

**THE RADICAL RABBI:  
“A RADICAL PRIORITY”  
(Luke 10:38-42)**

**INTRODUCTION**

The dictionary defines a “priority” as: *the fact or condition of being regarded or treated as more important*. You can tell somebody’s priorities by that with which they surround themselves. If it’s possessions, you’ll see a lot of them. If it’s family, you’ll always see family. If it’s career, you’ll always see them at work.

But no matter what somebody’s priorities, it has been said that, when it comes to the things of this life, “You can’t take it with you.” But sometimes the things of this life take such a place of importance, of priority, in our lives that we’ll try.

There once was a rich man who was near death. He was very grieved because he had worked so hard for his money and he wanted to be able to take it with him to heaven. So he began to pray that he might be able to take some of his wealth with him. An angel heard his plea and one night appeared to him, telling him, “Sorry, but you can’t take your wealth with you.” The man implored the angel to speak to God to see if He might bend the rules. The man continued to pray that his wealth could follow him. The angel reappeared to him and informed the man that God had decided to allow him to take one suitcase with him. Overjoyed, the man grabbed the largest suitcase he owned and filled it to the very brim with pure solid gold bars and placed it beside his bed.

Soon afterward the man died and showed up at the gates of heaven to greet St. Peter. Seeing the suitcase, Peter stopped him. “Hold on. You can’t bring that in here.” But the man explained that he actually had permission, and he asked Peter to go and verify his story with the Lord. So Peter left him to check with the Lord and eventually came back, saying, “You’re right. God has allowed you one carry-on bag, but I’m supposed to check its contents before letting it through.” Smiling broadly, the man beckoned Peter to take his suitcase and look inside. So Peter came and opened the suitcase to inspect the worldly items the

man found too precious to leave behind, and then exclaimed, “You brought pavement?!!!” You see, sometimes the things we think are priorities really aren’t priorities at all.

As we celebrate our seniors today, we are going to look at a particularly well-known story of setting priorities that comes from a ministry moment with our radical rabbi. So, as we begin, let’s set our priorities **with a word of prayer.**

### **TEXT**

***As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him — Luke 10:38.***

Jesus and his disciples are gradually making their way to Jerusalem for the final time, meaning all that is going to be happening during Holy Week. The village of Bethany is about two miles from Jerusalem, located on the southeastern slope of the Mount of Olives. It was the hometown of the sisters Mary and Martha, and their brother Lazarus; in fact, the contemporary name of this village today (sitting as it does in the West Bank) is the Arabic form of “Lazarus” or “the place of Lazarus.” While today the village has a population of approximately 17,600, back in Jesus’ time, it was much smaller, with an estimated population of just a little over 100 (counting adult males only).

The NIV text says that Martha “opened” her home to Jesus. The Greek says that she “received” Jesus, meaning literally “to admit under one’s roof,” the understanding being that her home — and her hospitality — were now being made available to Jesus and any of his companions.

***[Martha] had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said — Luke 10:39.***

Mary was showing a remarkable departure from the expected, assumed behaviors of first-century Jewish women; by comparison, Martha was being much more “mainstream.” So what was so different about Mary’s behavior? By sitting at the feet of Jesus, she was taking the posture of a disciple listening to instruction of a rabbi.

You see, there were two understood outcomes for followers of a rabbi. One was the obvious one — that he (and yes, I said “he”) would continue to be a faithful disciple, continuing to follow in that particular rabbi’s steps, continuing to learn his instructions. But the other was that, eventually, the disciple would himself become the teacher, the rabbi. That would never have been understood to be the place for a woman — not in that culture. Yet here was Mary, doing precisely that — sitting at the feet of her rabbi, listening to his instructions. Nowhere in this posture is there the slightest hint of the traditional roles that would have been assumed of a woman — those of homemaker or hostess.

And let’s not overlook the fact that Jesus is enabling Mary; he is allowing a woman to have this time at his feet. So quite contrary to that culture, Jesus is making it clear that women are completely and unreservedly welcome to be at his feet, and to be listening to his teachings — as much as would be any man. This would have been downright shocking to any man of that culture who witnessed it!

But, in the meantime, while Mary is having this wonderful time of sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to his words, ***Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made — Luke 10:40a.***

Well of course she’s distracted; there are guests in the house and there is work to be done. Food prep and anything associated with hosting guests was always assumed in that culture to fall solely on the woman of the house — meaning Martha. The Greek for the NIV’s “distracted” comes from a root that literally means “to drag all around.” In other words, she was burdened; she was feeling the weight of all the assumed obligations for hosting. Or, as we might say it today, she was feeling overwhelmed with all the responsibilities she had, and all the things that she deemed necessary to get done. You can almost hear the sounds from the kitchen — pots and pans getting wholoped within an inch of their lives — as Martha commences with all the particulars that would come with the best meal she can think of preparing for Jesus.

