

## THE ONE NEEDFUL THING

Luke 10:38-42

I grew up in the era that said that the harder you worked, the better you would do. In sports we were taught that the key to success was to hustle; not in the sense of cheating, but give it your maximum. That may seem to still be the case among athletes, but we are told other things about work.

The Covid epidemic forced people to slow down and reevaluate their work. Many decided to quit and take other jobs. Many have settled for early retirement. Others have stayed at their jobs, but have insisted that they could work fewer hours and do more work at home as they did when everything seemed to be done by Zoom. Companies are experimenting with 4 day work weeks. In places like Europe vacation times can be double what we have here.

What makes that hard for me with my background is that it can seem that people don't want to do hard work. It used to be a popular job to spend the summer being a swimming pool lifeguard. You could get a great tan and get paid for it. Now they can't find enough people to do that. Working construction or detasseling corn was hard work, but popular because you made good money. The money for that is still good, but who wants to work in the heat and humidity of summer when you can do something on a computer with AC? People complain about illegal immigrants in this country. But without them, who would roof our roofs, pick our produce, or do the work we don't want to do? People who were plumbers or electricians or HVAC technicians were skilled people who provided well for their families. But who wants to do that work today?

So I find myself sympathizing with Martha in the story. Here she is working her tail off to make a great meal for Jesus and her sister just sits around listening to Jesus. It fills me with thoughts of people who seem to not work because the government will bail them out, young people who think they are entitled to a free college education, and the expectation in our culture that AC, a screen for every member of the family, and using morning showers as saunas is our right.

But what lies behind that? Am I really trying to work hard to serve God, or is it something else? I learned a long time ago that if you at least appear to be busy, then you won't get caught doing nothing. If Mary had been washing Jesus' feet or something like that, Martha wouldn't have complained. And if I am busy doing something, then I think I am on God's side. My hard work earns me brownie points with God. The busier I am, the more important I am, the better I am.

In Jesus' time those who felt they were closest to God were people like the Pharisees who made sure to follow all the exterior rules of their faith. They followed the proper procedures for diet, washing before meals, giving alms, and praying in public. It wasn't that they worked harder than others (in fact they had the poor do all the dirty, hard jobs for them). But they could think of themselves as better than others.

The Roman Catholic Church 500 years ago saw that in terms, not of the Jewish laws, but what was commended by church tradition. The more works you did for the church, the better you were. Those works originally were genuine charities, but it became more things like paying for masses, praying a lot of “Our Fathers” and “Hail Marys”, and buying indulgences to finance cathedrals. Again, it was a matter of working to gain God’s favor.

The Reformation created the Protestant churches who stated that those catholic good works don’t save us. But even though salvation by grace through faith was preached, there developed among Protestants—many of our ancestors in north Europe—that hard work makes us better than others—the so-called “Protestant Ethic” and the idea that “idleness is the workshop of the devil.” That is my heritage. That is why it is so easy for me to be like Martha.

So is work evil? Is the solution for us to be lazy? If we feel that Mary was that, as Martha did, then we are dead wrong. The problem is not working too hard or not enough, but what lies behind it. Jesus refers to this as “the one thing needful.”

Experts tell us how important it is to not only work hard, but to work smart. If I work hard building a structure on a poor foundation, I am wasting my time. It is not only important for athletes to work hard, but to work out the right way. That’s why athletic teams have professional trainers who make sure the athletes train in ways that build up their strength, skills, and endurance, rather than injure themselves. One football player made a spectacular run after a fumble to score a touchdown. But he ran the wrong way. One commentator said about it, “At least he gave it 100%,” but what good was that when he scored for the other team?

Jesus offers us the only things that really will last—a life with Him. Anything we have or gain in this life is gone when we die. But what Jesus offers lasts forever. The smart thing is to do as Mary did—to give time first to God.

So do I go out and spend an hour each day in prayer and Bible study? Perhaps, but that can be a daunting task for us. How about trying this? Get up in the morning and first thing, make the sign of the cross as was done over us in baptism and say, “I have been baptized into Christ Jesus.” That’s simple, but it can set the tone for our whole day. When you have to wait, say for a doctor, spend time with God. If you have a cell phone with internet, it is as simple as googling the Bible or a devotion. Think about the people in your life, and just think a thought about how God can help them. Instead of just having a meal prayer, ask family members to share a blessing God gave them that day.

In our women’s Bible study during the week we were looking at women in the Bible. One woman was Tabitha (she was also known by her Greek name, Dorcas). She was an early Christian who used her talents as a seamstress to provide for the poor. She died, but Peter was sent to the town of Joppa where she lived. When he got to her home he saw all the people

mourning her death. He was given the power by the Holy Spirit to bring her back to life. Tabitha was a woman who kept quite busy, but not to impress anyone, to succeed, or to cover up weaknesses. She did it because of the “one thing needful,” her love for her Lord Jesus Christ.

Before an athlete works out, he or she stretches out. Before a busy day of work, we should eat a healthy breakfast. Before assembling something, (unless you are a man) you should read the directions. Likewise, when we give a little time first for God, then He can shape our whole day. We see that the jerk who cut us off in traffic is also someone who Jesus died for on the cross. We see that our children need more for us to give them time each day than material blessings. We are more willing to forgive than gloat over someone else’s mistakes. We become more and more a part of what can never be taken from us. And at work or play, busy or at rest, we do the one needful thing—Christ Jesus.