

## Mary and Martha

### *A study of two sisters, Mary and Martha, from Bethany*

*There are at least six women named Mary and three separate times that Jesus visited Mary and Martha, so it is easy to get confused about the stories with these sisters from Bethany. Some of the people, events and places can get mixed up, and the more familiar story tends to overshadow the beauty and importance of the other visits. This study helps us understand not only what happened in the lives of Mary and Martha, but more importantly what God is teaching us through these accounts in his Word.*

Have participants share in reading the narrative sections of the study. There are no specific lesson numbers, the group should work through sections of the study at whatever pace is comfortable for their style of discussion and participation.

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# Mary and Martha

## Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, you graced the home of Mary and Martha with your presence, and you grace our homes with your Word and Spirit. Teach us through your Word to be women of faith and strengthen us to see our high and holy callings. Show us how to be confident and passionate about our faith, yet humble, and gracious to those around us. Help us be like Mary in her love for your Word and help us be like Martha in her gifts of service. Deepen our love and desire for your Word that our faith would grow and our lives would reflect your grace to others. Focus our distracted minds on your truth and teach us those things you want us to know. Help us see that you have given us gifts and your Spirit in great measure to honor you. Encourage us to make the most of our opportunities for your glory. Above all, fill our hearts with the quiet peace that comes from knowing you as our Savior. Grant us joy in the forgiveness of sins and hope in the life everlasting. Amen.

## Introduction

Many people are familiar with the first story of Mary and Martha. Mary is the good girl who listens to Jesus, Martha is the bad girl who is too busy, and Jesus says “one thing’s needful.” That’s it, right? No, not really. There is more to consider in the story and although it is only recorded in the Gospel of Luke, there are other passages and points to deepen our meditation. There are also other visits these sisters had with Jesus that are packed with powerful lessons. When studied together, the events shed light on the faith of these New Testament women and the tender love of their Savior. And so we study. It is always valuable to spend time in God’s Word, listening and learning, being reminded of his love and grace – and that IS the point of the story.

## The People

To make sure we have our people straight, let's start by clarifying which Mary we're talking about. Scripture mentions at least six women named Mary. The first three will likely be the most familiar to you and you should be able to clearly identify them in Scripture. Make sure when you're reading that you take time to think about which Mary Scripture is talking about.

Discuss what you know about each Mary and differentiate their roles in Jesus' life.

- Mary, the mother of Jesus
- Mary of Magdala, also called Mary Magdalene. She is mentioned 14 times in Scripture and is often listed first when the women are named. Jesus drove out 7 demons from her (Lk 8:1-3). She followed and supported him during his earthly ministry (Mk 15:41).
- Mary of Bethany (sister to Martha and Lazarus, she is always with Martha in Scripture)
- Mary, the wife of Clopas (Cleophas is the Greek spelling), also mother of Jose/Joseph and James the younger (or James the less) (Mt. 27:56, Mark 15:40, John 19:25).
- Mary, the mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12)
- Mary, the hard worker from Rome (Romans 16:6)

Of the three women named Mary that were identified at Jesus' crucifixion, Mary of Bethany is not listed; the Gospels consistently list

1. Mary, the mother of Jesus
2. Mary of Magdala
3. Mary, the wife of Clopas, the mother of James the less and Jose. The punctuation of the text in John 19 may allow the understanding that there were 4 women listed: "[**Mary**] the mother of Jesus, her sister [**Salome**], [and] **Mary**, the wife of Cleophas, and **Mary** Magdalene" (Kretzmann). It may also help to understand that Salome and Zebedee were the parents of James, the elder and John. The other allowance of punctuation would suggest that Mary the wife of Clopas was also the sister-in-law (sister and sister-in-law would read the same in Greek) of Mary (the mother of Jesus). Some believe that Clopas/Cleophas and Joseph were brothers.