But then, all of a sudden, it struck her that she was totally alone. Wait a minute, she may have thought. Don’t I have a sister? Well, where in the world is she? She may have even called out her name: “Mary!” But

nobody responded. So she turned from her duties to look for her. And what did she find? Her sister, seated, doing nothing. Well, not exactly nothing. I mean, technically she was doing something — she was listening to Jesus. But what help was that? Didn't she know there was a boatload of things to get done? What in the world was she thinking? Martha was infuriated!

And she wasn't exactly shy about letting Jesus know about it, too: ***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!" — Luke 10:40b.***

Obviously one of the things from which Martha had been distracted was remembering exactly who it was she was talking to. She literally was saying to him, "Is it of no concern to you, doesn't it even matter to you, that Mary has left me alone to do all this work by myself? I mean, say something, will you?"

I wonder if Jesus maybe paused to stare at Martha for just a moment, stopping her with his eyes as if to say, "Really, Martha! Do you really want to go down that path? Do you really think that I don't care, that I'm not aware of all the things you're trying to do?"

And then Jesus does indeed say something — but not what she's expecting: ***"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed — or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her" — Luke 10:41-42.***

You get no sense of anger, no picture of "How dare you interrupt me!" or humiliating her with words that would make her feel like an idiot. Jesus loves Martha, so he very tenderly calls her by name, and then repeats her name, making sure he has her attention. As only he can, he sees that she is literally (in the Greek) "anxious and disturbed" about a whole bunch of stuff, "about many things" — all the cultural expectations and assumptions of hosting a guest, and we see this in three ways:

First, it appears that Martha had commenced with elaborate and immediate meal plans, elaborate enough that she felt stranded when

Mary wasn't available — even though Luke never tells us that Jesus either requested or in any way expected a meal. Second, all Martha's busyness is causing her to miss a hugely important point: She's completely neglecting the guest for whom she is doing all this busyness in the first place. She's not able to be with Jesus at all. And third, how she responds to Mary's absence tells us that, instead of her service for the Lord bringing her joy, it is bringing her anxiety and anger — likely not the outcome service to the Lord should bring.

So, reflecting the love Christ has for her, he begins redirecting all the energies Martha is spending on those many things — pointing her away from her distractions because, as he says it in the Greek, “There is really only one primary thing that is needed here, only one thing that is a necessity” and, to put it very simply, “Martha, all your stuff ain't it.” And then he points out that Mary in making a different choice made a far, far better one — and not just a better choice for now, but also a choice that would stay with Mary right on into eternity.

So what choice did Mary make? Sitting and listening to Jesus. She saw this opportunity to simply sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to him as more important than anything else in the world. How could she not? The radical rabbi himself, Jesus of Nazareth, famous all over the country, right there in her house. And maybe so much more — this man might even be the Messiah, God's long-promised “anointed one,” sitting in our living room! “Top that, Martha!” Sure, food and meal prep and all that stuff has its place, but not first place; even in the wilderness, a very hungry Jesus had still opposed Satan's temptation to miraculously make some nearby stones become bread by quoting from the OT book of Deuteronomy: ***“It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God’”*** — *Jesus Christ, Matthew 4:4 (quoting Deuteronomy 8:3b)*.

In other words, Mary chose to spend time with God's word — literally bringing to life the opening of John's gospel: ***In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*** — ***John 1:1***. By being with God's Son, Mary was being with God's word, literally, with God himself. And this essential, critically primary choice of Mary spending these few moments at the feet of Jesus — listening to

his word, pondering his instructions — could not be taken away, literally could not be removed from her — not now and not ever. These moments would stay with Mary right into heaven itself.

## **APPLICATION**

Now, while obviously the sermon today is for all of us, it's so cool that this message from our "radical rabbi" came up on the same Sunday in which we recognize our high school graduates. So while I say this to all of us, I especially want to be saying it to them.

This story is all about priorities. Martha's error was not found in the desire she had for serving Jesus a wonderful meal. Bless her heart! Her error was how she chose her priorities. Obviously service is important, and those opportunities are privileges to be cherished. But what is the priority? More specifically, what is Christ's priority?

Martha lost sight of what should have been of first importance for her — Jesus was in the house! She was so busy with the salad that she lost sight of the Savior. The primary most important activity in which we can spend our lives, more important than food, family, funds, anything, is simply sitting at the feet of Jesus — spending deliberate, purposeful time in his presence, listening to what he has to say in his word. To put it simply, before giving your time in working for Jesus, much more important is giving your time in worship to Jesus. That starts at his feet, in his word, in prayer, in his presence. That's "ground zero" for living out a life pleasing to God.

Guys, there is no way that spending intentional time in the Scriptures can be overemphasized. If spending time in the Bible is compared to eating, I cannot begin to tell you how many Christians I know who have allowed themselves to fall into a place of spiritual starvation because they have neglected daily feasting on God's word — and note I said "feasting," not "nibbling." What has often happened is that we have allowed the schedules of this world to take that place of primary importance, and then we try to squeeze in a few verses or a devotional into some time in our day. Pretty soon that time becomes less and less, and I promise you: The more time you spend away from the word, the easier it becomes to stay away from the word. And I also promise you

this: That is not what the Holy Spirit had in mind when he superintended those 40 authors of the Bible's 66 books over some 1,500 years. The intention of the Holy Spirit is to nourish us, to fill us to overflowing with the plans, pleasures and purposes of Almighty God. And face it, how much can you ever accomplish from a place of starvation? How healthy can you be if you're starving? Starvation ultimately leads to only one outcome: death!

