

Rx for Worriers • Luke 10:38-42

If the Publisher’s Clearing House truck pulled up in front of your home and the representative came to your door, what would you do? Suppose the President of the United States came to your home. What would you do? What if your favorite movie star or musician showed up at your house? What would you do? If Steven Spielberg, Michael Jordan, Bill Gates or Oprah Winfrey showed up at your house, what would you do? Or, what if Jesus Christ came to your home? What would you do?

Here is what happened at the home of Martha and Mary, according to Luke 10:38-42 when Jesus visited them:

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called

Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. 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!”

“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “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.”

This is a classic case study of different personalities handling the same situation in very different ways. Let’s first review the case. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. En route he stopped at the home of his friends Martha and her younger sister Mary. We know from another biography of Jesus that Martha and Mary had a brother named Lazarus and that they lived in the village of Bethany about two miles from Jerusalem.

Hospitality is always important, but in those days it was especially important because they didn’t have hotels and restaurants for travelers as we do today. It was a blessing to Jesus to have

friends like Martha who opened her home to Jesus.

To Martha and Mary Jesus was very important. They both loved him and followed him. They were counted among Jesus’ most loyal disciples. It was an honor to them to have Jesus come to their house and they wanted to give him their very best.

Because it was Martha’s house and because of the way Martha was wired, she went overboard in preparations. We don’t know exactly what she did, but it’s not hard to guess. She probably received very short notice that Jesus was coming

and would soon be there. So she hurried to straighten things up, cleaning places and things that Jesus probably would never see. She wanted everything to be perfect.

And, she prepared the

best of meals with lots of food bringing out her best recipes. She wanted the meals to be just as perfect as the house.

Before talking about what happened next, I want to give the benefit of the doubt to both Martha and Mary. I assume that Mary did her share of the work. And, I assume that Martha spent some time with Jesus. But Martha and Mary quickly focused in different directions. Martha became focused on the preparations so that she didn’t make time for Jesus. Mary so totally focused on Jesus that she didn’t make time for preparing and serving the meal. At first, neither one noticed what the other was doing. Then Martha became upset when she realized she was doing everything because Mary had stopped working.

Has that ever happened to you? You thought you were in a partnership. You thought you were part of a team. Then one day you realize that you are giving most of the money, you are taking most of the responsibility. You feel angry, upset, ripped-off.

It’s common in a situation like that to blame someone else for what we don’t like, and Martha

Put Jesus first. Stop what you are doing and spend time with him.

was the same way. She decided to blame Jesus. Instead of taking responsibility for herself, she laid the responsibility on him, saying, *“Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”*

Occasionally people come to me and ask me to change the behavior of other people. Get the church to do it! Get somebody to fix things. Tell them what they are supposed to do. And that is pretty much the case here. Jesus came to her home. Martha became distracted by her tasks. She complained to Jesus and asked him to fix the situation.

In medical or in counseling terms there would be a distinction between what is called the presenting problem and the underlying or actual problem. Often what we say is the matter has nothing to do with what is really the matter. Martha’s presenting problem was that Jesus did not care and Mary was not helping. Jesus quickly diagnosed the case. He said, *“Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed.”*

The truth is that we do not fully understand all that Jesus meant by this statement. It is possible that Martha was preparing a buffet when Jesus only needed a cheese sandwich. He told her she was worried about many foods when he only needed one. In other words, she was doing what she wanted, not what he wanted. She was making unnecessary work that was really a waste because he wasn’t going to eat it, anyway.

Several years ago Charleen and I were invited to the home of some friends. We were told to arrive around 8 o’clock at night. They never said anything about food, so we ate a big dinner before going. They invited us into their living room for the first half hour and had some snacks and beverages. I wasn’t hungry but I ate out of courtesy more than need. It was then that they invited us into their dining room for a huge full course meal. Charleen and I looked at each other and decided we had to eat as much as we could. I thought I was going to get physically ill before the meal was finished. I wish I had remembered Jesus’ line when he said, *“You prepared many things, but only one thing was needed,”* that was a cracker!

But the amount of food wasn’t really the problem. The real problem was that Martha was worried and upset about things that she should not have been worried and upset about. It is a common problem. There are millions of Marthas in our world today. We are inclined to worry and get upset and then blame other people or find excuses to justify the way we feel.

I have read this story many times and have heard Bible teachers and students analyze Martha and Mary. Most of the time people try to make Martha the bad guy and Mary the good guy. It is presented that Mary really loved Jesus and Martha loved the kitchen. Frankly, I don’t see it that way. Maybe it’s because I identify too much with Martha. I like to do things and I like to do them right. If I were part of this story in Jesus’ biography, I would be in the kitchen helping Martha. So, it seems to me that Martha was a good person trying to do the right thing. She truly meant well, but she had a problem . . . and Jesus had a prescription to help her.

The first part of Jesus’ three-part prescription for Martha was to experience Jesus’ compassion. His words to her were not harsh, condemning or confrontational. He looked her in the eye and simply said, *“Martha, Martha”* There is warmth to his words. They are the words of a friend, not a critic. They are words of love, not anger. They are words of caring and compassion.

Jesus gives us a lesson here about how to criticize. There is helpful and there is destructive criticism. Jesus clearly wanted to help Martha.