Both Matthew (27:55) and Mark (15:41) indicate that there were "many women" watching from a distance, so it is probable that Mary of Bethany was there, but not named. Two women named Mary are listed at Jesus' burial (Mt. 27:61) and resurrection (Mt. 28:1) but it is

understood from Mark (15:47 and 16:1) and Luke (24:10) to be Mary of Magdala and Mary the mother of James (the less) and Jose.

Formulate at least 4 memory pegs to distinguish the key women named Mary in Scripture.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

## **Lazarus**

Lazarus, the brother, appears several times in Scripture. He and his family must have been dear to Jesus' heart as we read that our Savior wept at the death of his friend (John 11:35). The account of Lazarus's death is the first time we hear of him. He is also mentioned because his resurrection was a catalyst of the Jew's plot to kill Jesus (John 12:10); little else is said.

## **Simon the Leper**

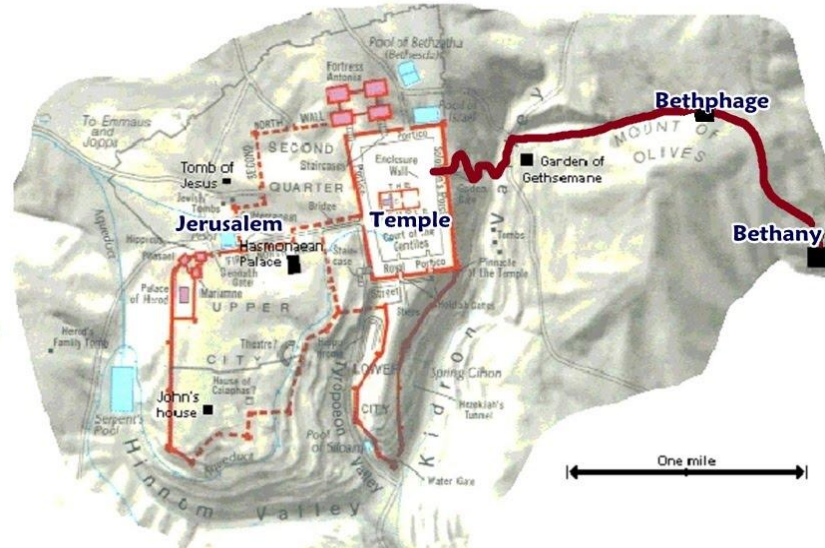
Some think that the home of Simon the Leper was also the home of Mary and Martha. Others extend that line of thinking to suggest Simon the Leper was possibly related to Mary and Martha. It cannot be established whether this true, and it doesn't have an impact on the story either way. There are no other references to Simon the Leper. It was not Simon Peter.

## The Place and Time

Bethany was a village about 2 miles east of Jerusalem on the slope of the Mount of Olives (aprox. 2700 feet high). Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday from that area (Mt. 21:1, Luke 19:37) and the Garden of Gethsemane was on the same road. The village of Bethany was home to Mary, Martha and their brother, Lazarus, as well as Simon the Leper. Jesus and his disciples stopped at Bethany several times and likely enjoyed the hospitality that was extended to them as they traveled around Jerusalem. Luke also records that the Ascension took place in the vicinity of Bethany (24:50).

Identify a location that is two miles from where you are.

If possible, recall a land mass that is about 2,700 feet high.



Summarize several key points about the village of Bethany.

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Scripture does not record the first time that Mary, Martha and Lazarus met Jesus; it simply begins with the story of Jesus coming to their house. Some suggest that since Simon the Leper was from Bethany, it is possible they met Jesus when Simon was healed. While it isn't clear, the unknown facts do not deter from the strong love witnessed between these friends.

The following texts record accounts of Jesus visiting Bethany (in chronological order):

Luke 10:38-42 –

John 11:1-44 –

The final visit was a series of events which occurred during the last days of Jesus' life traveling between Jerusalem and Bethany. He traveled to Jerusalem, taught in the temple, celebrated the Passover and also visited friends in Bethany.