It's all about the intimacy of relationship with God desires for us through his Son. We see that in Christ's interaction with Martha. I love that Jesus called Martha by name — twice: "Martha, Martha!" I love the sense of tenderness he displays in that moment. Jesus wants her attention because he desires her to know him in the same kind of relationship, with the same kind of priority, that Mary does.

The Bible makes very clear the incredibly intimate way in which God knows and calls to each and every one of us — personally, individually and intimately. In the book of Isaiah, quoting the words I have on my shirt this morning: ***"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine"*** — ***God speaking, Isaiah 43:1b***. And God used these words when calling Jeremiah into ministry: ***"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart"*** — ***God speaking, Jeremiah 1:5a***. That same dynamic appears in the NT as well; Jesus in speaking about himself as the Good Shepherd said this: ***"The gatekeeper opens the gate for [the shepherd], and the sheep listen to [the shepherd's] voice. [The shepherd] calls his own sheep by name and leads them out"*** — ***Jesus Christ, John 10:3***. And because of the miraculous work of redemption done on the cross through the sacrifice of the life of Christ, that intimacy can be eternal; as Paul shared from God himself in his second letter to the church at Corinth: ***"I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty"*** — ***Paul, II Corinthians 6:18***. Wow!

And where does that incredible intimacy, leading to that incredible outcome, begin? Exactly where Mary was: Sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening to the words of Jesus. There's no place better!

And it's a great barometer for the priority you are giving to the relationship you have with God through Christ. As Christ said so accurately: ***"[W]here your treasure is, there your heart will be also"*** — ***Jesus Christ, Matthew 6:21***. What do you treasure in your life? What are you spending time with here on earth that will translate to heaven? The priority you give to spending time at the feet of Jesus is a great translation. But the bottom line is this: No matter what your service for the Lord, what is your life with the Lord?

## CONCLUSION

As we close, you know, there may be other women named "Myra Friese" and other guys named "Tanner Mathiowetz" and "Drew Lundeen." Actually, not to make you feel any less unique, Drew, but I did find another "Drew Lundeen." He happens to be a "cellar technician" at someplace called the Oskar Blues Brewery in Austin, Texas!

But the truth of the matter is, there is nobody like you, Myra, or you, Tanner, or you, Drew. Each of you have something grand and glorious in common: You are here because God wants you here! You are not here by human designs or human interactions. You are here only by Almighty God's perfect intentions, and only for Almighty God's perfect outcomes. It was God who formed you and made you and designed you and placed you and purposed you for him — just like all the rest of us here. Your talents, your abilities, your strengths, your weaknesses — all those things are formed by God's own creative hands. You are an exclusive, a one-of-a-kind, a genuine once-in-a-lifetime experience.

That's why living in God's word is so important. God's word takes us all back to the source of why we even exist. God's word tells us what is truly, absolutely top priority, and God's word also tells us what just really doesn't matter.

As we close, I think most of you know that I stay next door at the Redwood Lodge. One of the really cool things they have for decorating their interior is all these old photos of Redwood Falls way yonder "back in the day." One of my favorite photos is of the class of a one-room Redwood County schoolhouse. All the kids are standing outside as their picture is taken — sometime in 1904.

Think about that: The Wright Brothers had just flown at Kitty Hawk, NC a few months before. This was five years before the Titanic was even begun to be built. Theodore Roosevelt was the president. These kids only had to know the names of 45 states.

But what leaves the deepest impression from that picture is simply that nobody of school age in 1904 is alive today; they are all, every one of them, in eternity. Most of them would have presumably grown up, gotten married, had their own kids who would have married and eventually made these people grandparents and, then, eventually, everybody in that picture passed away.

It's interesting because, as you look at them from that moment in time, you realize that all of them had their whole lives ahead of them — all the relationships, all the jobs, all the families, all the incredible world events — it was all yet to be lived. And now, for those in that picture, those lives are done.

Life goes amazingly fast. But it is just this life. God has plans for you, ideas of the place he intends for you to have in his Kingdom work. But don't lose sight of the outcome. Mary recognized something far more important, and far more eternal, than her sister Martha's meal prep — sitting at the feet of Jesus. As you guys go on with your lives, don't forget to live your lives like Mary — sitting at the feet of Jesus with an eye toward the life, the eternal life, that we all have to look forward to. For Christians, as Paul said so well, ***our citizenship is in heaven — Paul, Philippians 3:20a***. Live your lives that way, as citizens of heaven and ambassadors of God through Jesus Christ.

And as Paul reminds us: ***Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory — Paul, Colossians 3:1-4***. So live looking up — by living at the feet of Jesus. What a way to graduate! Let's pray!