

Doing & Devotion

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[0 : 00] Let us pray, using words of one of the hymns we sang just a moment ago. Lord, we ask that you would burn your truth not only on our lips, but into our minds and our hearts.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, again, can I express my gratitude to Martin for his invitation to come and be with you here today, this morning and this evening.

And to you all at St Silas for your welcome and, I have to say, generous hospitality. It's been very good. And as I said this morning, the reason for this visit is, in a sense, a kind of a handing on of Martin to you.

Because he was in the Diocese of Blackburn and we valued him there. Didn't want to lose him, but want to make sure that you know that we think he's the best thing since sliced bread. And we were very reluctant to let him go.

And for me to be able to say to you how fortunate you are to have him. If we'd have been able to find something for him that was right, then we'd have held on to him tightly. But it wasn't to be.

[1 : 05] And it's great to see him here and to now picture him and Kathy ministering in this place, seeking to realise the massive potential that you've got here for a future as a church here at St Silas.

So, it's great to be with you. Thank you for the privilege of sharing today with you. And we move to that reading in Luke chapter 10. I got slightly confused in my preparation because it was Hebrews 10 this morning and it's Luke 10.

So, if I get my verses muddled up, it's because I'm thinking of Hebrews 10 this morning. But it is the story of Martha and Mary. And it's so familiar to us that it's very easy for it to lose its impact.

Have you done actually earlier bits of Luke 10 in your series, Martin, or not? Yes. You have done? All right. Well, this is going to be interesting to see whether what I think Luke 10 is about fits with what you have told them that you think it's about.

But I think it's a chapter about what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ, a disciple, someone who puts their hand to the plough and does not look back.

[2 : 13] Jesus has just set his face to go to Jerusalem. We just read that. And as he goes, he wants his disciples to learn how to follow him. And so, from Luke 10, the whole chapter, we find being a follower involves just two things from this chapter.

Martin is looking amazed that I'm going to have something rather different to say from what he has said on a previous occasion. And I think the two things are these as we look through Luke 10. Doing and devotion.

Those are two themes that run through the whole chapter and are worked out in different areas and culminate in our reading just a moment ago.

First of all, doing and devotion worked out in terms of mission. Because as we have read through the chapter, disciples have been called workers in the harvest, verse 2 of chapter 10.

They've been described as lambs among wolves, verse 3. They've been described as heralds of the kingdom, verses 8 to 15. And verse 16, they've been described as representatives of Jesus Christ.

[3 : 22] And there's lots of doing going on. And yet, when they return and come back to Jesus and tell the stories of their doing, they're told not to rejoice in what they had done.

But that their names were written in heaven. Verse 20. Devotion. That God has done something for them and written their name in the book of life.

Something they could never do for themselves. Is in fact the thing they should rejoice in. Not all the activity that they'd engaged in as they'd been sent out and done things for him.

So it's quite an interesting rebuke that Jesus offers to them with regard to this balance between doing and devotion. And we find that expressed in a number of ways in our liturgy within the Church of England and here in your church here.

We said this morning in our service of Holy Communion, the prayer of humble access. That's a wonderful prayer. A beautifully crafted prayer by Cranmer all those years ago.

[4 : 25] But saying, we do not presume to come to this your table trusting in our own righteousness in what we have done. But in your manifold and great mercies. That's the balance.

And therefore our attitude to service and God's using of us ought to lead to quiet amazement that God is at work in such a way.

I wonder how often we stop to thank God that our names are written in his book of life. That our names are engraved upon his hands.

Doing and devotion worked out in terms of mission. But then in the next section we find doing and devotion worked out in terms of salvation. Because there's the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Which ought never to be isolated from its context. The one in which Jesus told it. And it was in response to Jesus' question to the expert in the law who asked, What must I do to inherit eternal life?

[5 : 26] And of course the two commandments, to love God and to love neighbor, if done, will bring life. Do this, Jesus says, and you will do this.

In fact, doing. Do this and you will live. And after the parable in which the priest and the Levite passed by and did nothing but in which the most unlikely Samaritan does the neighborly thing, Jesus says, Go and do likewise.

There's lots of doing. But of course, that would not on its own lead a person to inherit eternal life. No one can inherit eternal life by their doing.

Even the caring for a mugged stranger on the roadside. It must be accompanied by devotion to God to love him with all heart, soul, mind and strength.

Doing and devotion sits side by side in those two great commandments. There's been a very healthy, I believe, new emphasis on the place of offering our worship to God within our meetings and gatherings.

[6 : 35] And that's been a healthy corrective. So in the past, a lot of the hymns and songs we sang were just doctrinal statements without any sense of a personal reflection and expression of love for God.