Read the accounts in each Gospel, noting things of significance or interest:

Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 11:1,11; 14:1-11, Luke 19:28-38; 21:37, John 12:1-8

Harmony of the Gospels:

Friday: \_\_\_\_\_

Saturday: \_\_\_\_\_

Sunday: \_\_\_\_\_

Monday – Tuesday: \_\_\_\_\_

Wednesday \_\_\_\_\_

General notes:

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Notes from Matthew

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Notes from Mark

Notes from John

Notes from Luke

## Martha of Bethany

Read Luke 10:38-42

A note on translations: the 1984 NIV includes the phrase “but only one thing is needed.” Most translations are very similar.

Martha is often depicted as a woman who doesn't have very strong faith. After all, who could really stay in the kitchen if Jesus was in the living room? But Martha's actions don't mean she doesn't love Jesus. She has the gift of hospitality and Martha is responding to Jesus' earthly needs. Certainly Martha's priorities are mixed up at the moment, but don't let it taint your perception of her faith or improperly judge her motives and actions. Jesus corrects her - and she does need correcting, but he speaks to her in love as a Christian sister. Scripture reveals Martha as a faithful woman of God with a very clear understanding of who Jesus is and what he came to do.

Read John 11:17-27 (the account of Jesus returning to raise Lazarus from the dead) and identify significant points in Martha's clear confession of faith:

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So, if Martha had such strong faith, what was she doing in the kitchen? Martha had a solid grasp on her God-given gift of hospitality and she knew Jesus and his disciples would be hungry. The Old Testament acrostic in Proverbs 31 was likely taught to Jewish women and it extols gifts of service and hospitality! Imagine Jesus' gratefulness for a good meal and a place to sleep in light of his words from Matthew 8:20, “*Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.*”



Note the passage which specifies “she opened her home” to Jesus. Martha clearly felt responsible for dinner and recognized the special honor of having Jesus as a guest. When you are the person responsible for a project, the tasks weigh heavily on your shoulders. You also know that if something needs to be said or done, it falls on you to make sure it happens. Recognize it was not just Jesus that was invited to dinner. His disciples were also along and would’ve been invited to dinner as well, perhaps even the women who traveled with Jesus. She was hosting a large dinner for special people she loved.

- Defend her frustration.
- Relate to an aspect of Martha’s irritation.

List the negative descriptors of Martha in verses 40 & 41

Quick word study on “distracted” - Μάρθα Μάρθα (“Martha, Martha”) Μεριμνάω (“distracted”) Merimnáō (from mérimna, “a part, as opposed to the whole”) – properly, drawn in opposite directions; “divided into parts”; (figuratively) “to go to pieces” because pulled apart (in different directions), like the force exerted by sinful anxiety (worry). Anxious or distracted (Matthew 6 and Luke 12 contain most of the occurrences of this word in its various forms).

We just identified many emotions and problems that were weighing heavily on Martha’s mind. Point out several ways the word “distracted” fits her condition.

Categorize the various responsibilities in your life as “parts” that pull you in different directions and share how you manage (or fail to manage) them.

Identify the same root word in Philippians 4:6 and discuss the parallels as they apply to your life.

Read the following passages and discuss the contrast of a mind driven into pieces (which we all have at times!) versus a mind focused on one thing. Compare these verses to Jesus' words, "*only one thing is needed*" (NIV 1984).

Philippians 2:2 - \_\_\_\_\_

Colossians 3:2 - \_\_\_\_\_

Romans 8:6 - \_\_\_\_\_

Hebrews 12:2 - \_\_\_\_\_

## Learning the Lesson

The distracted mind.

We've all been where Martha was. Overwhelmed, pulled in a hundred directions and frantically putting out fires. But don't think that you need to try harder to keep it together or just make an effort toward better time management. Don't hope you can overcome the busyness. There will always be things that must be done and the world will never stop for you to have time with God. Living life with Jesus as Lord of your heart is not squeezing him in an open time slot amidst a packed schedule; it is a condition of the soul. Stillness is not a lack of things to do, it is the presence of grace. Calmness and peace come from Jesus (not your efforts to be calm and peaceful).

