

Luke 10:38-42

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[0 : 00] He made some bad choices. Those few words can say a great deal about somebody. He made some bad choices. And they're words that recognize a serious truth. Choices carry consequences.

And we're making choices all the time. The consequences of some of our choices are not hugely significant. But other choices that we make have consequences that are life-changing, for better or for worse. We mentioned in prayer the very sad news item concerning these three girls from the south of England, Kadisa, Shamima, and Amira, who are heading out, no doubt, filled with illusions of a heroic life, I don't know, to Syria. Maybe they've already got there.

But the CCTV images that we've seen have been of Gatwick Airport and heading to Turkey. And in fact, this morning on the BBC News website, I saw CCTV footage of the bus station in Istanbul of seemingly these three girls. And everything would suggest that they've made it into Syria. And we pray God would have mercy on them. But they have taken a choice. They've made a choice in what circumstances, under what pressures, we don't know. But they had a choice to make. And they've made a very tragic choice, which we fear will have very sad consequences. How important it is to choose well and how difficult it can be to choose well. This morning I want us to learn from a woman who chose well, who chose very well. Her name is Mary and her choice is commended by Jesus. Mary has chosen what is better.

Mary has chosen what is better. And I want us to consider Mary's choice with the help of two questions that we'll try and answer. First of all, what did Mary choose? To what is Jesus referring?

What did Mary choose? And then the second question, it's perhaps a very obvious question, why was her choice better? Why does Jesus describe her choice as better? So what was her choice and why was her choice better? What then did Mary choose? Jesus commends her for choosing what is better, but what was that? Well, the passage gives us the answer very clearly. We're told that in verse 39 of Luke chapter 10, she had a sister called Mary who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said.

[3 : 27] This is what she chose to do. She sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. Now, this is really one action, certainly one choice resulting in one action. But in that one action described, there are what we might call two intertwined elements, the sitting down at the Lord's feet and the listening to the Lord's words. And these two actions, these two connected actions, speak of two things. They maybe speak of more, but certainly two things that I want to highlight. They speak of devotion and they speak of devotion and discipleship. Let's think of each in turn. Mary, by what we are told about her, by the commendation she receives from Jesus, Mary, we can be very sure, was devoted to Jesus. She was devoted to Jesus. The picture painted is tender, it's eloquent. She sits at his feet.

She delights to sit at his feet. She can imagine no more delightful place to be than at the feet of Jesus. She is clearly devoted to Jesus. But the picture portrays for us one who is more than a devoted admirer, though she is that. She is also a disciple. The picture that is painted, that is presented, that is recorded for us here, is the picture of one who is a disciple of Jesus. The very posture that she is described as occupying is one that speaks of discipleship. That is where disciples sat and learned from the master, from the rabbi, at his feet. In Acts chapter 22, when we find Paul given the opportunity to speak to the crowds in Jerusalem following his arrest, he introduces himself with a brief autobiographical description of who he is. And this is what he says,

I am a Jew, born in Tarsus and Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel, according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God, as all of you are this day. But very particularly how Paul himself describes his training, him becoming what he was, educated at the feet of Gamaliel. That is where a disciple would sit, even literally, certainly metaphorically, to hear and to learn from the master.

Now, for us, in our context, in our culture, the picture of somebody sitting at another person's feet can appear less than dignified. When we think of who sits at the master's feet, I think we would tend to think of a pet. That's what pets do. They sit at the master's feet, and we can picture that.

But a man or a woman, a grown man or woman sitting at another man's feet, it doesn't seem very dignified to us, but not so in first century Palestine. There's another reference in Luke's gospel to a man sitting at the feet of Jesus, and that reference also is quite revealing, quite telling.

[7 : 13] Let's just notice very quickly in Luke chapter 8 and in verse 35. In Luke chapter 8 and verse 35, this is a man who had been healed by Jesus, who had been liberated from oppression. And there too, there is reference to where he was found. We read there in Luke 8 verse 35, when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone out sitting at Jesus' feet, dressed and in his right mind. Now, you might say, well, that's simply describing what happened to this particular man on this one occasion. But when I read that verse, what struck me and what impacted most was the curious juxtaposition of a man being described as sitting at the feet of Jesus, but then in the same breath being described as in his right mind. And what I draw from that, and I think legitimately, is that there is no greater evidence of sanity than sitting at the feet of Jesus. Now, that wouldn't be what the world would say. They would say, what folly, what foolishness, how undignified, sitting at the feet of another. But there is no greater evidence of sanity, of being in your right mind, than sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to him.

