

**Title:** One Thing Necessary  
**Text:** Luke 10:38-42  
**Date:** 28 April, 2013  
**Preacher:** Rev Stu Cameron

...Let's pray: Father, help me to preach the Savior big, satan small, sin defeated and the sinner loved. In Jesus' name. Amen.

I have a question for you. Are you familiar with the Dummies books? Do you own one?

Over the past 20 years more than 1800 different Dummies books have been published, and more than 200 million have been sold. The books take complex topics and distill them down to simple advice and instructions. The titles are so diverse:

There is knitting for dummies, rabbits for dummies and cats for dummies. Now, if you own a cat – like we do - you pretty much already are a dummy. Only kidding, only kidding! No hate mail this week please!

There's more; there's sex for dummies, golf for dummies (I needed that on Friday), the firefighter exam for dummies and making marriage work for dummies. That one is really, really thick.

Actually the well known philosopher and marriage expert, Peter Lipsett, once told me that the secret to a happy marriage can be summarized in one sentence with four words; 'Happy wife, happy life.'

The Dummies self-help publishing juggernaut taps into a strong desire we have for simplicity. Suffering from information overload, we want to get to the guts of any topic – we want the bullet points, the PowerPoint slides, the summary notes.

There is even the bible for dummies and Christianity for dummies. While these books may be helpful in some ways, there is a problem in trying to 'dumb down' what it means to follow Jesus. Let me put it this way:

Christian faith is not a problem to be solved. It is a gift to be received, a relationship to be enjoyed, an adventure to be lived and a mystery to be explored.

One of the things I love most about following Jesus is this; the more I come to discover and know about God, the more I understand just how little I do know and that there is to discover. The quest for faith with understanding should last a lifetime.

Having said this, we can easily fall into the trap as Christians of overcomplicating things. There are some beliefs and practices which are at the heart of the Christian faith. We know this because Jesus himself points it out.

The title of today's message is 'The One Thing Necessary'. What I hope to demonstrate is that the one thing necessary for a follower of Jesus, before anything else and from which all else flows, is summarized by three words; Stop, Sit Down, Shut Up.

Let's read today's passage from Luke, chapter 10:

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."  
(Luke 10:38-42)

I need to say up front I don't particularly like this passage. Is anyone with me in thinking Jesus seems pretty hard on Martha? I mean, Martha was doing the right thing. She was doing what was required and expected – she was being a responsible host. To give some context, Martha lived with her brother, Lazarus, and her sister, Mary in a little town called Bethany just a few miles out of Jerusalem. While we don't know where Lazarus fits, it's clearly implied that Martha was the older sister of Mary. It was Martha's house, where Mary also lived, that Jesus came to. Martha was fulfilling the role of responsible host and eldest sister.

Perhaps one of the reasons I feel sorry for Martha is that I am the eldest of three siblings. How many of this morning are the oldest sibling in our families? I was fascinated to discover this week that there are more than 65,000 published scholarly articles on the effect of birth order on things like a person's intelligence, personality and character. Now, there is whole heap of debate about this, but here are some words that researchers associate with those of us who are the oldest sibling in our families:

Serious, conscientious, goal-oriented, rule conscious, organized, responsible, determined, rule keeper, leader.

How many of us were the youngest sibling our family? Here are some words associated with you, you spoiled brats:

Charming, affectionate, manipulative, persistent, attention-loving, impatient.

Last, how many of you had the misfortune of being a 'middle child'? Here are your words:

Flexible, peace-maker, social, competitive, generous, diplomatic.

In preparing to host an important guest like Jesus, Martha was doing exactly what was expected of a responsible, rule-keeping, conscientious and organized older sister and host. She was following the script. Meanwhile, doing nothing but fall at the feet of Jesus, Mary was playing perfectly the role of her charming affectionate and attention-loving younger sister. But it's Mary that Jesus affirms and Martha who he gently rebukes. It's just not fair, and Martha was quick to point it out!

If we read this passage in isolation, we can end up with a skewed and distorted interpretation. It is so dangerous to lift a passage or a verse out of the bible out of its context – what comes before or after it. When we do this we can make the bible say whatever we want it to say, rather than what God actually meant and said. Don Carson puts it this way:

Text without context is pretext.  
(Don Carson)

The context of this story is that earlier in Luke 10, a lawyer asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus throws the question back at him and asked what the law said. The lawyer responded with the two commands to love God and love your neighbour- love people. Jesus gives him an A+ for his answer, but the lawyer isn't finished. He asks Jesus who his neighbour is. Jesus responds by telling the incredible story of the Good Samaritan, the unlikely hero who rescues the assaulted man on the road to Jericho. The meaning is clear; every human being we encounter is our neighbour and deserving not just of our good intentions, but our practical love. The parable of the Good Samaritan is a vivid illustration of that it means to love our neighbour.

Straight after telling the story, Jesus comes to Martha and Mary's house. In this encounter, and in Mary's devotion, we see what it means to love God. Now love of God and love of neighbour cannot be separated; they are two sides of the one coin. The bible is clear that if we say we love God and we hate, or are indifferent to our neighbour we are liars.

