The story of Martha and Mary in Luke 10 has often been seen as an example of the priority which should be given to the devotional life as opposed to merely worldly labour. This story was a popular passage in later Patristic writers, who set the pattern for its interpretation right down to the present day.

Martha has usually had a bad press. She has been seen as the bossy one, the unspiritual one, the jealous housewife who expected her sister to help her rather than indulging herself in idle chit-chat with Jesus. But there are other traditions which somewhat balance this. Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendell reports that Martha was made the patron saint of housewives and cooks. She is also commemorated in some little-known works of art (both paintings and sculpture) which portray her as the slayer of the dragon, just like St. George. The origins of this image are obscure. She has also been portrayed in a Renaissance painting as one who stayed awake together with Mary praying outside the garden of Gethsemane, while the (male) disciples fell asleep.

However, in spite of these positive images, it must be admitted that Martha has basically had a bad press. The reasons for this lie in the dualistic world-view within which this passage has been interpreted, in which mundane matters of life, domestic chores and such-like, are contrasted unfavorably with spiritual concerns. While Mary sits at the feet of Jesus and listens to him, Martha bustles around preparing a meal. When eventually she finds that the work is being left to her and that Mary is not showing any inclination to assist, Martha complains to Jesus and asks whether he thinks this is right and fair. The reply Jesus gives is seen as a rebuke to the one with worldly concerns and a commendation for the one with spiritual concerns, thereby indicating that there is a dichotomy between life and faith, or at the very least a certain priority of one over the other.

Patristic Interpretation

The Patristic interpretation of this passage clearly shows how the dichotomy was established. It was only in the fourth century that this passage received extensive

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consideration. Augustine commented on it in numerous works. He sees the attitude of Mary as an anticipation of the joy of the believers when they see Jesus returning at the end of the Age. Her attention to the Truth (even in the limited form possible in this age) prefigures the eternal contemplation of the Lord in the age to come. Martha on the other hand was preoccupied with the things of this age, which is good and useful, but is destined to pass away. The “best part” chosen by Mary will not be taken away, while that chosen by Martha will be taken away, since it is ministry to a need which will itself pass away.²

In a pair of sermons on this passage, Augustine develops this dualistic approach in detail. He says that Martha sought to feed the Lord, while Mary sought to be fed by the Lord. He compares the many things which Martha was troubled about (a point repeated by John Cassian³), with the one thing Mary was concentrating on. Augustine does not denigrate Martha’s work directly, but he does say that while both occupations were good, one was better, the one thing which was needful, expedient and necessary.⁴ Augustine compares the contemplative attitude of Mary, “which shall not be taken away from her” because it is spiritual and eternal, with the concerns of Martha to feed the physical body; which concerns will be taken away, since in the heavenly country there will be no one hungry or thirsty or sick. We will be fed there on spiritual things, but we will have nobody to feed with physical things; therefore what Mary has chosen is a foretaste of heaven, and will be eternal, while what Martha has chosen is earthly, that which will eventually pass away.⁵

However, Augustine must have been aware that he had thereby got himself into a quandary, since in the next sermon he takes up this passage again, and feels compelled to refute the idea that we should all then abandon care of the poor and the needy to engage in contemplation. He has to repeat that he did not say that caring for the needs of the body was bad, but that contemplation of the things of God was better.⁶ While Martha was caring about something good, namely the needs of the mortal flesh of the incarnate Lord, Mary was caring about listening to the Word who was incarnate in that flesh. Since the Word was greater than the flesh in which it was incarnate, Mary

² Augustine. On the Trinity 1.10.20. NPNF 1/3, p. 28.
therefore was attending to something better than Martha. Augustine goes on to stress that what Martha was doing was not vile, or wicked, or ungodly, it was in fact perfectly commendable; however that which Mary was engaged in was superior, as it was the “image of things to come” while the concerns of Martha were “the image of things present.” It is only when we lay aside the concerns of domestic and business life that we are able to listen to the Lord.

As a result of this Augustine is not able to affirm the inherent goodness and validity of the domestic way of life, as it is implicitly devalued in comparison to the contemplative life, in spite of all his protestations that it is good and commendable, since he does concede that the contemplative life is better.

Augustine discusses the episode in John 12:2 when Martha served a meal for Jesus, and tries to interpret this in the same dualistic framework. He says that the serving of Christ to which we are called is not the preparation of food for the body, since this was done by those who had Christ’s physical presence. While this was good, it was only possible for a few since we no longer have the physical presence of Christ. However, there is a problem for Augustine in this interpretation; Judas also “served at the table” on this occasion, since he had provided the funds for the food from the money bag he kept on behalf of the disciples. This interpretation of Augustine’s does not give the best sense of the Greek NT text, which implies the meal was provided by Lazarus and Martha and Mary. Similarly when at the Passover meal Jesus said to Judas, “What you have to do, do quickly” it was assumed by the disciples this had to do with preparations for the meal [John 13:27-30]. Since therefore both Judas and Martha were “serving” Jesus in the same way, it is impossible for Augustine to consider that this is what is meant by serving Christ. Instead, he says, to serve Christ is to obey his commands and perform good works on behalf of others. But again Augustine has implicitly denigrated the serving of meals, and the work of Martha in particular, since he correlates it not with serving those with needs, but with the betrayal of Judas.