Read John 16:33.

Share Scripture and hymn verses that calm you and pull you back to the quietness of Christ. Compile a list of ways to keep those verses visible in your daily life.

## More of Martha

Now we see Martha's ugly sinful nature rear its head and regrettably, we recognize it in our own lives as well. Verse 40 says, "*She came to him and asked, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself?'*" Crummy prayer, lousy attitude – but have we whispered these same thoughts in a moment of anxiety? "Are you kidding me? I have to deal with this?" Or maybe in the darkness of a hospital room we struggle with resentment, "Lord, don't you care?" Bank statements or IRA reports make us wince as we wonder why God doesn't richly bless our finances when we're striving to give our first fruits. God forgive us for saying such a thing, but sometimes we feel it. Hardships with finances, relationships, health or work can make us feel alone, betrayed or abandoned. There are a hundred ways we think it as our sinful nature reacts to difficulty and tragedy.

This is certainly not the model prayer but did we notice she is coming to Jesus?

Maybe we need to give her credit that she's coming to him with her problem when she's overwhelmed. To be sure, Jesus DOES care and while we don't want to reflect her attitude in our prayer life, she does come to Jesus for help. She sees him as the solution and knows he can fix things. He is not unaware of all the things that burden us and distract us from peace in Christ. He knows our thoughts and emotional status even when we don't tell him (did you think you could hide it from him?). And while we may tell our children to take a time out before they speak disrespectfully, Jesus does not. He doesn't ask us to calm down or get our act together before we approach him; he invites us to come with our broken pieces and ungodly attitudes to plea for his grace and help. He invites us to come to him when we are lonely, scared or bitterly angry. He understands us when we can only weep, and when we grind our teeth.

What changes would you make to Martha's prayer?

Identify the emotions in these Psalm prayers and compare them to how Martha was feeling (and your own emotions at times). Be sure to also look toward the end of the Psalm to see if the psalmist has changed his tune.

- Psalm 4:1-2 \_\_\_\_\_
- Psalm 10:1 \_\_\_\_\_
- Psalm 13:1-3 \_\_\_\_\_

Martha (unfortunately) continues, “*Tell her to help me!*”

We will admit she is not the only woman who has presumed to know what God should do? How often are our prayers filled with prideful or selfish requests rather than humble petitions? We think we understand our needs so well and are sometimes convinced we have the perfect solution. How often do we deny ourselves blessings because we demand answers limited to our comfort zone and realm of understanding? Too often. Clearly, this is not Martha’s best moment. Her demand of Jesus can hardly be considered a bold prayer and his patient response gives us a glimpse of God’s grace to struggling sinners.

On a personal note, I process problems and frustrations by organizing things in my mind. For many years, it was not uncommon for me to unload the file folders of my brain to the Lord in prayer. I assured God I had it all figured out (from my perspective, of course) and I would pour out the importance of each step so he understood exactly why and how to fix this problem. Eventually, I realized that God was not waiting with baited breath for my solution. He didn’t express great relief that I figured things out for him. The skies never parted with a voice that said, “Oh, I was stumped on that one!” One day I found a sticker that said, “God gives the best to those who leave the choice to him.” It became clear to me (with great humiliation) that I had a lot to learn in my prayer life. We can pray boldly and ask for anything but God encourages us to pray, “Thy will be done.” That isn’t a compromise - it’s an incomprehensible blessing! Don’t sigh when you pray those words as if to say, “I suppose you can do what you want.” Pray it with a sigh that knows you are in the hands of our Almighty Lord! Please Lord, DO your holy will! That will be so much better than what I want or can imagine.

## **Learning the Lesson**

What should we humbly pray in our time of need? The words of Jesus, “*Thy will be done.*” He taught it in his prayer and he lived it in Gethsemane.

- Discuss the reasons it is often difficult for us to pray this petition.
- Contrast the concepts of praying boldly and yielding to his will.
- Draw a conclusion that shows the God-pleasing balance.

