

A sermon, Everything [in] between – Faith & Works
Luke 10:38-42
Preached at Plymouth Presbyterian Church
St. Helens, Oregon
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March 16, 2025

Introduction: We live in a world that glorifies hustle. Productivity is praised, busyness is worn like a badge of honor, and slowing down feels like falling behind. But in Luke 10:38-42, we find a story that challenges this mindset—a story of two sisters, one caught up in doing, the other choosing to be. This passage speaks directly to the balance between faith and works, reminding us that before we serve, we must first sit at the feet of Jesus.

Have you ever felt overwhelmed by all the responsibilities of life? Work, family, ministry, and personal commitments can quickly pile up. Sometimes we equate busyness with purpose, but today's passage teaches us a better way. In Mary and Martha, we see two different approaches to life and faith. One is consumed by doing, while the other is focused on being. Which one are you?

I. The Tension Between Doing and Being Jesus enters the home of Mary and Martha. Martha is in full-on hosting mode—preparing, cooking, managing the details—while Mary simply sits at Jesus' feet, listening. Anyone with siblings knows that tension can arise when one seems to be doing all the work while the other appears to be relaxing. Martha, overwhelmed, asks Jesus to tell Mary to help her. You can almost hear the frustration in her voice, the unspoken rivalry between the two sisters.

But instead of siding with Martha, Jesus gently redirects her: "You are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better."

Sibling rivalry is real, even among the most faithful believers. Martha probably felt like she was always the responsible one, the one who had to make sure things got done, while Mary had the freedom to sit, listen, and reflect. How many of us have felt that way—carrying the weight of responsibility while others seem to enjoy the moment?

But the deeper truth is this: God often meets us in the spaces between our relationships. God is found not only in our work or our worship but in the way we navigate love, tension, and expectations within our families and friendships. In this story, Jesus is inviting Martha and Mary—and us—to find the Lord in the in-between, in the tug-of-war between duty and devotion.

II. Martha's Struggle: When Work Becomes Worship Martha wasn't wrong for serving. The issue wasn't her work, but her worry. She had become so focused on doing for Jesus that she missed the opportunity to be with Jesus. This is a challenge for many of us. We work hard to build careers, support our families, serve in church—but when we measure our worth by what we produce, we risk losing sight of the One we are working for.

Sibling rivalry often stems from different personalities and priorities. Martha's frustration wasn't just about Mary's choice; it was about feeling unseen and unappreciated. Have you ever felt like you were doing all the work while someone else got all the praise? Perhaps Martha had felt this way before, always being the one to take care of things while Mary had the luxury of spiritual reflection.

But Jesus wasn't just addressing Martha's workload; He was addressing her heart. He was calling her to see that God was not only present in her service but also in the tension between her

and Mary. He was calling her to trust that her worth was not tied to her tasks but to her relationship with Him.

III. Mary's Choice: Relationship Over Routine Mary chose differently. She wasn't being lazy—she was being intentional. She recognized that the best use of her time was to be near Jesus, learning from Him, growing in faith. Today, we have endless distractions—social media, schedules packed with meetings, never-ending to-do lists. Like Mary, we must choose to pause and make space for God.

Sibling dynamics play into this story in a powerful way. Perhaps Mary, aware of her sister's frustration, had to push past the guilt of not helping. Maybe she had learned that no matter how much Martha disapproved, she needed this moment with Jesus. Sometimes, choosing what is best means disappointing others who have different expectations for us.

But even here, in the quiet tension between Mary and Martha, God is present. He is working not only in Mary's choice to listen but also in Martha's struggle to understand. He is calling both sisters—and us—to a deeper connection, not just with Him but with each other.

IV. Finding Balance: Faith That Fuels Works We are long past choosing between good vs. bad; well beyond choosing right over wrong. These are days we are choosing between what is good and what is better. And for some, we have entered the Generative time in life (Erik Erickson) where we are choosing between better and best. For these among us, we are choosing to invest ourselves in the lives of the next generation. We are pouring life lessons, expertise and experience, into sons and daughters, grandsons and granddaughters. We are choosing the best over what is better.

This passage doesn't teach us to choose between faith and works—it teaches us the right order. James 2:26 reminds us that “faith without works is dead,” but it's also true that works without faith become empty.

1. **Faith fuels works:** When we prioritize time with God, our actions are led by God's Spirit, not just our stress.
2. **Rest is not weakness:** Slowing down to seek Jesus is not a waste of time—it's the source of strength.
3. **Serving should be an overflow:** When we sit at Jesus' feet first, we serve with joy, rather than obligation.

Martha was exhausted, not because she was working, but because she was working without worship. We, too, can fall into this pattern—serving God without spending time with Him. But when we flip the order and prioritize faith first, our work becomes purposeful and Spirit-led. And in the process, we begin to see God in the spaces between our relationships—where frustrations and love collide, where expectations and grace meet. He is there, refining us, teaching us, and reminding us that both Mary and Martha have a place in His kingdom.

V. Practical Steps to Finding Balance So how do we apply this lesson in our daily lives? Here are some practical steps to ensure that our faith fuels our works:

1. **Start your day with Jesus:** Before checking your phone or tackling your to-do list, spend time in Scripture and prayer.
2. **Schedule “Mary moments”:** Intentionally set aside time to be in God's presence, even in the midst of busyness.
3. **Serve with the right heart:** Evaluate why you are serving—out of obligation, or out of a deep love for Jesus?

4. **Learn to say no:** Not every opportunity is a calling. Prioritize what truly aligns with God's purpose for your life.
5. **See God in your relationships:** Pay attention to the ways He is shaping you through the tensions, conflicts, and love between you and those closest to you.

Conclusion: Are you living like Martha—busy, overwhelmed, and running on empty? Or are you making time, like Mary, to be with Jesus? The key isn't to stop serving but to ensure that faith comes first. When we get this right, our works are more meaningful, our stress is replaced with peace, and our service becomes an act of worship.

Imagine what would happen if we all lived this way. Imagine a church full of people who serve, not out of exhaustion, but out of intimacy with Jesus. Imagine a world where Christians are known not just for their good deeds, but for the joy and peace they carry from spending time with God.

Sibling relationships can be complicated, but Jesus invites us to move beyond comparison and resentment. Whether you see yourself in Martha's frustration or Mary's devotion, the invitation is the same—come and sit at Jesus' feet. From that place, your works will have deeper meaning, your heart will find true rest, and your relationships will reflect His love.

Call to Action: This week, take a "Mary moment" each day—pause, pray, and listen before diving into your tasks. Let your faith fuel your works, and may your service be a joyful reflection of your time with Jesus. Amen.