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Augustine uses this passage in passing to make a social comment, using it to criticise the proud who made others stand up in their presence, while “even a woman” was allowed to sit before the Lord himself.\textsuperscript{11}

Jerome continues the dualistic interpretation of the story. He says of this passage, “Be then like Mary; prefer the food of the soul to that of the body.”\textsuperscript{12} However, Jerome also commends Martha’s work in preparing a meal for the Lord in John 12:2. He includes that passage in a list of those whom the Lord rewards for their service.\textsuperscript{13}

John Cassian, the fervent advocate of monasticism, also compares the active and contemplative lives, and he says concerning this story, “Contemplation then, that is, meditation on God, is the one thing, the value of which all the merits of our righteous acts, all our aims at virtue, come short of.”\textsuperscript{14} John Cassian identifies this contemplation of God and heavenly things as the highest purpose of the human heart; thus he says that “Whatever is alien to this, however great it may be, should be given the second place, or even treated as of no consequence, or perhaps as hurtful.” He then illustrates this with the story of Martha and Mary, thus thereby denigrating the preparation of meals and the serving of others as something secondary, of no consequence, or even harmful to the “spiritual” life! John concedes that what Martha was doing was a “sacred service,” not because preparing meals in itself was important, but because she was “ministering to the Lord and his disciples.” So preparing a meal was sacred not because it was something which was commended by God, but only because in this instance it was service to Christ. John Cassian further describes her work as “pious care” and “praiseworthy service,” but when Martha requested the Lord to tell Mary to help in this task, she was told that it was less important than “meditation, that is, divine contemplation.” Everything else, no matter how good or necessary or useful it might be, is secondary to this greater good. John then says that while the Lord does not “blame” Martha, “yet in praising the one, He implies the other is inferior.” Further, that which Martha is concerned for “can be taken away from her,” but the contemplation in which Mary is engaged “cannot be taken from her.”\textsuperscript{15}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Augustine. \textit{On the catechising of the uninstructed} 13.19. NPNF 1/3, p. 297.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Jerome. \textit{Letter} 22.24. NPNF 2/6, p. 32.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Jerome. \textit{Letter} 71.2. NPNF 2/6, p. 152.
\item \textsuperscript{14} John Cassian. \textit{Conferences} 3.3. NPNF 2/11, p. 521.
\item \textsuperscript{15} John Cassian. \textit{Conferences} 1.8. NPNF 2/11, p. 298.
\end{itemize}
The monastic context appears also in other patristic interpretations, and it is perhaps the growth in monasticism that rendered this passage and its interpretation so popular.

Evagrius interprets this passage to teach that only a few dishes of food are necessary, and compares the concern of Martha for “many things” with the “one thing” of listening to the divine word.\(^{16}\) A similar emphasis on few dishes of food for monks is found also in Nilus of Ancyra,\(^{17}\) Antiochus of Saba,\(^{18}\) and Basil the Great.\(^{19}\) Pseudo-Macarius (a member of the ascetical sect of the Messalians) in his so-called Great Letter, criticises certain extremists in the movement who refuse to do any work on the basis that only “one thing is needful,” namely prayer.\(^{20}\)

Basil sees Martha as ministering to the visible man, while Mary ministered to the invisible Lord and God. He draws out the dichotomy of the spiritual and the material in his interpretation.

Here we see the two states placed before us by means of the two women; the lower, choosing to serve Him in corporeal ministrations which also is most profitable, and that which, ascending to the contemplation of the sacred mysteries, is the more spiritual.\(^{21}\)

Cyril of Alexandria saw Mary as a symbol of the gentiles, and Martha as a symbol of the Jews. He interprets the “one thing” as love, while the “many things” are the many precepts of the Law of Moses.\(^{22}\) Olympiodorus of Alexandria follows Cyril in correlating the “one thing” with love and the “many things” with the Law of Moses, but he does not interpret Mary and Martha as symbols of the Jews and the Gentiles.\(^{23}\)

\(^{16}\) Evagrius Ponticus. *Rerum monachalium rationes earumque quietem appositio* 3. PG 40, 1253C-D.

\(^{17}\) Nilus of Ancyra. *De monachorum praestantia* 16. PG 79, 1080B.

\(^{18}\) Antiochus of Saba. *Homilia 14. De distratione, alias, importuna occupatione*. PG 89, 1472B-C.

\(^{19}\) Basil the Great. *Regulae fusius tractate* 20. PG 31, 973B.


\(^{22}\) Cyril of Alexandria. *In Ioannem* 7.9.6. PG 74, 40.

\(^{23}\) Olympiodorus of Alexandria. *In Ecclesiasten*. PG 93, 489.
Gregory the Great also makes a clear contrast between the contemplative life and the active life, and bemoans the fact that he is burdened with the latter so as to be unable to pursue the former.