But of course, the principal reason for sitting at the feet of Jesus or Gamaliel or any other teacher was to learn. It wasn't simply to be there. It wasn't simply to identify with the one whose feet you were sitting at, though obviously you did do that. The reason you were there, the reason you wanted to be there was to learn. We're told that Mary was listening to what he said. And this is not the picture of some lovestruck teenager gazing into the eyes of Jesus, quite oblivious to what he is actually saying. Oh, it doesn't matter what he says. I just like listening to him. No, Mary is there because she wants to hear what Jesus has to say. She's listening intently to the words that he speaks.

She wants to learn from Jesus. Just being there isn't enough. Mary is listening. As a disciple, she listens to the master. And listening, of course, implies submission to his authority and obedience to his instructions. Nothing is to be gained from listening and then walking away unchanged, unmoved. No, she listens, recognizing his authority to teach, and she listens with the intention of obeying what he has to say. And what does she hear? What does she hear as she listens?

Well, she certainly heard Jesus' words of commendation for her, but she heard a great deal more. We're not told what it is that Jesus was talking about on this occasion, but to use Peter's language, she heard from the lips of Jesus' words of eternal life. And these are the words, I would contend, that drew her to that place because Jesus was one who spoke words of eternal life. And this is what Mary chose. This is what she chose. Mary chose what is better. This was her choice. She deliberately and consciously and consciously and carefully chose to be devoted to Jesus. She chose to learn as a disciple of Jesus. It doesn't just happen. You have to choose. Mary chose. It is a choice, and it's your choice. You need to choose. Will you choose what is better? Sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to Him. But let's move on. Having identified what it is that she chose, let's move on to this question. Why was her choice better? That's the way Jesus describes it.

There in verse 42, He addresses Martha, and in reference to Mary, He says, Mary has chosen what is better. I want to answer this question or consider this question by considering this word, this contrasting word, better, in three ways. Better than what? Better by far, and better for whom? So we're focusing in on this word that Jesus uses. He describes Mary's choice as better. And let's think about it in those three ways. First of all, better than what? The word better implies a comparison, and so begs the question as to what Mary's choice was better than.

[12 : 34] Okay, so it's better, but better than what? Well, that's not a difficult question to answer. It's very clear from the passage that Mary's choice was better than Martha's choice. That, I think, is very clearly what Jesus is saying. Her choice was better than Martha's choice. But in order to understand that, we need to think a little bit about Martha's choice. What can we say about Martha's choice? I think the first thing we need to say, in fairness to Martha, is that it was a good choice. Martha's choice was not a bad choice. Martha chose to serve Jesus, to serve Him devotedly and sacrificially.

Here He is, a guest in her home, and she is doing everything she can to make His stay as best as it possibly can be. There is nothing that concerns her more than serving Jesus well. How can that not be a good choice? It is a good choice. Her choice was a good choice. Jesus, at no moment, and on no occasion, says that it was a bad choice. He does say that Mary's choice was better, but that is not to be understood as Jesus saying that Martha's choice was a bad choice. It was a good choice. She chose to serve Jesus. It was a good thing for Martha to desire the very best for Jesus and His disciples. It was a good thing, to work tirelessly for the Master. It was a good choice, but Mary's was a better choice.

And that leads us on to say something else about her choice. It was good, but there is a sense in which it was flawed. Perhaps not the choice itself, the choice to serve Jesus, but what flowed from her her choice? Her choice to serve in the manner that she did brought unhelpful consequences. And the passage, I think, identifies three. We can call them somewhat gently unhelpful consequences. And Jesus Himself identifies them for us. First of all, we're told that she was distracted by all the preparations.

Then in verse 40, but Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. It was good that she wished to prepare in the way that she did, but these preparations distracted her, and clearly they distracted her from what was better. It left her with no time to sit at the feet of Jesus, to listen to Jesus. She was too busy. She was distracted by what she was doing. That was one unhelpful consequence of her choice. But it's also clear, and again, Jesus identifies this as being so, she was stressed out by her self-appointed responsibilities. In verse 41, the very words of Jesus addressed to Martha, Martha, Martha, Martha, the Lord answered, you are worried and upset about many things. I wonder how many of us, if we were honest, would say, well, that is speaking to me.

Worried and upset about many things. She's stressed out. We think stress is a 21st century preoccupation. Well, maybe it's particularly prevalent today, but Mary was, Martha was stressed out.

[16:13] You're upset and worried about many things. That was a consequence of her choice to focus on doing stuff for Jesus. But there's another unhelpful consequence, and this is maybe being very kind to her by describing it in that way. She was guilty of foolish and hurtful words towards Jesus, and if not too, certainly concerning her sister Martha. Then in verse 40, Lord, don't you care?