Perhaps the pendulum's swung a little bit, maybe too far the other way. And now there's a lot of songs that are just, I love you, Lord, a thousand times. And there's no doctrine at all. The right way of doing it is actually to have both.

That sense of clear understanding of what the Christian faith is about, but using it as a way of expressing our love for God and what he has done for us.

Doing and devotion worked out in terms of salvation. But then to our reading for this evening. Doing and devotion worked out in terms of priorities.

The incident of Martha and Mary entering Jesus in their home is a further surprise.

[7 : 33] Having commended a Samaritan, which was a massive surprise a little bit earlier in the chapter, Jesus now commends a woman who is behaving as a man.

Mary sits at Jesus' feet, listening to his words. That's what men would have done. While Martha busies herself getting the meal ready. That's what women would have done.

So the picture that is painted for us here in this scene in their home, it was quite unheard of. And yet it emphasizes that place of value that Jesus gave to women in a culture where they most clearly took second place to men.

But it's against that radical backdrop we see this double theme of doing and devotion playing itself out. Serving and sitting.

Martha is annoyed that Mary expects her to do all the work and asks Jesus to tell Mary to come and help. Tell her to get into the kitchen and start doing the washing up.

[8 : 38] How unfair it seems that one should have all the pleasure and the benefit while the other has to do all the work. We read that Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.

Well in settling the issue, Jesus talks about priorities. Both Martha and Mary had chosen how to use the time Jesus gave them, but differently.

Martha was giving of her best to provide a good meal for Jesus and I believe he was not ungrateful. There was nothing wrong in her activity. But she was a worrier and upset about many things. I'm supposing that she was the sort of person who wrote everything to be just so. Who wanted everyone to pull their weight and to compare her lot with that of others.

So something was needed to regain a right perspective. And Jesus said, only one thing is needed, Martha. That's a remarkable phrase.

[9 : 46] I would love it if Jesus were to say to me, Julian, only one thing is needed. Because really, he says, oh Julian, there's a lot of things that are needed. But to say only one thing is needed would have been very exciting.

And he said to Martha, only one thing is needed. But what was the one thing? Well it was the choice that Mary made. Jesus said, Mary has chosen what is better.

And it will not be taken away from her. Mary is commended, not because she left her sister to prepare the meal. But because she saw that there was another meal on offer in that house.

Listening to Jesus' words was a spiritual meal that would last. Whereas Mary's, Martha's beans on toast, bread and cheese, whatever it was, would only make a difference for a while.

And you have to think just for a moment how much time we tend to spend on preparing meals.

Whether it's growing things or buying them, preparing them, eating and clearing up.

[10 : 56] I remember meeting a woman who had seven children under the age of ten. And she said, life, Julian, is one long meal. No sooner is the washing up done than the next meal has to be thought about and got ready.

But if we spend just a fraction of that time and energy on feeding our souls, our relationship with Jesus would be so much stronger.

Mary chose what was better. And how did she do it? Well, by sitting at his feet and listening to his words. We cannot do as Mary did.

But we can do the next best thing. Which is to recognise the feast that the Bible contains as God's word. And to read it.

Whether it's in private or here when we're gathered together with fellow Christians and the Bible is read and taught and explained. The Bible is often described as food for the soul.

[11 : 59] Remember when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. One of the answers he gave to the temptations that Satan brought before him was to quote from Deuteronomy. And he said, man does not live on bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

There's something of a spiritual meal to be had as we read the scriptures, as we study them, as we seek to understand them. There's something rich about our reading the Bible.

I remember the story of the elder lady who said, oh, I don't read my Bible. My Bible reads me. As we read the scriptures, so God speaks into our lives and speaks to us his word.

There's something powerful about the scriptures, which they've come in for a lot of criticism. And people have lost confidence in the Bible as God's word, as that revelation of his activity in history for our benefit.

And we need to regain a confidence in the scriptures so that we can see the power that they hold in bringing God's truth into our lives. It was Dr. Samuel Chadwick who said, I never defend the Bible.

[13 : 17] The Bible is like a lion in a cage. I just open the door and let it out. There's a power in the scriptures if we will but realize and understand that and see it as God's revelation of himself.

So this priority that Jesus sets is rather a surprise because Luke chapter 10, this whole chapter, is about being a worker in God's harvest field.

Going and doing. But here Jesus praises the person who does nothing in practical terms but who does much in spiritual terms.

So he sets devotion above doing. In that no amount of doing is going to achieve his purposes if it does not arise out of a devotion and a love for him.

And so there are many ways in which we can see that expressed in the scriptures. And perhaps one of the best is Jesus' restoration of Peter after Peter's threefold denial.

