

Faith & Works
Series: Everything in Between
Luke 10:38–42
Sunday, March 16, 2025 (Lent 2)

Let us pray: Lord, may we *hear* your Word and *act* upon it, in the name of Jesus.

Last week we started a new sermon series that will carry us through the season of Lent. And the idea is that we live in such a highly polarized time in which so many people view life and faith in terms of binaries – it’s black and white, good or bad, right or wrong. It’s either all one thing or all the other, with nothing in between. And while that certainly *can* be the case – there are certainly things that are right and wrong, good and bad, things that are factually true and demonstrably false – it’s not *always* the case. The truth is not *always* at one extreme or the other. The world in which we live *is* black and white, and it is *also* blue and green and yellow and red and purple. Life and faith are full of nuance and complexity.

So we are going to be looking at the dichotomies in some of Jesus’ most well-known stories from Luke’s gospel to see how God is often present in the *both/and*, not just the *either/or*. We started last week with the dichotomy of stranger and neighbor, where we saw that sometimes the people closest to us can be like strangers to us, and sometimes complete strangers can be our neighbors. And we’re looking today at the dichotomy of faith and works.

This is actually one of the longest debated dichotomies in Christianity. From very early on, just a few years after Jesus’ resurrection, when the church was just starting out, and Gentiles (non-Jewish people) started becoming Christians, there was this question of, “Do they have to follow Jewish law?” Is following Jesus about what you *do* or what you *believe*? In his letter to the Galatians, Paul says, “A person is justified (or *made righteous*) not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.” While in the letter of James it says, “A person is justified by works and not by faith alone.” Which is it?

This dichotomy was one of the main driving forces in the Reformation that led to a division between the Protestant Church and the Catholic Church. Martin Luther was reacting to the Catholic Church's teaching that good works and the sacraments were necessary for salvation when he said that we are saved through *faith alone*.

And you might be thinking, "Well, that's great for *them*, but this isn't a dichotomy that I run into in my everyday life." *But*, if you have ever wondered whether God was punishing you for something you did, *that* is a question of faith and works; does God judge us by what we *believe* or what we *do*? If you have ever felt *unworthy* or *undeserving* of God's love or unworthy of taking communion or whatever else, that is a question of faith and works. Is it about what I *believe* or what I *do*? If you have ever worried about what is going to happen to you after you die, or what's going to happen to someone else after *they* die, *that* is a question of faith and works. Is salvation about *God's grace* or *our actions*?

So this *is* a question that we see at work in our lives. And we *also* see it at work in the story of Mary and Martha.

This is a very short, simple story that has *deep* implications for life and faith. Jesus is welcomed into the home of a woman named Martha. Martha is busy serving him – we can assume she was preparing food for him to eat, wine for him to drink, water to wash his hands and feet with – showing him the appropriate hospitality that a host would show a guest. While she is running around doing all of this, her sister Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to what he is saying. Martha gets upset, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me." To which Jesus replies, "Martha, Martha (you know when Jesus says your name twice, you're about to be in trouble), you are worried and

distracted by many things; there is need of only *one* thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” And *scene*. That’s it.

So many times, what we draw from this story is that we need to slow down, take time, not get worried or distracted by all of the things that we need to *do*, and spend time with Jesus. And that *is* a really good lesson to take away from this story. So many of us *do* need to slow down. We *do* need to spend more time *being* and less time *doing*. We *do* need to stop and listen to Jesus. So many books and sermons frame this as a question of, “Are you a *Mary* or a *Martha*?” But what that question *does* is paint Mary as *good* and Martha as *bad*. Mary is the example we should follow, and Martha is what we should seek to avoid. But it is not always that clear cut.

Last week we heard the story of the Good Samaritan. A man is beaten and left for dead on the side of the road. A Jewish priest comes by but does nothing to help him. A Levite (another Jewish religious leader) comes by, but he doesn’t do anything to help either. Then a Samaritan comes along, tends his wounds, takes care of him, and saves his life. Which is the example we are called to follow in *that* story – the one who does *something* or the ones who do *nothing*? The story of the Good Samaritan says, “Don’t just sit there, *do something*!” While the story of Mary and Martha seems to say, “Don’t just do something, *sit there*.” Which is it?