I have loved the beauty of the contemplative life as a Rachel, barren, but keen of sight and fair [Genesis 29], who, though in her quietude she is less fertile, yet sees the light more keenly. But, by what judgement I know not, Leah has been coupled with me in the night, to wit, the active life; fruitful, but tender-eyed; seeing less, but bringing forth more. I have longed to sit at the feet of the Lord with Mary, to take in the words of His mouth; and lo, I am compelled to serve with Martha in external affairs, to be careful and troubled about many things.24

Elsewhere Gregory makes the same comparison between the active life and the contemplative life based on the story of Martha and Mary. The latter, “being rapt in the contemplative, she transcended the active life, which Martha her sister still pursued.”25

An exception to this approach is found in the works of John Chrysostom, who has a better sense of the meaning of the passage, although he does not appear to have grasped the full redemptive-historical significance of the situation. He argues that we must not be careful about tomorrow, laying up treasures in this world, but this is according to him not incompatible with work in this world, since

...a man may do no work, and yet lay up treasure for the morrow; and a man may work, and yet be careful for nothing; for carefulness and work are not the same thing; it is not as trusting to his work that a man works, but that he may impart to him that has needs.26

In this connection he says of Martha that it was not the proper time to be busy at work, but rather she ought to have been listening to the Lord. Christ told her not to be worried about food, not because he wanted her to be idle, but because he wanted her

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24 Gregory the Great. *Epistle* 5. NPNF 2/12, p. 75.
26 John Chrysostom. *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 44. NPNF 1/14, p. 158.
to listen to him. Chrysostom rebuked Martha not because of the “inferior” activities she was busy with, but because her priorities were wrong. Chrysostom presents Christ as saying “I came to teach you necessary things, but you are anxious about a meal.”  

He says that we are instructed not to labour for perishing food, but this does not mean idleness, but rather that we are able thereby to benefit others. In fact, he says, idleness can be rightly understood as the “perishable food” since idleness is the root of wickedness. Thus to labour for the “perishable food” is to be idle and gluttonous and preoccupied with luxurious living. Chrysostom thus has a more positive view of the preparation of meals, since it is the timing that Martha has got wrong, not the activity.

Mediaeval interpretations

The mediaeval mystic Eckhart took this passage to mean that detachment from the world is what Martha lacked. After saying that he had read many books by pagans and in the OT and NT, Eckhart said that he set himself to find the greatest virtue with which man can “most completely and closely conform himself to God, with which he can by grace become that which God is by nature,” and he came to the conclusion that

...no other virtue better than a pure detachment from all things; because all other virtues have some regard for created things, but detachment is free from all created things. That is why our Lord said to Martha, ‘One thing is necessary’ (Luke 10:42), which is as much to say, ‘Martha, whoever wants to be free of care and to be pure must have one thing, and that is detachment.’

Eckhart did not deny that we have to be involved in various activities in life. He was not commending contemplation over against activity. Instead, he wanted to see the virtue of detachment expressed in those various activities. The person who is spiritually mature is able to be detached in the middle of activity.

Giving his preference, where his will is concerned, to the rest and leisure of Mary, to the extent that necessity demands he accepts the toil and the business of Martha, yet does this with as much peace and quiet

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27 John Chrysostom. *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 44. NPNF 1/14, p. 158.
of spirit as he can, and always brings himself back from that manifold
distraction to the one thing necessary.29

Guerric of Igny applies the statement “Mary has chosen the best part” to Mary the
mother of the Lord, of whom he says that it is apt to apply this statement to her. He
overlooks the centrality of Martha in this story, since he says that both Marys
welcomed the Lord, one under her roof and the other into her womb.30 He then goes
on to say that Mary the mother of the Lord “showed herself to be a Martha in her care
for the Child’s rearing in such a way that nonetheless she fulfilled the part of Mary in
her application to knowledge of the Word.”31 Thus, “since she was not careless or
remiss in Martha’s work she has not been left without Mary’s fruit. Toil is in action,
fruit or reward in contemplation.”32

Thomas Aquinas continues the distinction between the active life (Martha) and the
contemplative life (Mary).33 Thomas says that the contemplative life is loved for its
own sake, while the active life is directed to something else.34 According to Thomas,
the “best part” of Mary’s is the contemplative life.35 This is also stated elsewhere, as
he says that “it would seem that the contemplative life is more excellent than the
active.”36 Thomas explicitly refers to Aristotle in his interpretation of Luke 10:42, as
he says:

Again man’s good is threefold as stated in Ethic 1.8; one consisting in
external things, for instance riches; another, consisting in bodily
goods; the third, consisting in the goods of the soul among which the
goods of the contemplative life take precedence of the goods of the
active life, as the Philosopher shows (Ethic 10.7), and as our Lord
declared (Luke 10:42) Mary has chosen the better part.37

33 Thomas Aquinas. Summa Theologica Q. 171, Prologue. London: Burns Oates and
Vol 14, p. 134.
Reformation interpreters

Martin Luther sees these two women as exemplars of works and faith, and places one in priority to the other, in a polemic against works righteousness.\(^{38}\) He says that the work that Martha does is fine, but it will not attain the goal. Similarly, working in any position, whether as a servant or as a pastor, will not attain the goal. But hearing Jesus is the secret of attaining the goal.\(^{39}\) In his lectures on Galatians (1531), Luther stresses the difference between works and faith, and cites Luke 10:41-42, and says of this, “Therefore a man becomes a Christian, not by working but by listening.”\(^{40}\)

