

## **Jesus between the Seasons: HIS PRIORITIES**

### **Luke 10:38-42**

Well, here we are again right on the cutting edge of a brand new school year. If we took a survey this morning, I'm sure we would find a variety of thoughts and feelings about this. But that in no way changes the fact that it's happening.

So instead of either celebrating or dreading the fact, I want us to consider a topic that could actually help us as school begins. And even if you don't feel personally affected by the new school year, I think you will still find this topic beneficial.

We're taking a look at our priorities. In our text from the Gospel of Luke, we find Jesus sharing some insight into what He considers to be important.

Since following Jesus means that we're seeking to align our priorities with His, anything that provides insight into what Jesus emphasized during his life and ministry helps us to understand what we should emphasize in our lives today.

Do you ever struggle with priorities? Well, if you have ever second guessed yourself—questioning why you spent so much time, energy, effort, or money on something that didn't turn out to be nearly as important as you once thought—then you know what it's like for your priorities to get "out of whack."

Any new beginnings involve questions about how we will prioritize our lives. A new school year means that our children and youth have to decide about the time they will devote to school work--as opposed to athletics, music, dance, community service, church activities and, well, socializing—especially on-line socializing!

Nobody has an unlimited amount of time. In fact—surprise--we all have precisely the same amount of time. We can't add to our time. We can't subtract from it. We can't save it or change it in any way. It is what it is, and it's the same for everybody!

Don't see this as a bad thing. Whether we're at school or at work or whatever—there're always going to be people who are smarter than us, more gifted than us, better looking than us--you name it. But not a single one of them will have any more time than we do.

It's the same for all of us. Those who succeed are the ones who make the most of their opportunities because they have learned to prioritize—seeing what's most important and living accordingly.

Let's look at our text for today. In Luke 10, we find Jesus at the home of Mary and Martha. We get a glimpse into the lives of these two women. We discover something about what makes them tick. We see this in where they place their priorities when Jesus stops by for a visit. (Luke 10:38-42)

**<sup>38</sup>As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. <sup>39</sup>She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. <sup>40</sup>But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"**

**<sup>41</sup>"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, <sup>42</sup>but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."**

There are several lessons we could consider here, but the one we're focusing on today has to do with our priorities. I think Jesus is saying to Martha that on this particular occasion, her sister Mary has handled this matter of priorities better.

At least for now, Mary's decision to sit and listen to Jesus was more important than Martha's emphasis on preparing a meal. I don't think Jesus is saying that this is always the case, just that it was in this case. I'll try to explain this more later.

Jesus knows the importance of life, and wants us to be good stewards of our lives. He wants us to understand about priorities so that we will choose those that are best for us. Let's take a closer look at this.

**1.** First, let's consider **some problems we face with priorities.** The failure to establish good priorities in our lives leads to many wasted opportunities. This is often reflected in that nemesis we call procrastination.

Richard Armour wrote a little poem about this. It's called "9:00 to 9:15 AM." I've dusted my desk and I've wound up my watch,

I've tightened, then loosened, my belt by a notch.  
I've polished my glasses and removed a small speck.  
I've looked at my check stubs to check on a check...this continues  
until finally it says...I've sharpened each pencil till sharp as a  
dirk... I've run out of reasons for not starting to work!

Can you relate? Of course, this poem was obviously written long  
before the internet—or it would also have included browsing,  
tweeting, and e-mailing; then the poem's title would need to be  
expanded from fifteen minutes to maybe a couple of hours!

Do you remember the time that Jesus and his disciples met a  
man who had been born blind. This launched the disciples into a  
discussion about the reason for the man's handicap. "Who  
sinned?" they wanted to know.

Now, it was quite popular to debate such issues in that day—it  
was one of their ways of wasting time, I suppose--but Jesus  
would have none of that. He told them the question was off base  
and debating it would only cause them to miss their opportunity  
to help the man. Jesus' priorities were in order.

Students, you've probably learned this in school already, that we  
have three tenses or time frames in the English language: past,  
present, and future. Well, anytime our lives get stuck in just one  
of these time frames, we run into problems with our priorities.

If we, for example, dwell on the past tense, we will fall into one of  
two traps: either nostalgia or guilt. Nostalgia is a desire for  
something that's long gone.

It's a preoccupation with an experience, a relationship, a chapter  
in our lives that has now ended. No amount of hoping, praying,  
or fretting will bring it back. And if we're not careful, nostalgia  
will cause us to miss the opportunities we have today.

With nostalgia, we want to return to the past. With guilt, on the  
other hand, we regret the past. We would like to have it to do  
over--differently. But that's not going to happen either; so what  
good does it do us to carry around all that guilt? People who are  
caught up in the past--for whatever reason--are not going to set  
good priorities for their lives now.

But it's not just a preoccupation with the past that gets in our way. Concerns about the future can also do this. On one hand, there is fantasy—which is an unrealistic anticipation of what the future holds for us.

On the other hand, there's anxiety. This is when we worry about the future and assume that only bad things are going to happen to us. How can we set priorities for the present when we're agonizing over something that could possibly happen to us in the future. It's such a waste!

Now, this just leaves the present. So, are we only to live for right now, for this moment? In a sense, that's the only way we can live—but that's not to say that we should turn a blind eye to the past and future. There are lessons from our past that we need to have learned, and future consequences of any actions we take today that we need to be mindful of.

You remember Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son—a classic example of what can happen when our only concern is for the present moment. The boy forgot his roots and the lessons of the past. He also thumbed his nose at the future consequences of his actions. None of this turned out so well for him, did it?