[14 : 25] Do you love me? That's the key. Do you love me? Do you love me? And if you do, then go and do. Feed my sheep. Feed my lambs. But before the feeding or the doing is, do you love me?

The love for Jesus at the heart of things. So Luke chapter 10 sets a balance between activism on the one hand and pietism on the other.

Those are the technical terms. And it's interesting how it's contained there for us so clearly in this 10th chapter of the gospel of Luke. And in that sense, there needs to be a bit of Mary and a bit of Martha in all of us.

Because of our nature, some will need to concentrate on being more active. Well, some will need to focus on being more contemplative. But most of us need to balance our busy lives with Christian service, persevering hard graft on the one hand, and then moments of quiet reflection and peace, sitting at Jesus' feet on the other.

And that's to be worked out in our daily routine and the broader pattern of our lives. Activity and rest. Activism and pietism.

[15 : 42] And so through the holiday season, well, it's almost come to an end in Scotland, hasn't it? Because schools are back already. But it's such a balance within our ordinary lives of work and rest.

It needs to find its way into our pattern as Christians. And therefore, the place for Sunday being a day of rest. In contrast to the work of the rest of the week.

And in that place of rest, making an opportunity for God to speak to us from his word. I think it's quite useful for us to picture ourselves to be like Mary, sitting at Jesus' feet as we open the Bible. And so in our mind's eye, as we read the Bible, picture ourselves sitting at Jesus' feet and saying, Lord, what do you want to say to me today? What is your word for me this day?

The scriptures are so important and we must never neglect them. I was recently reminded by reading that book.

[16 : 50] I don't know if you've seen it here in Scotland. The Servant Queen and the King She Serves. Have you seen that? It's a book produced by the Bible Society for the 90th birthday of Her Majesty the Queen.

The Servant Queen and the King She Serves. It's a wonderful testimony to the Queen's faith. And it records a number of her Christmas Day speeches over the television.

But in the middle of that book, there's a fascinating reminder of what happened at her coronation. She was given a number of things all those many, many years ago. And one of the things she was given was an orb, which was a circular thing with a cross on top of it, reminding us that actually although she was queen, there was a more superior authority.

And there are studied gems around the orb. And one of them is worth over 400 million pounds.

That's just one of the gems. And then after she was given the orb, she was then given a Bible.

And the words given when she was given the Bible were, Here is wisdom. This is the royal law.

These are the lively oracles of God. We present to you with this book the most valuable thing this world affords.

[18 : 03] More valuable than that orb with its very, very, very precious jewels all around it. I can't imagine how much that orb is worth if just one jewel is worth 400 million pounds.

For the Bible, the most valuable thing this world affords. And so I really want to be encouraging people to go back to the scriptures, to be reading the Bible regularly and finding their spiritual food, making time to sit at Jesus' feet.

That is what he calls the better. What is better? Mary has chosen what is better. So the priorities we choose as disciples are often not between the bad and the good, the right and the wrong, but between the good and the better.

Plenty of choices of how we spend our time. Some may be dictated to us by others, and there's very little choice. But some we'll be able to make for ourselves. So let's make some priorities and choose deliberately to do what Jesus would call the better.

And if we do not resolve in advance to do this, then a thousand and one other things and duties, all claiming to be prior necessities, many of them very good things, will tyrannize our time and energies and rob us of enjoying the better that God longs for us.

[19 : 32] So I suppose the message for us as we look at Luke chapter 10 this evening is let's aim for the better. Let's maintain a strong devotional life that will show itself in acts of service, compassion, hospitality, but also a strong devotional life of sitting at Jesus' feet and hearing his word.

Some of you may have read years ago the book that Gordon MacDonald wrote called Ordering Your Private World. Anybody read that book years ago? Gordon MacDonald? No? It's a good Scottish name, but he wasn't Scottish.

No, all right, okay. Anyway, it's a fascinating book because the premise of the book is that all of us have got busy, full lives. But quite often those busy, full, open public lives are based upon a rather small and fragile inner life.

And he says we can only sustain the busyness and the fullness of our outer worlds if we've got a strong inner world. And so he argues in the book that we should order our private world.

That's the name of the book, *Ordering Your Private World*, to make sure the inner life is strong so that it can sustain all the demands of the outer life. Discipleship then is about devotion and then doing.

[20 : 55] Loving the Lord God with all we are and then loving others around us. The first leads naturally on to the other. Let's aim for what he calls the better.

Let us pray. Just have moments of silence and quiet as we reflect on a lot of words and single out just that one thing that we believe God might be saying to us through his word as we have read Luke chapter 10 together this evening.

Lord, we pray that in all the many demands that we find placed before us, all the choices, all the options, you will help each one of us to know what it is that you would call the better as we seek to serve you with all that we are.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.