Don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me. Don't you care? Is that not an accusation framed in the form of a question? Don't you care? You're doing nothing.

Can't you see all the work that I'm doing? Don't you care? And what she thought of her sister? Well, I think the passage rather tactfully doesn't tell us exactly what she thought of her sister, but I don't think she was very well disposed towards her. Tell her to help me. She's doing nothing. I'm doing everything.

You see, this choice, it was a good choice to serve Jesus, was flawed in terms of the consequences that it carried. There's a very striking difference in where Mary and Martha are, if we think of this visually. Mary is at the feet of Jesus, and Martha is standing over Jesus, rebuking him for not caring.

A very different place to be. I wonder if we can identify with this picture of Martha. Can you identify with this picture of Martha? You love the Lord, you serve the Lord, but in all your busyness and activity, you've been distracted from that which is better. You are worried and upset about many things. You're perhaps just a little resentful towards others, the church, maybe even the Lord himself.

[18:30] You're unappreciated by those who seem to do so little in comparison to your exhausting efforts. Just a little like Martha. And maybe it's time for us to stop and reflect.

Do you really need to do all the stuff that is consuming you? Be it in church or outside of church, be it in your home or at your work, do you really need to do all that stuff? Is it all really that important? Is there nothing you could say, well, I'll just leave this to one side, that there might be time to do that which is better? I wonder if you need to, I wonder if we all need to urgently step back and establish priorities and focus on what is really important, on what is better, in the words of Jesus. Her choice was better. It was better than Martha's choice, but we can also say that it was better by far. Better by far. We could say a lot about how sitting at the feet of Jesus was and is better by far. We've already spoken of the devotion it evidences and the discipleship it represents. But I want to limit myself to highlighting and commenting on two expressions of Jesus found in the passage that demonstrate how Mary's choice was better by far. The first expression that we find used by Jesus is as he gently rebukes Martha for her feverish and frantic activity, Jesus explains to her that only one thing is needed. We'll read again from verse 41. Martha, Martha, the Lord answered, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Now what does Jesus mean by that? Some have suggested that Jesus is commenting on the mouth-watering spread of multiple dishes being served up by Martha to Jesus and the disciples. And that Jesus is saying to Martha, you know, one dish would be enough. You know, there's so much and it's great, it's good, but you know, really, just one dish would be more than enough. It's an interesting thought. But I don't think it does justice to what Jesus has in mind in speaking to Martha in that way. It may well have been Jesus' opinion that it wasn't necessary that the spread that Martha was preparing, but he's surely saying more than that. The one thing needed. Only one thing is needed. That one thing needed is that which was chosen by Mary. Mary chose not only what was better, but what was best. The one thing needed. To be with

Jesus, to listen to Jesus, to listen to Jesus, to fellowship with Jesus, and to do so in an attitude of loving and humble dependence. Just one thing is needed, and it is that thing that Mary chose.

And we can come to our own day, to today, and we can say confidently and with great assurance that nothing has changed. Nothing has changed. That remains the one thing needed. Life is full of stuff, good stuff and bad stuff. But at the end of the day, when weighed in the balance of eternity, just one thing is needed. To know and humbly sit and learn at the feet of Jesus, our Lord, and Savior. This is the one thing needful. Better by far. But there's another comment Jesus makes concerning Mary's choice that confirms that Mary's choice was better by far, and that is that he goes on to say that her choice will not be taken from her. They're right at the end of the chapter.

Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her. Now again, it may be that Jesus is in part responding to Martha's demand that Jesus send Mary back to the kitchen. And Jesus is making clear that that's not going to happen. What she's chosen is not going to be taken from her. I'm not going to send her away. You want me to send her away. Well, that's not going to happen.

[23 : 21] It may be that Jesus has that in mind, or that's part of what he has in mind in these words that he uses. But again, there must be more in mind in these words that he uses when he speaks of her choice and says of it, it will not be taken away from her. What Jesus is doing is recognizing that the spiritual benefits to be gained at his feet cannot be lost or wrested from us. Such time at the feet of Jesus, listening to him, is of profit for this life and for eternity. And it will not, it cannot be taken away from us. It is time well spent. How often do we busy ourselves with matters that are of passing significance and yet are careless concerning matters of eternity. And it is to this matter and to this concern that Jesus addresses himself when he commends Mary in this way and assures us that what she has chosen will not be taken away from her. Sitting at the feet of Jesus is better by far.

Now, we do have an issue as we try and apply this to ourselves. You see the picture here of a disciple sitting at the feet of Jesus. It's all very moving. It's all very tender, but we can't do that, can we?