**2. There are all kinds of pitfalls when it comes to setting priorities for our lives. Let's turn our attention now to trying to **find some solutions—solutions when it comes to setting our priorities.****

Doing this well requires wisdom—the kind of awareness of life that grows out of a close relationship with God and an understanding of what He sees as important for our lives.

There's a wonderful word that describes this important spiritual quality. It's DISCERNMENT. When we have good insight into a situation, that's called discernment. When we're able to look beneath the surface and find underlying truths, causes, motivations, and the like, we are being discerning.

Closely related to this is a sense of TIMELINESS. This just means doing the right thing at the right time. Mom and Dad would often tell me, "There's a time and place for everything." This meant, of course, that what I was doing was either at the wrong time or in the wrong place—or both!

When Jesus showed up at the home of Mary and Martha, Martha immediately got busy in the kitchen—we've got to feed these people, she thought. But Mary sat at the feet of Jesus and listened to Him.

This didn't go over well with Martha. The more she worked without the help of Mary, the more she fretted. Dinner wasn't burning, but she was! She was getting madder by the moment. As someone put it, Martha was "working like the devil serving the Lord." You hear that?

When our priorities are off, and life gets out of balance, and we're trying to cram too much in to each moment of our time, we get tired, and angry, and hyper-critical. Martha wanted to honor the Lord through this meal, but she ends up lashing out at him:

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

Our temperatures rise when school's starting, or some other big event is happening—like having dinner guests; but sometimes even when we're heading off on vacation—but we're still trying to cram so much into our lives that we have to let out some steam at the expense of others. Right? Can anybody relate to this?

Listen again to Jesus' response: <sup>41</sup>**"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things,** <sup>42</sup>**but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."**

We can pack our lives full of anything and everything and see all of it as having equal importance. Martha was doing something like that. Mary, though, was able to discern that some opportunities are more important than others. She devoted this moment to sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening. She was discerning. She set priorities.

**3.** How do we go about **setting our priorities**? If we took this story by itself, we might conclude that we need to just sit and watch and listen a whole lot more, and do a whole lot less—especially in the kitchen. (I did have a fellow tell me that when he needed to hide his wife's birthday gift, he would always put it in the oven...)

There are those dedicated servants who need to do a bit less and sit in the Lord's presence in order to listen and learn from Him

more. But let's not make this into a general rule, because there are lots of other folks who evidently believe that sitting and soaking it in is all that's required for following Jesus. When you think about it, we can't follow anybody by JUST sitting.

What I want you to understand is that Mary's way is not always better than Martha's. In this case, it was—just not always. If you have your Bibles open, I want you to see what happens in the rest of the tenth chapter of Luke.

It begins with Jesus commissioning seventy-two messengers to help him get his word out. He tells them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few." (Luke 10:2a) Evidently Jesus felt too many of his people were sitting down on the job already!

Next, we find an expert in the law challenging Jesus concerning what matters most to God. When Jesus asks him what he thinks, the man says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind," and "Love your neighbor as yourself." (v. 27)

Jesus affirms his answer and then says, "Do this and you will live." (v. 28) But that wasn't enough--the legal expert now wants the term neighbor defined.

This is when Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan, the man who crosses all the boundaries that were so important to this legalist in order to take care of the one who was injured and hurting. (vv. 30-37)

So look what Luke has put here to make sure we don't misunderstand what Jesus is saying to Mary and Martha OR what He's saying to the expert in the law, for that matter—because our priorities can get out of kilter in either direction! He begins the chapter with Jesus' concern that the workers are too few.

Then comes the question about what matters most with the answer that we are to love God with our whole heart and love our neighbor as ourself--and Jesus says DO this—not FEEL this way—but 'DO this and you will live.' Jesus then tells us about what the Good Samaritan did to make sure we get what He means!

It seems to me that the story of Mary and Martha is a reminder to us—a reminder that some Christians clearly need—that life in

Christ is not JUST about doing. Sometimes it is also about sitting at the feet of Jesus, intentionally getting ourselves in the presence of the Lord, for the purpose of listening and learning and growing in Him.

It's only then that we have something to do WITH! Do you follow this? I think Jesus wants us to find the right balance. In the Old Testament, people were instructed to labor for six days and then observe the Sabbath—a day for rest and spiritual renewal. The God who made us knows we need a proper balance in our lives.

As New Testament people, we have a lot more freedom to make these choices. We don't have all those laws prescribing our every move; but this just puts more of the responsibility on us to find the balance between working and playing and resting.

We also look for balance between worship and service, between being WITH the Lord and doing FOR the Lord, between getting dinner ready and sitting at the feet of Jesus. We need to find a healthy balance between duty and devotion.

In all the busy-ness of our lives, it's vital that we give priority to our time with the Lord. He comes first—this is what it means for Christ to be Lord.

Mary reminds us that some of this priority time is to be spent in worship, Bible study, and prayer—both public and private. But Martha reminds us, along with the Good Samaritan and others, that some of this priority time is also to be devoted to service. Just don't make the mistake of thinking the serving can take the place of the sitting and listening—or, vice versa.

First, we make sure that Jesus Christ is Lord of our lives. We give Him priority. Then it follows that we will listen to Him, learn from Him, and follow Him into the places of service He has for us—and in the process, our other priorities will fall into place.

And in this relationship with the Lord, our lives take on balance and purpose and fulfillment—all of which I promise you has been His priority for us all along. He wants only what's best for us—and finding His priorities and living by them is best!