I was thinking about this at Supper at St. John’s this past Wednesday. People started arriving a little before 6:00, gathering in the Fellowship Hall, visiting and talking, catching up and laughing. It’s a really nice, leisurely time of fellowship together. In the kitchen, Betsy Miller and about four or five other people were frantically working to finish getting the food ready. Which one of those is *better*? Neither! They’re *both* good! We *need* people like Martha running around, making all of the preparations, or else there wouldn’t be anything to eat. The people like Mary who are laughing and talking around the tables,

that is *also* good. And if all of those people went into the kitchen to try to help, it would be a disaster; too many cooks in the kitchen! If everyone was like Mary, nothing would ever get done. And if everyone was like Martha, we would be tripping over each other trying to get things done. Both are *good* and both are *necessary*.

Part of the challenge with this story is that we hear Jesus as *criticizing* Martha for what she has chosen to do. “You are worried and distracted by many things, but only one thing is necessary, and Mary has chosen *that*, which is *better*.” But what if what Jesus is critiquing here is not *what* Martha is doing compared to what Mary is doing; what if Jesus is critiquing *why* or *how* Martha is doing it? It says that Martha is *distracted* by her *many tasks*. That word *tasks* is the Greek word *diakonian*, and it doesn’t just mean *tasks*, it means *service* or *ministering*. It is where we get the word *Deacons*. What Martha is doing is her *ministry*. It’s just that she is worried and distracted while she is doing it.

Distracted from what? Jesus says, “You are worried and distracted by many things, but only one thing is necessary.” What is that one thing? It’s Jesus. Martha is so focused on what she has to *do* that she is not focused on the reason she is *doing* it – Jesus. Sometimes when we are ministering or serving, we can get so focused on all the things we have to do that we lose sight of why we’re doing it.

Do you think that Martha could have done what she was doing and still focused on Jesus? Could she have made all those preparations while still listening to Jesus? I love to cook. And so often, while I am getting dinner ready, Jen and the kids are telling me about their days. And I can listen to them and focus on them *while* I am cooking. But there *are* sometimes when I have so much going on in front of me that I can’t focus on it all, and I say, “Hold on. I can’t right now.” That’s like saying, “I can’t listen to you right now because I have to get this food ready for you to eat, because I love you and want you to have a good dinner.” That completely misses the point.

As soon as I had typed that last sentence on Thursday morning, one of our cats came into the room where I was working and tried to jump up on my lap. And I said, “I can’t right now. I have to....” I almost said, “I can’t right now. I have to work.” And my cat was like, “Okay, Martha.” God finds funny ways to teach us things.

The problem isn’t what Martha is *doing*. It’s that she isn’t focused on Jesus while she’s doing it.

We *need* people who *do* and *act*, and we *need* people who *listen* and *learn*. And we need people who are able to do *both*. I read one author who said, “Perhaps Mary represents our faith, our desire to know God intimately, and Martha represents our good works, our desire to transform the world. Both are needed, and both are good...Perhaps in this particular visit, Jesus is asking Martha to slow down, to be present, to not be filled with distraction and worry. Perhaps in this moment in his ministry, Jesus needs disciples who can truly hear him and learn, so that when it’s time to take action, they will know what to do.”¹

I mentioned earlier how Paul says that a person is made righteous not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, while James says that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. Seemingly contradictory statements. But the thing is, they are *both* in the Bible. The people who put the Bible together didn’t forget about that. They knew that both of those statements were in there. And they left them there. They didn’t choose one over the other. They didn’t try to smooth them out or reconcile them. The Bible says *both*.

But the funny thing is, they each say contradictory things for the same reason. Both James and Paul believe that it starts with faith, and then our faith has to be put to work. They both say that our actions

¹ *A Sanctified Art. Everything in Between: Faith & Works. The Second Sunday in Lent. Pg. 11.*

have to be driven by our faith, or else both our actions and our faith are meaningless. We are saved through our *faith* in Jesus Christ, and our *actions* prove our faith. We don't do good works *so that* God will love us. We do good work *because* God loves us, and we want to say *thank you* for that love and share it with the world.

So faith and works are both good. Action and contemplation are both necessary. We just can't be so focused on *what* we are doing that we forget *why* we are doing it – for Jesus. As followers of Jesus Christ, everything that we do is *because* of him, *for* him, *focused* on him. Paul says, “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God through him.” So may you have faith *and* good works. May you listen *and* act. May you sit at the feet of Jesus *and* do many tasks that serve him. May you be Mary *and* Martha, focused on Jesus in all that you do. Amen.