The message of Luke 10 is that eternal life is found in loving God and loving neighbour. The exclamation mark that is provided by the story of Mary and Martha is that before we can offer love to God or neighbour, we must receive love. The one thing necessary is to do as Mary did, bask in the grace-filled love of God always on offer to us in the presence of Jesus. To do this we stop, we sit down and we shut up.

### **Stop: Rest in God**

First, we stop and rest in God.

Every six months or so we have a manse inspection. While our house is normally pretty tidy, extra work is done to make sure everything is ship shape. Actually, Sue and I secretly love manse inspections because it means our son, Joel; has to clean the festering mess that is his room. For a few weeks after at least, Joel's room is fit for human habitation. We are actually thinking of asking for more inspections!

I am not sure what it's like in your house, but having special guests over can be a blessing and a curse. The house gets some extra TLC, but that involves some extra work. Martha knew Jesus was a special guest. Jesus was close to this family. They supported his ministry. Martha was thinking, '*Jesus deserves a tidy house. He deserves immaculate catering. He needs a perfect host.*' It was a lot of pressure. I imagine if Jesus was coming to my place for dinner I would want to tidy up a little.

Martha is frantically rushing around being the perfect host while Mary spends quality time with Jesus. The longer it went on, the angrier she got, eventually exploding in bitter accusations.

Martha was trapped in a deadly way of thinking. She was desperately working to earn Jesus' attention and favour, while her sister simply stopped everything she was doing and received Jesus' attention and favour.

Years ago I saw a t-shirt at the Eumundi markets that had this caption:

Jesus is coming soon. Look busy.

In a humorous way this sadly reflects how many of us approach God. Too often we desperately try to earn God's favour and attention with our good works, our service, our giving - our good moral lives- the list goes on. But here's the thing:

God doesn't want our activity; God longs for our adoration.

At the end of the day there is nothing, absolutely nothing, we can do that will make God love us any more than he already does.

The interesting thing is that this text uses three words to describe Martha – Martha who was faithfully serving Jesus. Martha was distracted, anxious and troubled. And this all overflowed into bitterness towards her sister. *'It's not fair. I do all the work, she does nothing and yet she gets all of the Lord's attention.'*

Rather than trying to earn God's favour like Martha, God longs for us to rest in the favour of God already present in Jesus, just as Mary did.

Then and only then, as we stop and rest in the presence of God, then we have the strength and power and motivation to love God and neighbour. We love because we are first loved. Dallas Willard puts it this way:

Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning.  
(Dallas Willard)

Here is a dirty little secret of the most churches. Most churches are full of Martha's – good people trapped in a deadly pattern of thinking they need to earn, rather than receive God's favour. How do you know if you are more Martha or Mary? There is a pretty simple test. When it comes to your relationship with God, the state of your spiritual life, do any of these words apply to you?

Distracted – Anxious - Worried

There is a terribly sad equation when these three words are added together in our life:

Distraction + Anxiety + Worry = Bitterness.

More than anything, Martha was bitter that her younger, undeserving sister was getting more of Jesus' attention than she was. Bitterness poisons our hearts, steals our joy and diminishes our relationships.

If like Martha, you are trying to earn the attention and favour of Jesus that is already your gift to receive, hear his word of grace to you this morning:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. My yoke is easy and my burden is light.  
(Matthew 11:28, 30)

Stop and receive the rest your soul craves from God.

**Sit Down: Commune with God**

Once you stop, then sit down and commune with God. Simply enjoy God, as Mary did.

Dallas Willard makes this fantastic observation:

One of the greatest spiritual attainments is the capacity to do nothing.  
(Dallas Willard)

At his feet, Mary was simply doing nothing other than enjoying the intimate presence of Jesus. Mary was doing what we were created to do; enjoy the presence of God. This week many of us have been SOAPing our way through the first few chapters of Genesis. A beautiful picture is drawn of Adam and Eve enjoying the Garden of Eden, and more particular the intimate presence of God. Then the tragedy of human sin erupts, after which Adam and Eve first trying pathetically to hide from the presence of God. After God confronts them with their sin, he banishes them from the garden – and they lost, and we their descendents lost - that close, intimate relationship with our creator.

We were created to enjoy the presence of God. It is the presence of God lost in the garden that every human being since right up to today craves and searches for.

And it was the intimate presence of God that Mary enjoyed when she fell at the feet of Jesus.

In rebuking Martha, Jesus says that in spending time in his presence, Mary has chosen the ‘good portion’, and it will not be taken away from her. Rather than rushing around with her sister, Mary had chosen to sit in the presence of Jesus. This was the ‘portion’ she had chosen. There are many dishes we can choose in life, but the only dish that will satisfy our soul’s craving is the intimate presence of God for which we were created.

In my first message this year I shared that God powerfully spoke to me last year, out of which emerged a New Year’s resolution of sorts:

In 2013 I resolve to live more fully in the presence of God.