In his lectures on the Psalms (1513-1515), he commented with reference to Psalm 121:3, “Hence He also said of Mary Magdalene (that is, of the contemplative, who are the most perfect), that she chose not the total best, but ‘the best part’.”\(^{41}\) He continues the contrast of contemplative and active in other passages where he discusses Martha and Mary,\(^{42}\) as well as a contrast between concern for temporal things and a concern for spiritual things.\(^{43}\)

In his sermon on John 14:13-14 (1537), Luther identifies the “one thing needful” with the confession that Christ is the one true God,\(^{44}\) while in his earlier lectures on 1 Timothy (1527-1528) he says that it is to believe in God and love one’s neighbour.\(^{45}\) In Concerning the Ministry (1523) he says the “one thing needful” is “the Word of God, in which man has his life,”\(^{46}\) while in Concerning the order of public worship (1523) he says it is “to hear [Christ’s] word daily.”\(^{47}\)

\(^{38}\) Martin Luther. Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 6-8. Luther’s Works. St. Louis: Concordia. Vol. 23, 1959, pp. 247-248. Luther accepted the identification of Mary of Bethany with Mary Magdalene, a view common in the Middle Ages and still current at the time of the Reformation.


\(^{41}\) Martin Luther. First Lectures on the Psalms. Luther’s Works, Vol. 11, 1976, p. 541.


Luther still sees a contrast between the active and the contemplative life in this passage, but he does not set up a hierarchy of merit, he simply expresses a preference for that which is most satisfying.

Psalm 55:6. *Who will give me wings?* This is the language of those who are in an active life and in the public eye, like Martha, troubled about many things (Luke 10:41), since with weariness they endure rebellion, opposition and envy from every side, as did Christ from the Jews. And therefore they sigh for a contemplative and quiet life of agreeable endeavours and they crave to be set free from this bother.48

He sees the “many things” Martha is concerned with merely as distractions and sources of frustration in life, rather than as intrinsically inferior activities.49

Calvin in contrast to Luther abandons the Patristic and Mediaeval approaches to this passage, and says that it has been distorted by seeing in it a commendation of the contemplative life over against the active life.

As this passage has been basely distorted into the commendation of what is called a Contemplative life, we must inquire into its true meaning, from which it will appear, that nothing was farther from the design of Christ, than to encourage his disciples to indulge in indolence, or in useless speculations. It is, no doubt, an old error, that those who withdraw from business, and devote themselves entirely to an contemplative, lead an Angelical life. For the absurdities which the Sorbonnists utter on this subject they appear to have been indebted to Aristotle, who places the highest good, and ultimate end, of human life in contemplation, which, according to him, is the enjoyment of virtue. When some men were driven by ambition to withdraw from the ordinary intercourse of life, or when peevish men gave themselves up to solitude and indolence, the resolution to adopt that course was followed by such pride, that they imagined themselves to be like the angels, because they did nothing; for they entertained as great a contempt for the active life, as if it had kept them back from heaven.

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On the contrary, we know that men were created for the express purpose of being employed in labour of various kinds, and that no sacrifice is more pleasing to God, than when every man applies diligently to his own calling, and endeavours to live in such a manner as to contribute to the general advantage.50

Calvin says that interpreting this story as a commendation of the contemplative life over the active life is manifestly absurd. He asks, although Luke says Mary sat at the feet of Jesus, does this mean she did nothing else through her whole life? Instead he refers it to the appropriate distribution of time by disciples. They will not always hear, but shall put into practice what they learn: “for there is a time to hear, and a time to act.”51 Calvin says it is foolish for monks to draw a comparison between a contemplative and an active life from this passage, since it tells us simply how Christ wishes to be received.52 Calvin says that the problem with Martha was that Christ wished to be entertained frugally, not at great expense of time and effort, but by so doing Martha distracted herself from the advantage of Christ’s visit. He stresses the “much serving” mentioned by Luke, and that Christ said he would be satisfied with little. In addition to Martha’s over-enthusiastic labours, she despised her sister’s willingness to listen to Christ. Calvin says that “This example warns us, that in doing what is right, we must take care not to think more highly of ourselves than of others.”53

Calvin comments on the “one thing necessary” that it does not mean that Christ commends only one form of activity and thereby excludes diversity of employment.54 He states that what it means is that no matter what activity believers are engaged in, they must all be directed towards the one object, and if we do not, then we “wander to no purpose.” He says that Christ does not mean that only one activity is proper, but that proper order is necessary, so that merely secondary matters become our chief concern.55

Calvin stresses that it was Mary’s choice of a good activity taken when the opportunity presents itself, that is commended.\textsuperscript{56} He says that some interpret the phrase “which shall not be taken away from her” to mean that the fruit of heavenly doctrine can never perish. Calvin says he has no objection to that opinion, “but I have followed the view which appeared to me to be more in accordance with Christ’s design.”\textsuperscript{57}

