha are like two halves of an ideal disciple: one acts and serves while the other listens and learns.

But in this story, Jesus says that Mary has taken the "better part" (10:42). The only reason this response does not come as a surprise to us is that we are so familiar with the story. Some interpreters have speculated that Jesus gently chides Martha not because she is serving, *per se*, but because she is overly anxious and distracted by her service. She is unable to attend to Jesus' words. "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing" (10:41–42a). Moreover, Martha wants Jesus to

make her sister stop listening to Jesus so that she can help: “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me” (10:40). But Jesus replies that “there is need of only one thing,” and “Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her” (10:42). It would be a mistake to conclude that Jesus meant women disciples should only listen passively and not serve actively. Nor is it very likely that Jesus was saying that the “need of only one thing” meant that disciples should only listen and not serve. However, in that moment, he is teaching Mary and Martha (and us) that our service can become so distracting, so full of endless tasks and anxieties, that we neglect taking time out to listen attentively to the Lord. Our activities can become more important to us than prayer, reading, and study, and so our discipleship is out of balance.

Mary’s choice to sit and listen at Jesus’ feet was “the better part” that would “not be taken away from her” (10:42). There are times when listening and attending to Jesus is better than checking things off the to-do list or trying to make sure everything is “just perfect” or thinking we have to be busy every minute to impress Jesus. Jesus modeled the balance of listening and doing in his own life. He made the important decision of which disciples would be among the twelve after he had spent the night alone on a mountain in prayer (6:12). And it was only after prayer that he came down the mountain to teach the crowds (6:17). Though crowds of people pressed around Jesus to hear the word of God and to be healed (e.g., Matt. 5:1–2; Mark 4:1; Luke 5:1; John 6:1–2), the Gospels record that Jesus was often in the habit of withdrawing from the crowds to pray, usually in a secluded place (e.g., Matt. 14:13, 23; Luke 5:16; 6:12). In the story of the transfiguration, Jesus withdrew from the crowds and took only three disciples with him up the mountain to pray, where they observed Jesus speaking and listening to Moses and Elijah, two of the great teachers of Scripture (Matt. 9:28–37). Jesus modeled the need to withdraw for prayer and study. He balanced active ministry with prayerful attentiveness to God’s word. The disciples also took time to receive Jesus’ teaching (Mark 4:33–34; 10:23–45; 11:12–26; 13:1–37). Jesus gave them extra instruction so that they could carry out his mission. The Gospels describe the disciples as being “with” Jesus (Mark 3:14; Luke 9:18; 22:56).

The Gospel of John: Disciples Devoted to Jesus

The Gospel of John provides a deeper look into Mary and Martha’s relationship with Jesus. This Gospel shows how Martha’s strong faith becomes stronger, and Mary’s devotion turns to a deeper understanding of who Jesus is.

John provides more details about Mary and Martha. They live with their brother Lazarus in the town of Bethany. That Mary, Martha, and Lazarus must already have had a close relationship with Jesus and great faith in him when the story opens becomes evident when they send word to Jesus in a simple, intimately worded message: “He whom you love is ill” (John 11:1–3). In this message, there is no begging, negotiating, or doubting. They do not have to ask Jesus to come—they simply state what is happening, and they know that he will.

Mary and Martha are disciples who model confidence in prayer. When Jesus arrives in Bethany too late to cure Lazarus, Mary and Martha each say to Jesus: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (11:21, 32). This sounds like a reproach and a statement of faith rolled into one. They clearly believed Jesus could have healed their brother, and they both expected that he would come in time to do so. That he did not would seem to be an example of unanswered prayer and an occasion to start doubting Jesus, but instead, it leads them to the next level of faith in Jesus.

Lazarus as a Disciple of Jesus

Some interpreters have speculated that Lazarus is the mysterious “disciple whom Jesus loved” (the Beloved Disciple) who reclined next to Jesus at the table (John 13:23) and to whom Jesus entrusted his mother’s care at the crucifixion (19:26).

In this story, it is Martha, not Mary, who listens and learns from Jesus. Martha tells Jesus that even though he did not arrive before Lazarus died, she knows that God will give Jesus whatever he asks (11:22). Jesus assures her that her brother will rise again, and Martha responds that she knows this will happen “on the last day” (11:24), because Jews in her time believed that the dead would rise on a future day of general resurrection. This teacher-disciple interchange sounds like a

test. Jesus tests Martha (your brother will rise again). Martha's response sounds like a dare (God will do whatever you ask). It is clear to Jesus that this disciple is ready for the next step of faith. When Jesus tells her, "I am the resurrection and the life. . . . Do you believe this?" Martha replies, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world" (11:25–27).

The Anointing Woman in Luke

The story of Mary of Bethany anointing Jesus' feet and wiping them with her hair (John 12) reminds many readers of the story of an unnamed woman in Luke 7:36–50 who is identified only as "a sinner." This woman bathed Jesus' feet with her tears and kissed them before anointing them with oil. Because of her great love and faith, Jesus forgave her of her sins (7:47–50). Some interpreters have identified this woman as Mary Magdalene, whom Jesus cured of seven demons (8:2), but the story does not make that connection clear. Nor do we know if there was more than one occasion when a woman anointed Jesus' feet or if Luke's story is about Mary the sister of Martha.