Well, it is Jesus for us to sit at his feet. Well, the manner in which we can sit at his feet. At the feet of Jesus involves the same key elements that it involved for Mary. It involves devotion and it involves discipleship. We express our devotion as we seek God in prayer and in his word. We demonstrate our discipleship as we listen and learn and submit to and obey God's word. In our devotion, in our discipleship, in our following, in our listening, we do what Mary did. We make that better choice. Better by far. But let me just suggest one further thing or comment on one further thing in relation to this word better that Jesus uses. What Mary has chosen is better. And what I want to just think about is this idea of better for whom. Now, even as I just pose that, better for whom, you might say, well, that's a little bit odd because it's just so obvious. It's so obvious who this is better for. Mary's choice. Who is it better for? Well, obviously, it's better for Mary? It is better for Mary to choose as she chose. It's better for Mary to sit at the feet of Jesus and to listen to him. It's a no-brainer. Clearly, it's better for

Mary. And it was better for Mary, without doubt. But not just for Mary. It was better for Jesus. Have you ever thought from that perspective that Mary's choice was better for Jesus? Jesus took delight from having Mary seated at his feet. Jesus derives satisfaction and comfort from her rapt attention and devoted listening to his words of eternal life. The delight was very much mutual.

And this is important for us to grasp. We are to be delighted by Jesus, but we are also to be delightful to Jesus. Mary's choice was better for Mary, but it was better also for Jesus. But it was better for Jesus also in the sense of securing from Mary a more effective and useful service.

[27 : 28] Mary would not remain forever at his feet. She would, in good time, probably just a few minutes later, get up and head out to do her business. To the kitchen, to the garden, to the market, to her neighbor's homes, whatever it was that the day held for Mary. Mary would be up and doing.

But she would be up and doing all of these things, putting into practice, at least in some measure, what she had learned at the feet of Jesus. Her service for Jesus would be a more effective service and a more pleasing service to him, thanks to the time that she had spent at his feet. Better for Jesus, but better also for others. Mary will be a better server of others, thanks to the time spent at the feet of Jesus.

Less distracted, less fraught, less stressed out, less judgmental, less self-righteous. How much better was her service going to be, thanks to the time spent at the feet of Jesus, thanks to her choice of doing that which was better.

I mentioned, just as we began the reading, that there was perhaps significance in the fact that this record of this occasion follows immediately on from the parable of the Good Samaritan.

And I think possibly what Luke is doing by ordering his material in this way is saying, look, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, yes, Jesus is commending the need to do good stuff, to help people, to sacrificially go out of your way to serve others. And that's important. That is what Christians do. That is what we should do.

[29 : 31] But you need to balance that with spending time at the feet of Jesus. And as you spend time at the feet of Jesus, you're not doing that instead of the good stuff. It's in order that you might do what you need to do and that your service would be more pleasing and more effective and more useful because of what is learned, because of what is gained, sitting at his feet, listening to him. Well, we can admire Mary. We can even warm to Martha, who maybe seems a lot more like us. But of greater importance is that we would examine ourselves and consider our choices. And so I ask you this morning, in the light of what we have seen in God's Word, I ask you this, have you chosen what is better? You, not the person next to you or behind you or in front of you, have you, in your life, chosen what is better? Humble service to King Jesus, sitting at his feet, listening to him. Is that what you have chosen? If you have not as yet chosen in that way, will you choose what is better? Or will you be content with second best? Will you be content with a choice that is not better? Will you choose what is better? Will you choose Jesus? Will you choose fellowship and friendship with him as that which is the one thing needed? As you look at your life and all its priorities, your work and your family and your finances and all important stuff, but do you acknowledge and do you acknowledge and do you recognize that in the midst of all of that, there is one thing needed? And that is to be right with God. And you can only be right with God in and through Jesus. As you come to him and put your trust in him, as you sit at his feet and listen to him. That is the one thing that cannot be taken from you. You could lose your family. You could lose your job. Your dreams could go awry, and I don't wish any of these things on you. But you'll never lose this, the one thing that is needful. Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we come to you and we thank you for your word. We thank you for what we can learn from it. We thank you that we learn from real people, making real choices in the real world. And so they stand as a challenge to us. We thank you for what we have read of Martha and of Mary. In many ways, we admire them both. In many ways, we think of ourselves as not at the level of either of them. We fall short.

But we thank you that as we read of them, we are given this great and deep and very practical instruction from Jesus concerning the choices we make and the choices that we need to make. Help us to choose what is better. And we pray that by your Spirit, you would enable us to know what is better and to choose what is better. And as we do, so to be blessed ourselves, but also to be of greater blessing and usefulness and of help to others. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.