

Pay Attention to God before Attending to God

Luke 10:38-42

• Pastor Mark Mah

There are two sisters in this story. One day they had an important guest coming to their house. They were both overjoyed and excited because this guest was a close friend of theirs. The guest brought along some friends. The sisters wanted to make the guests feel welcome. One of them was busy making preparations. She boiled water to make tea. She went to the market to get fresh food to cook dinner. She had the house swept, the furniture rearranged, and the rubbish taken out. The day was hot and she had the fan fixed. She made sure there were enough ice-cubes in the fridge to make some nice iced lemon tea on a hot day. She was busy attending to the guests as any good host would. The other sister was just as excited and overjoyed, but she hardly lifted a finger to help out. Instead, she spent most of her time paying full attention to the important guest, sitting at his feet, listening to his every word.

The biblical story of Martha and Mary is familiar to many of us. While Martha was busy attending to Jesus' every need, Mary was paying close attention to Jesus' every word. We expect Mary to help out and chide her for not extending a hand to relieve Martha of her busyness. The story took an unexpected twist. Instead of Martha, Mary was the one who was commended by Jesus. Martha received no commendation for her hard work by attending to Jesus. Mary, on the other hand, was commended for her passive role in paying attention to Jesus. We feel sorry for poor Martha! She was the one who deserved to be commended by Jesus.

We feel awkward about this story because deep inside, we behave more like Martha than Mary. I was disturbed when one of my professors wrote that busyness was essentially laziness. Eugene Peterson, in his book, *Subversive Spirituality*, writes: *"Busyness is the enemy of spirituality. It is essentially laziness. It is doing the easy thing instead of the hard thing. It is filling our time with our own actions instead of paying attention to God's actions. It*

is taking charge.” Like Jesus, Peterson does not mince his words. The words hurt and shock! We conclude that Mary was the lazy one, not Martha. But Peterson is right. It is much easier to attend to God than to pay attention to God. We excuse ourselves for not spending time with God because we are busy doing God’s work.

I do not think the Bible is against busyness per se. Jesus was a busy person. His schedule was always full, yet he made an effort to go to a solitary place to be alone with God. What is wrong with Martha? She got busy because she wanted to take charge of the situation. With a dozen guests at her home she had her hands full. She did not want the situation to get out of control, she needed Mary’s help. Out of frustration, she even faulted Jesus for not getting Mary to help her.

“But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. 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!’ (v.40).

Even in doing the work of God, we want to take charge. Busyness may be a subtle excuse for not letting God take over. We want to play center-stage and even congratulate ourselves for it. Who can argue against someone who is busy attending to God’s business? Such a person will be commended for his or her hard work and zeal. The problem with Martha, and with many who serve God, is that she busily attends to God’s work, without first paying attention to what God has to say to her.

Why is it so difficult to pay attention to God? Once my wife worked with preschoolers. Her greatest challenge was to get the 4 year olds to pay attention to her. She could not take charge of the class if the children were not listening to her instructions. If they did not pay attention to her instructions, they would go ahead and do their own things. The children, not the teacher, were in charge of the class.

It is hard to pay attention to God because this means receiving orders from Him and letting him take over. It is difficult but this is the only way to serve God. Jesus is a good example. In John 5:19, 30 he said:

“I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees the Father is doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does ... By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear ...”

What Jesus is saying is that he has to pay close attention to his Father first before he can do the work the Father wants him to do. He knows that his Father is in charge and he can only do what he calls him to do. This is not the first time Jesus talks about this. He talks about his submission to the Father many times in the Gospel of John (7:16; 8:28; 12:49-50; 14:24).

We find it difficult to argue against a Christian’s zeal and busyness in God’s work. When I hear of a person talking about how busy he or she is in the work of God, I sometimes wonder whether I should congratulate the person or warn him or her of misplaced zeal. As Paul writes in Romans 10:2, misplaced zeal is due to a lack of knowledge. But Paul is not against zeal as he calls on the Roman Christians to

“never lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.” (12:10). True zeal is based on how attentive we are to what God is saying and doing to us.

We behave more like Martha than Mary. We want to take charge, even in God’s work, and tend to put ourselves in the center of our personal universe. From this center, everything we do is important and even God is called to respond to us because we are leading the way. This is a fallacy, and I dare say a lot of “God’s work” has gone down the drain because of this. The opposite is true. Even without us doing anything, God is already working. He is leading the way. He is in charge. We need to pay attention to what he is doing and join him in his work. Unlike Martha, we must not be distracted by our busyness in God’s work. We must first be a Mary before we can be an effective Martha. We must first pay attention to God before we can attend to him.