In John's Gospel, as in Luke's, Mary takes her place at Jesus' feet, but this time in a posture of devotion that reveals how profoundly she understands who Jesus is. In the Gospel of Luke, she merely listens to what Jesus says; in the Gospel of John, she acts on this learning. Mary takes a pound of costly perfume, anoints Jesus' feet, and wipes them with her hair (12:1–3). The fragrance of the incense filling the room is reminiscent of incense used in worship and the spices used in preparing a body for burial. Jesus recognizes that she had bought the perfume for the day of his burial (12:7). That Mary anoints Jesus before his death is a sign that she understands that Jesus will soon go to die, an insight that the twelve disciples had great difficulty understanding. Judas questioned why the costly ointment was wasted (12:4–8), and the disciples did not understand why he was riding into Jerusalem until after Jesus was glorified (12:16). In the Gospel of Mark, when Peter gave his confession of faith, he also questioned Jesus about his having to suffer and die (Mark 8:31–33). Mary's act of devotion in anointing Jesus before his

death proves her understanding of the deeper meaning of his suffering, death, and resurrection.

Home Talent

The discipleship of Mary and Martha differs from that of the itinerant disciples, because they are depicted always at home. They do not go with Jesus; instead, Jesus comes to them. Instead of going out to proclaim the gospel and heal, they provide hospitality and a space for quiet learning and devotion.

After Jesus' resurrection, the apostles founded Christian communities that initially met in homes called "house churches." Christians gathered for a common meal that included the Lord's Supper, heard stories about Jesus, and studied Jesus' teachings. Sometimes they read letters from an apostle that included instructions and encouragement (the letters of Paul were written to the churches he founded for this purpose). We do not know if Mary and Martha hosted a church in their home after Jesus' death and resurrection. To have a group come together for a meal, worship, and instruction would have required a very large house, and the Gospels simply do not say how wealthy they were or what sort of house they lived in. But in the Gospel accounts, their home life reflects a space where learning and worship took place and where service took a back seat to devotion.

Mary and Martha illustrate the prayerful, educational, and devotional side of being a follower of Jesus that would be a model for the house churches:

1. Mary and Martha provided an example of strong faith in Jesus: they believed that Jesus would come when they needed him. They sent for Jesus to help them when their brother was ill and dying (John 11:1–2), and they were ready to make the next step in faith when Jesus required it.
2. They knew how to celebrate Jesus' presence with them. Martha served a dinner for Jesus (John 12:1–2), and perhaps she also was serving him in this way in Luke 10:40. The early Christians met for a fellowship meal in which they commemorated the Lord's Supper and prayed for Jesus' presence with them.
3. They were eager to learn from Jesus. Mary sat at Jesus' feet and "listened to what he was saying" (Luke 10:39), a posture of discipleship that Jesus

called “the better part.” In a time of overwhelming grief, Martha talked to Jesus about hope and the meaning of resurrection (John 11:20–27).

4. They showed devotion to Jesus. Mary anointed him in an act of lavish devotion (John 11:2; 12:3–8), a form of praise and worship that acknowledged her full understanding of his coming death and resurrection.
5. They made statements of faith (John 11:21, 32). Martha confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, Son of God, and that he was the resurrection and the life (11:21, 25–27, 32).

Women as Disciples of Jesus

Popular Christian literature tends to paint a very bleak picture of the role of women in first-century Judaism. Based on selections from rather obscure early Jewish writings, some Christian interpreters have claimed that Jewish men universally regarded women as inferior and unworthy of learning. Therefore, these Christians conclude, Jesus was a very unusual Jewish man in accepting women as disciples.

We now know that these depictions of men’s attitudes toward women are not entirely accurate and certainly were not proscriptive for everyday Jewish life. The writings in question contain scattered misogynist attitudes that do not reflect Judaism as a whole. Evidence now shows that women went to the synagogue along with men and that they were not separated by gender as they worshiped and learned together. In fact, ancient inscriptions prove that women were leaders and benefactors in their synagogues. Girls whose families could not afford tutors would have learned the Scriptures from their parents at home, particularly from their mothers and other female relatives.

Before narrating the story of Mary and Martha in chapter 10, the Gospel of Luke has mentioned that there were women who traveled with Jesus and the twelve disciples: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and “many others, who provided for them out of their resources” (Luke 8:1–3). At least one of these women was married (Luke says she was the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza), an indication that they had left their homes and families behind, as had the twelve male

disciples. We know very little about these women who traveled with Jesus except that they helped support his ministry financially. Some interpreters have suggested that when Jesus appointed pairs of missionaries to go to every town (Luke 10:1), these pairs might have included women and/or married couples.

Mary and Martha are not named among the women who traveled with Jesus. We do not know if they were among the seventy missionary pairs in Luke 10:1 or even how much they might have provided for Jesus out of their resources. However, we do know that they modeled a discipleship of learning and worship that Jesus called “the better part.”

Conclusion: Disciples as Learners

The Old Testament is filled with testimony about the need for ongoing attentiveness to God’s word: “Make me know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me . . . for you I wait all day long” (Ps. 25:4–5). God commanded the people of Israel to recite God’s words to their children and to talk about them at home and away (Deut. 6:6–7; 11:19). Education and study has always been a mainstay of Jewish life, and this value was passed down to the early Christian communities. In 2 Timothy 1:5, we hear that Timothy’s faith is the direct result of what his mother, Eunice, and his grandmother Lois taught him. Timothy has known the sacred Scriptures from his childhood (2 Tim. 3:14–15). The apostle Paul encouraged Christians to study the Scriptures that were “written for our instruction” (Rom. 15:4). That Christians took time to gather for study and worship and passed down the teachings of Jesus and the apostles to future generations is evidence of their understanding about the importance of learning and growing in faith. Families and worship communities continue to provide the space and resources for learning about the faith for those who follow Jesus today.

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