\textbf{Modern interpreters}

The dualistic approach taken by the Patristic writers which sets the “worldly” concerns of Martha over against the “spiritual” interests of Mary is perpetuated in more recent times. This can be seen from the various commentaries on this passage. Even a Calvinistic commentator like Geldenhuys (NICNT) sees in this passage contrasts between “spiritual fellowship” and “outward activities.” He comments that “Material things and the honouring of [Christ] through outward means are evanescent matters, but the soul’s communion with the Lord can never be removed, not even by death.”\textsuperscript{58} He goes on to add:

This story should not be taken to mean that the Saviour taught that a life of quiet worship and contemplation is the right form of religion and that an active Christian life is to be disapproved of. There is here no question of such a contrast. What we do learn is that in our life’s active service we must not be anxious and agitated, sulky and dissatisfied with our fellow-Christians or with our Master, and that we should not busy ourselves to such an extent with outward things that we neglect the quiet worship of the Lord. The most important part of our religion is the spiritual exercise of communion with our Redeemer. When things are right in this respect, we shall also in our practical life be actively busy in His honour.\textsuperscript{59}

Thus while supposedly rejecting the contrast between contemplative and active Christianity, Geldenhuys actually perpetuates the distinction and emphasises the

importance of “spiritual communion.” G Campbell Morgan also sees a commendation of devotional life, but stresses that this was in addition to works of service, not instead of them.

Martha goes on and on until she is distracted; but Mary also sat at His feet. This is a most vital distinction. Some people seem to imagine that all she did was to sit herself down, to have a good time. If she had done that, Christ would never have commended her. Mary knew the one deep secret that love cannot finally express itself in service. It must take the place of devotion, of discipleship.  

Similarly Cornelius VanderWaal places the emphasis on the priority of listening to Jesus over works of service.

Jesus reproached Martha for not seeing what is central, as Mary did: after Mary had done her duty, she did not look for other household chores but abandoned her sister - that’s literally what the text says - and sat down a Jesus’ feet. “One thing is needful,” declared Jesus. Now, this story has nothing to do with women’s liberation. Jesus did not come to uproot people but to point out to them what is central, what they must put first as they carry out their divine calling.

There is remarkable similarity to Eckhart’s virtue of detachment in the comments by S G de Graaf on this passage.

Jesus had to defend Mary against Martha. What Mary did was not better in itself. If Mary had thought that her listening was better than Martha’s service, she would also have lost touch with Jesus even as she was listening to Him. But Mary listened for Jesus’ sake. This is the central thing in life: to remain close to Him. This is the part Mary chose, and no one, not even the jealous Martha, could take it away from her. We too must always seek one thing only, that we abide in Him in spirit. That is always possible, no matter what we do. Whether

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we listen quietly to His Word or are busily engaged in life for Him makes no difference. Even though we may have many things to do, we can still seek to be with Him in spirit. No man can rob us of that. Then we also acknowledge the calling of others who do something else; we then refrain from jealousy but are one with them in Him.62

G B Caird thinks Martha saw Mary as selfish, seeking her own pleasure in listening to Jesus, while she is not like that - but she is rebuked by Jesus for self-concern and self-pity, since her good works are not self-forgetful.63 Talbert rebukes Martha as “trying to be the hostess of the one who came to serve.”64

One frequent interpretation of this passage by contemporary interpreters is that it teaches the priority of listening to the word of God rather than busyness. Stuhlmueller says “Nothing else can compensate for the true blessedness of hearing the word of God and keeping it alive.”65 Similarly Tinsley sees Mary as the “model of the ideal disciple who can perceive in the words of Jesus something of overriding significance, what John in his Gospel would have thought of as discerning the “Word” of God in the “words” of Jesus.”66 Ellis also sees Mary choosing the priority of the Word of God over other concerns.

Jesus rebukes Martha for diverting Mary from his word to less essential tasks. The issue is not two kinds of service but religious busyness which distracts the Christian - preacher or layman - from the word of Christ upon which all effective service rests. Mary chose “the best dish” (42, Moffatt), because she saw the priority of the word of the kingdom to all worldly concerns. Martha’s concern was to be a proper hostess, Mary’s to be a proper disciple. Jesus’ concern, as ever, was to serve and fulfill his mission, not to have his rights as a guest.67


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A common interpretation in recent commentaries is that the passage presents a contrast between salvation by works and salvation through love of God. This contrast is often drawn in connection with the preceding story, the parable of the Samaritan. Fitzmeyer contends that this episode of Mary and Martha is unrelated to the preceding passages “unless one wants to see in it another way of inheriting eternal life.” He mentions that in the preceding episode (the parable of the Samaritan) there was a contrast between the Samaritan on the one hand, and the Jewish priest and the levite on the other, while in this episode the contrast is between the perfect hostess and the perfect disciple, but considers that “that is a superficial consideration at most.” Fitzmeyer suggests that the love of God might be a motivation for listening to Jesus’ instruction, but there is no reference to such a motivation which would link the passage in this way to the parable of the Samaritan. This is repeated by Stuhlmueller.

Lest the parable of the Good Samaritan become an excuse for excessive activism, Luke now tells of an incident which took place at Bethany, a village near Jerusalem.

Again, Craddock sees the connection between the parable of the Samaritan and the example he sets, and the example Mary sets.