Over the years I have received my share of criticism. Much of it is because I deserved it and much of it is because I deal with people and dealing with people always generates criticism. I have learned that those who confront and criticize me with anger and animosity usually trigger my defenses. They hurt me more than they help me. But those who know me, who speak my name with kindness, who genuinely care and want to help are the people whose criticism helps me the most. And that’s the way Jesus criticized his friend when he said, *“Martha, Martha. . . .”*

Whether your problem is worry, anger, distraction, upset or something else, I recommend

that the first place to experience the prescription for help is to hear and receive the compassion of Jesus. Jesus, the Son of God, comes to you with love, warmth and outrageous grace. He speaks your name. He knows who you are. He will not overlook or ignore problems, but he will always treat you with compassion. Take Jesus' prescription for worry and other problems. Accept his compassion.

The second dose of Jesus' three-part prescription is to understand the problem. Jesus was direct and simple: "*Martha, you are worried and upset about many things.*" Martha was fragmented. She was divided. She had lost focus and integration. She was overwhelmed by all she had to do.

Martha's problem is also a modern American problem. We stress ourselves out with all we want to do. Our lists are longer than the hours we have to do it. Our minds manufacture catalogues of everything that can go wrong. We are like volcanoes that build up pressure until we burst out in anger and frustration against the closest person. In Martha's case, it was Jesus.

Jesus gives all of life meaning, purpose and focus.

An interesting article by Wayne Muller in the Minneapolis Star Tribune described the modern Martha-problem very well. He wrote:

As the founder of a public charity, I visit the offices of wealthy donors, crowded social-service agencies and the small homes of the poorest families. Remarkably, within this mosaic there is a universal refrain, "I am so busy." I speak with people in business and education, doctors and day-care workers, shopkeepers and social workers, parents and teachers, nurses and lawyers, students and therapists, community activists and cooks. The more our life speeds up, the more we feel weary, overwhelmed and lost. Despite our good hearts and equally good intentions, our life and work rarely feel light, pleasant or healing. Instead, as it all piles endlessly upon itself, the whole experience of being alive begins to melt into one enor-

mous obligation. It becomes the standard greeting everywhere: "I am so busy." We say this to one another with no small degree of pride, as if our exhaustion were a trophy, our ability to withstand stress a mark of real character. The busier we are, the more important we seem to ourselves and, we imagine, to others. To be unavailable to our friends and family, to be unable to find time for the sunset (or even to know that the sun has set at all), to whiz through our obligations without time for a single mindful breath—this has become the model of successful life.

Because we do not rest, we lose our way. We miss the compass points that show us where to go.

That was Martha, and that's many of us. Martha didn't think she had a problem. She thought Mary had a problem. She thought Jesus

had a problem. She thought her problem was that they did not do what they were supposed to do. But Martha needed to understand what her prob-

lem was and admit to her need. She was too busy, too distracted, too worried. The problem was in her, not in others.

This does not mean that other people do not have to carry their share of the load. It does not mean that other people are not wrong. It does mean that we worriers need to start with ourselves. We need to understand our own problems and admit to them. That was Jesus' prescription for Martha and that is Jesus' prescription for us.

The third part of Jesus' prescription for Martha was to put first things first. He said, "*Martha, Martha, 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.*" Jesus explained that there was one necessary priority. Mary had chosen it and Martha should do the same thing. The one priority was Jesus.

Mary had stopped everything else and had spent time with Jesus. She sat at Jesus' feet. She

listened to what Jesus had to say. She was relaxed, renewed, refreshed and refocused. Her time with Jesus gave her a center and direction to life that would never be taken away from her.

The same prescription has been written for us. Put Jesus first. Stop what you are doing and spend time with him. At least once a day, sit at the feet of Jesus. Read the Bible. Pray. Share your needs. Be quiet and listen to what he says to your soul. In the midst of your busy-ness, stop and take time for Jesus. Make him your highest priority. Do the same with your finances—Jesus first. Do the same with your relationships—Jesus first. Do the same with your career—Jesus first. You will find that Jesus gives all of life meaning, purpose and focus. You will trust him for the things and people you cannot control. You will relax more, be happier and do what is best and right.

Now if you think the way I think, you have a huge objection to this whole line of reasoning. If we all do what is being suggested, how is the work going to get done? There are calls to return, appointments to make, meals to prepare, children to put to bed, sales to be closed. We don't have time for Jesus, for ourselves or for others.

Maybe you remember the central illustration in Stephen Covey's best selling book, First Things First. He tells about a business associate who set a large glass container on a table at a conference. He put in some very large rocks and asked the audience to tell him when the container was full. It didn't take long. Everyone agreed it was full. Then he brought out some gravel and poured it over the rocks, asking when it was full. When the gravel reached the top everyone agreed it was full. Then he brought out some fine sand and poured it over the gravel. The sand fell through the crevices until a lot of sand was in the container. Last of all, he brought out a large pitcher of water and poured it over the rocks, gravel and sand. The water filled the container to the brim.

Next he asked what would happen if the water went in first. It was obvious that there would not be room for the sand. What if the sand or gravel went in first? The rocks would have to be excluded.

The point was made. First things should go first. If the rocks are most important, they must go first or there will never be space for them in the crowded container. And don't worry; there will probably be room for everything else to fill in the crevices. The less important things of life will not be excluded, but they will have to find a way to fit around the rocks.

The question is: What is most important? What is first in your life? What is more important than anything or anyone else?

Martha's mistake was that she put the wrong things first. As a result, she became distracted, worried and upset. Her sister Mary got it right. She put Jesus first, so everything else fell in the cracks and crevices. Mary put Jesus first, and Jesus said, that "*will not be taken away from her.*"

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