I’d like to say that it’s been going well, but frankly that would be a lie. I have been busy; stupidly, sinfully, unhealthily busy. After Easter Sue and I had a couple of week’s holiday, which was fantastic. And then I took another week to retreat. I used some frequent flyer points and flew down to Tassie on my own and holed myself up in a beach shack a pastor friend arranged for me. Honestly, for the first couple of days I hated it. I missed Sue and the kids and I was worried the long ‘to-do’ list waiting for me when I returned. I was on retreat and I was grumpy. But then God spoke, not with a blinding vision or a sudden revelation – he spoke to me in a moment of illumination as three words were impressed on my mind, ‘Mary and Martha’. As I opened my bible and read this story I heard God speak into my mind and heart something like these words:

Stu, I don’t want your effort, your striving, your sleepless nights, your attempts to impress me or others. I don’t need your long sermons, your short attention span, your big visions or your grand ideas. Before all of that I want you. I want you to enjoy me as I enjoy you. I want you. I love you, not what you do. Your significance to me is not in what you do, but who you are – my beloved son.

God wants me – he wants us – to stop, to sit down and, like Martha did with Jesus, simply enjoy his company. He wants us to choose him as our portion. But it doesn’t end there.

### **Shut Up: Hear from God**

First we stop and rest in God, then we sit down and commune with God, and finally we shut up and hear from God.

The fascinating thing about this passage is Martha and Jesus do all the talking; Mary doesn’t utter a word, not even to defend herself. But Mary wasn’t passive:

Mary...sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching.  
(Luke 10:

Mary may not have uttered a word, but she was actively listening to the voice of Jesus, hanging off every word. Mary was in exactly the position expected of a dedicated disciple; at the feet of her Rabbi – her teacher. It was at the feet of her master she heard Jesus' life-giving teaching.

As he did with Mary, Jesus longs to teach us. That is without question. But will we stop, sit down, shut up and then listen?

Some of you may be thinking, *'Mary was in the tangible, physical presence of Jesus. She could hear his audible voice. What about us?'* Since his resurrection and ascension, only a very blessed few people on this planet have miraculously heard the audible voice of Jesus.

But Jesus still speaks; that is fact.

Jesus is speaking by the written word of God that testifies to who he, who is the Living Word of God, is. Jesus himself declared that the Bible – all of it – testifies to him, speaks of him and speaks for him. The Bible, illuminated by the Holy Spirit in our lives, is as powerful and as life-giving for us as the audible voice of Jesus was to Mary. This book is God speaking to us. Through it we discover life and health and peace. We live, not by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from God.

For quite a while here at Newlife we have been banging on about how important regular bible reading is. All research shows that the most catalytic, the most effective habit for spiritual growth is bible reading and reflection. When we open this, we are doing far more than reading an interesting book. By the Holy Spirit, Jesus is teaching us just as surely as he taught Mary. Just as he spoke into Mary's life, so Jesus addresses our lives personally and passionately with the words of this book. You see, in the end:

God's word is more important than my work.

But like Mary, Jesus can only teach us if we stop often enough, sit down long enough and shut up consistently enough. We need to, by God's grace, learn to quieten our minds, hearts and lives as we expectantly wait for God to address us personally as we read his Word. Listening for the voice of God is an art and skill we develop over a life time. Bob Goff puts it this way:

Jesus won't try to speak over the noise in our lives; love whispers so we won't be confused about who's doing the talking.  
(Bob Goff)

In the Old Testament, the boy Samuel was addressed by God in the middle of the night. Three times he woke up and not once did he recognize it as God's voice. . It was only when he prayed one of the most powerful prayer in the bible, 'Speak Lord, for your servant is listening', that was able to hear God address him personally.

This book can be hard, difficult, troubling, exasperating and confusing. Our eyes can glaze over and our mind can wander when we read it. But if we stop often enough, sit down long enough and shut up consistently enough and ask and expect God to speak to us, speak to us he will. And when he does – everything changes.

Jonathon was four months old when he contracted viral meningitis. As a result of the disease, he completely lost his hearing. Four months later, when he was 8 months old, doctors inserted a cochlear implant and then turned on the switch. Watch Jonathon's reaction when he hears his mother's voice for the first time in months....

PLAY VIDEO

When we stop long often enough, sit down long enough and shut up consistently enough the static and white noise of this world will increasingly fade into the background until all that is left is the still, small, beautiful voice of our saviour speaking words of life and truth into the deep recesses of our lives. When we hear the unmistakeable voice of Jesus speaking to us, not just our heads, but our lives turn and are flooded with joy.

Sin ossified our ability to hear God. Grace made the way for us to hear again. There is no better place to be than at the feet of Jesus, hearing his voice.

What is the One Thing Necessary? The One Thing Necessary, the first thing that Jesus asks of us, and from which all other things flow – is to simply fall at his feet. We do this as we stop and rest in God, sit down and commune with God and shut up and hear from God.