Jesus has just met a man skilled in Scripture who has trouble hearing the word of God, and Jesus offers him an example, a Samaritan. Now Jesus visits with a woman so busy serving she does not hear the word, and Jesus offers her an example, her sister. To the man, Jesus said to go and do; to the woman, Jesus said to sit down, listen and learn.

Fitzmeyer makes other connections between these two stories.

On the heels of the good Samaritan episode, this one emphasises the listening to the word of Jesus, something that goes beyond love of

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one’s neighbor. Martha’s service is not repudiated by him, but he stresses that its elaborate thrust may be misplaced. A *diakonia* that bypasses the word is one that will never have lasting character; whereas listening to Jesus’ word is the lasting “good” that will not be taken away from the listener.\(^{72}\)

Craddock also tries to balance the call to serve and the call to reflect, with an admonishment to reflect on when it is the right time to do one or the other, but gives little in the way of guidance as to what choices to make at any one time.

The word of God and not food is the one thing needful, for we do not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord (Deuteronomy 8:3; Luke 4:4; John 6:27). This is the portion or dish Mary has chosen. But we must not cartoon the scene: Martha to her eyeballs in soapsuds, Mary pensively on a stool in the den, and Jesus giving scriptural warrant for letting dishes pile high in the sink. If we censure Martha too harshly, she may abandon serving altogether, and if we commend Mary too profusely, she may sit there forever. There is a time to go and do; there is a time to listen and reflect. Knowing which and when is a matter of spiritual discernment. If we were to ask Jesus which example applies to us, the Samaritan or Mary, his answer would probably be Yes.\(^{73}\)

Thompson also sees a contrast between practical Martha, who is rebuked harshly, and the practical Samaritan of the previous story, who is commended. This is because of Jesus’ ruthless demand for absolute priority to be given to himself and his teaching. Mary has her priorities right. Jesus is stressing that practical living must stem from listening to him.\(^{74}\)

Having just recounted a parable which praises “practical Christianity,” St. Luke skilfully follows it with a story which balances it. Mary, sitting in rapt attention, is absorbed in listening to Jesus. Generations of Christians have seen in her a model of the contemplative life of


prayer and meditation. Martha and the Good Samaritan on the one hand, and Mary on the other, illustrate the two-fold rhythm of the spiritual life in which service and prayer both have their place. Our Lord himself is the perfect example of the balance between the two. It is important to notice that Mary is not praised at the expense of Martha. The monastic life is not “better” than the secular life, as was argued from this text in the Middle Ages. Jesus defends Mary against Martha’s attack. Nor does Jesus rebuke Martha for her practical management. The gentle rebuke is directed at her fussy anxieties and her self-pity. To renew her spiritual resources she needs what Mary is determined to have.75

Danker sees the story of the Samaritan as referring to the second table of the Law, while the story of Martha refers to the first table. He sees Martha as a legalist who sees her own performance against the lack of performance in others. Also in conjunction with the story of the Samaritan, it ensures avoiding activism without love.76 This comparison of the two tables of the Law also appears in Talbert’s commentary.

If the parable of the Good Samaritan, at the level of Lukan theology, dealt primarily with the meaning of the commandment to love one’s neighbour, this episode deals with the meaning of the first commandment.77

Brian Beck repeats the same correlation of the parable of the Samaritan and the story of Martha with the two tables of the law.

The modern reader tends to have sympathy for the hard-pressed Martha, but it is quite clear that for Luke listening to the word of Jesus takes priority over service, much as it does in Acts 6:1-6, where the apostles will not allow themselves to be deflected from prayer and the ministry (diakonia) of the word by the need to serve at tables (diakonein trapezais). It is an important corrective to the impression

which might otherwise be gained from the parable of the Samaritan. The two commandments of love are one, but neither component can be reduced to the other. Obedience, important as it is, can only follow from a hearing of the word of Jesus.  

Fitzmeyer suggests that the idea that the parable deals with the Second table of the law, the love of neighbours, while this episode deals with the First table, the love of God, is stretching a point. A better interpretation of the contrast between these two passages is given by Craddock, who says that Luke 10:25-42 is about two people who do not get the point of what he is about or what the reign of God means: the lawyer and Martha. One is instructed to “go and do,” the other to “sit down and listen.” Jesus’ word is not the same to everyone in every situation and need. Craddock offers the illuminating analogy of Jesus writing prescriptions and not offering patent medicine.

Much discussion has focused on the “one thing needful.” It has been suggested that this means that Jesus told Martha not to bother with a big spread of dishes, but one dish would be sufficient to provide nourishment. Fitzmeyer takes this view, and sees it as bearing a deeper meaning.

This passage is somewhat subtle, since Jesus’ answer to Martha’s fretting request seems at first to reassure her, telling her that she need prepare only one dish. But when his pronouncement is complete, one realizes that the “one thing” means more than “one dish” and has taken on another nuance. It has become the “best part,” and he who has been part of it guarantees that it will not be taken away from Mary to send her to help distracted Martha. The episode makes listening to the “word” the “one thing” needed. In a way it repeats the Lucan message of 8:15,21. Priority is given to the hearing of the word coming from God’s messenger over preoccupation with all other concerns. Martha wanted to honor Jesus with an elaborate meal, but Jesus reminds her that it is more important to listen to what he has to say. The proper

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79 Joseph A Fitzmeyer. *The Gospel According to Luke*, p. 892. An alternative view is that the two tables of the Law were identical: they were not separate sections of the covenant agreement, but separate copies, one for God and one for the people.

“service” of Jesus is attention to his instruction, not an elaborate provision for his physical needs.81

It is rather this interpretation given by Fitzmeyer which is exceedingly subtle, and unlikely to be a genuine meaning we can take from the passage. Caird seeks to omit reference to “one” or “few” things needful, as an early gloss. He then says there is as a result no comparison between Martha and Mary. Mary is defended, not praised to the disparagement of Martha.82

**Feminist interpretations**

Modern feminist writing adds another dimension to the exegesis of this passage. One of the most common approaches seems to be that Martha was unable to recognise the liberation offered to her in being allowed to participate in the teaching sessions of Jesus. Instead she was, as Ann Loades describes her, “anxious about many things rather than seizing the priceless opportunity offered to women in discipleship of Jesus.”83 Mary is seen as the one who breaks out of the mould of traditional roles and does something previously unheard of: seeking to be part of the circle around a rabbi as he teaches.

The story in itself is not one we would notice at first glance: an older sister is disgruntled with her younger sister, and Jesus settles the trouble. Yet there is more. The hospitality code was of no small importance to the Jewish people; the women of the household were expected to entertain their guests with refreshment and tend to their needs. Mary blatantly chooses another role. Even more surprising, Jesus accepts it. For Mary is doing the unprecedented: she sits at the feet of a teacher, a rabbi, in the company of men, and receives his teaching and religious instruction. As women were not permitted to touch the Torah or be instructed in its words, Mary’s actions were a distinct break with Jewish custom. Jesus must have encouraged here; indeed, there may have been several women present in the room.84


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Fitzmeyer rejects Laland’s contention that the episode is given to instruct women as to the proper entertainment of travelling preachers. Rather, Jesus encourages a woman to learn from him, in contrast to the attitude of the rabbinical tradition.  

Another approach taken by feminists is that Luke is here trying to put women in their place. They have the option of either sitting submissively being taught by men, or engaging in domestic duties. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza cites Laland, who “suggested that Martha expresses the opinion of some circles in the early church who sought to limit women’s participation in the community to practical serving functions.” She takes the position that Luke’s treatment of women is not favorable and suggests that “Martha, who is rebuked by Jesus in this story, represents women in Luke’s community who are leaders of households. Mary, on the other hand, receives praise for her submissive and silent behaviour.” Powell, however, suggests against Schüssler Fiorenza, that “Luke portrays Jesus here as challenging the view that a woman’s role should be limited to such traditional duties as doing housework and providing hospitality. His defence of Mary, then, does not commend submissiveness so much as it affirms the right of women to learn the word the same as men.” Schüssler Fiorenza suggests that the ministry of the table and ministry of the word comes from the division of the one *diakonia* into two, in which one is subordinated to the other, as is shown by Luke in Luke 10:38-42, “where Martha is characterized as ‘serving at table,’ while Mary like a rabbincic disciple, listens to *the word* of Jesus.” This interpretation of Schüssler Fiorenza depends heavily on Patristic views of the passage: views which she does not appear to share, but which for her provide the meaning of the passage.

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89 Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. In memory of her, p. 165.
[Martha] was the image of the Jewish church in comparison with the church of Christ; the image of the imperfect earthly church in comparison with the heavenly church; the image of the active life in contrast to the contemplative life.\textsuperscript{90}

A redemptive-historical interpretation

The distinction between a contemplative and an active life arises not from the text itself, but from the preoccupations of a later period which saw Christianity in terms of contemplation and mystical experience. This is, however, an imposition on the text which cannot be sustained.

To read this episode as a commendation of contemplative life over against active life is to allegorize it beyond recognition and to introduce a distinction that was born only of later preoccupations. The episode is addressed to the Christian who is expected to be \textit{contemplativus(a) in actione}.\textsuperscript{91}

As can be seen, the emphasis in all these interpretations is the spiritual devotion of Mary, not the redemptive work of Christ. However, examining this passage from a redemptive-historical perspective leads us to different conclusions. Jesus had not come to act as a teacher of piety and devotion, but to proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God, the destruction of all Satan’s works and the setting free of all those who were in bondage. He came to die as a sacrifice for sin. His visit to Mary and Martha should be seen in this light. His commendation of Mary’s choice to listen to him rather than bustle around preparing a meal was not a choice for the spiritual over against the worldly, but a choice for the significant over the insignificant in terms of what was currently transpiring in God’s redemptive plan. It is not that personal devotion (which is not what the text indicates Mary was engaged in) is more important than preparing meals, a necessary and truly spiritual function if carried out in service to the Lord. The point is that Mary recognised the immediacy of the situation with the presence of Jesus that Martha completely missed.


The story begins with Jesus visiting Martha and Mary. Notice the order: it is Martha who invites Jesus into her home for a meal, and Luke adds that this Martha, who showed hospitality to Jesus, had a sister called Mary. This is Martha’s story: Mary does not say anything or have an active part in any way. Mary sensed that Jesus would not be around for long, and gave her attention to him while he was still with them. It was her recognition that this was a unique moment in the history of God’s redemptive acts that was commended, not her choice of one activity over another. Martha was busy with many things, but Mary had seen the one thing that (at that stage in history) was most important: to learn from Jesus about the task which he had come to fulfil.

Seeing this story as an illustration of the priority of personal devotion over against housework misses the point entirely. The presence of Jesus was not some mystical experience which can be repeated in our own devotional lives, so that “just as Mary spent time with Jesus, so we too should spend time with Jesus.” No, it was a recognition that for a few brief years, Jesus was present, God incarnated in human form living among his people, and that Mary should in that situation, when Jesus was present in her house, give her entire attention to that unique, unrepeatable and historically significant event.

An interpretation which puts the emphasis on the spiritual devotion of Mary to her Lord actually moves the thrust of the story away from Jesus to Mary. It establishes the importance of human devotion rather than the work of Jesus. It makes the focus of Scripture “the faith of the people of God” rather than the faith which we ought to have in God. It makes the centre of attention the response of people to God rather than the revelation by God of himself to his people. In this sense, it is comparable to one of the most destructive tendencies in modern liberal theology: centring on human faith rather than divine revelation. A concentration on the devotion of Mary rather than on the presence of Jesus in a unique unrepeatable stage in God’s redemptive plan makes the Scriptures a human-centred book which reveals more about us than it does about God. It removes God from the centre, focusing on human faith, and thereby leaves a void which will be filled not by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, but by any conception of God we care to generate. Thus the God worshipped by the people of God may be nothing more than their own perception of God, rather than the God who

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revealed himself uniquely in Christ. A shift of focus from the presence of Jesus as the incarnation of God in a unique unrepeatable historical way to the devotion of one of his followers eventually leaves us destitute of a relationship with God altogether, the exact opposite of the intention of that interpretation, but the result nevertheless. The focus of the passage is on the faith of Mary, and not the person of Christ and the mission on which he was engaged.

Martha is not contrasted with her so-called spiritual sister who was engaged in listening to the Lord, because she was busy with so-called unspiritual work like cooking a meal. Rather, she failed to see that it was not the proper time to be busy at work. She ought to have been listening to the Lord at that time. Christ told her not to be worried about food, not because he wanted her to be idle, but because he wanted her to listen to him. He rebuked Martha not because of the “inferior” activities she was busy with, but because her priorities were wrong.

The Messiah was on his way to Jerusalem to die to secure redemption for all humankind. In Luke 9:51-53 we read, “As the time approached for him to be taken up into heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem.” And not long after commencing his journey towards Jerusalem to die, he calls on Martha and her sister Mary. However, Martha failed to discern the times: she was not aware that the climax of the redemptive work of God throughout all of human history was imminent, from the first promise of the Messiah to Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, to the exodus of Israel from Egypt, and the coming of the prophets to foretell his advent. Jesus had announced his intention to go to Jerusalem, which is why the Samaritans refused to receive him. He had also sent out the seventy-two disciples to announce the coming of the kingdom of God. It was common knowledge that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem; but Martha ignored all this, and bustled around preparing an elaborate meal.

Craddock insists that the section of Luke from 9:51 to 19:28 is all part of the travel narrative, commencing from when Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem.” Everything that lies in this section is to be interpreted in the light of this journey to Jerusalem.93

The same insight is found in William Barclay, who says that this episode shows us the wrong kind of kindness.

Think where Jesus was going when this happened. He was on His way to Jerusalem - to die. His whole being was taken up with the intensity of that inner battle to bend His will to the will of God. When Jesus came to that home in Bethany it was a great day; and Martha was eager to celebrate it by - as we say - laying on the best the house could give. So she rushed and fussed and cooked; and that was precisely what Jesus did not want. All He wanted was quiet. With the Cross before Him, and with the inner tension in His heart, He had turned aside to Bethany to find an oasis of calm away from the demanding crowds if only for an hour or two; and that is what Mary gave Him, and that is what Martha, in her kindness, did her best to destroy.94

There is an evident denigration of “women’s work” in these interpretations, which contrast caring for bodily needs, that is, preparing meals, with contemplation, or caring for the needs of the spirit and the things of God. This negative evaluation of preparing meals is not consistent with the creation- and life-affirming perspective of Scripture as a whole, but is an imposition arising from a dualistic and world-denying worldview. Scripture nowhere denigrates life in this world, or considers our daily activities as unspiritual or unimportant to God. What it does condemn is carrying out such activities as though God was irrelevant to them. As Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians, “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” And in Proverbs 31 we read of the wise woman, who was commended for her faith: that is, she understood what it meant to live obediently before God, and her wisdom and faith is expressed in providing food and clothing for her family, for her skill in agriculture and in land dealings, and her ability to turn a profit from her business activities. This is the woman who fears the Lord and who is to be praised: a woman skilled in preparing meals, in managing a farm, and in conducting a business. These activities of hers are spiritual, because they are carried out through the insight and strength which the Holy Spirit gives.