## More of Martha

The story in Luke closes abruptly with Jesus' gentle rebuke to Martha but it is not the last time she makes dinner for him. Just a few months later we find Jesus in Bethany before his final trip into Jerusalem to die.

Read John 12:1-2 .

Hadn't Martha learned her lesson? Of course she had! Jesus' rebuke to Martha didn't mean she shouldn't serve, it meant she had her priorities mixed up. She thought it was more important for her to feed Jesus than for him to feed her. What a mark of strength and acceptance that she didn't cower in guilt or bitterly refuse to serve Jesus again in his earthly needs. As a forgiven believer she shows us true repentance by learning from her mistakes and moving forward in the grace of God. She was so confident in Jesus' love and forgiveness, that she again served a meal in love, this time with a better attitude and balanced priorities!

## Learning the Lesson

Moving forward in forgiveness.

Have you ever held a grudge? Ever been corrected and reacted (if not verbally, at least in your mind), "Fine! If you don't like the way I did it - then trust me – I WON'T do it again!"? If we don't listen to the spiritual correction and rebukes we need, we will not grow. Even worse, we will become blind and insensitive to those areas of our life that are affected by sin. But a life changed by forgiveness is beautiful. Fighting through our selfish pride and stubborn will to admit our sin, repent, receive forgiveness, and work toward change by the power of the Holy Spirit is part of our lives as Christians. We have past sins that embarrass and haunt us, and Satan loves to remind us of them to crush our confidence. But Jesus doesn't shame us or hold those sins over our head. He doesn't remember them. His actions toward us reflect grace and love. It is here that we see Martha shine. She is serving unashamedly and graciously. Pray that God would correct and teach us to better equip us for lives of service that honor him. Pray for the humility to receive his correction and live in grace.

- If you were going to hear a personal, spiritual rebuke/correction, would it most likely come from your pastor, a loved one or from reading the Word of God?

- Identify what thoughts or emotions might interfere with your ability to move forward in forgiveness.

## Mary

Even Mary's name brings a sigh of gentleness in our hearts. Oh, that we could be like Mary! She is able to set aside pressing needs and be at the feet of Jesus, listening and learning from him when life is calling us elsewhere. The pressure of an older sister in desperate need wasn't enough to make Mary take her eyes off Jesus. Undoubtedly, there was not a door to the kitchen with a window, but if there was you know the older, bossy sister would've been glaring at Mary with the death stare.

Did you notice that in the account there is only one simple sentence about Mary? Scripture says, "*She [Martha] had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said.*" (10:39). Those few words speak volumes about Mary's faith and love for Jesus. They present a beautiful image of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Trusting in him as her Savior, she longed to hear his Word and understand his teachings. She personifies the third commandment where God tells us to love his Word. The simplicity of this one verse resonates with purity. The message is, "Just listen." It pricks our conscience when we realize how infrequently we have such a love for Scripture; and it holds out the example of a sister we can emulate. Don't miss your personal invitation to listen to Jesus! While Mary got to sit at his feet literally, his presence in the Word is no less real. Jesus is the Word made flesh and he invites you to sit at his feet regularly.

Mary also appears in John 11 when she goes to Jesus after the death of Lazarus and falls at his feet in tears. "*Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*" Mary knew that Jesus had power over life and death, now, and in the life to come. The genuine humility in her heart is evident by her modest behavior, placing herself at his feet in all three accounts of her time with Jesus. John 11:32 records, "*When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'*"

But there is another account of Mary at a dinner which again reveals her lavish love. In this account, our humble sister Mary sheds her reserved guard and bares an appropriate, intimate love for her Savior. No consideration is given for the cost; there are no inhibitions in her worship. She is not mindful of what others will think; she is only concerned about pouring out her love and honoring her Messiah.

There are amazing parallels in this account. Mary and Martha are at a dinner with Jesus as the honored guest. Martha serves and Mary's faith shines with an outpouring of love. Mary's actions are publicly criticized and Jesus defends Mary's actions. In the Luke account, he corrected Martha and affirmed that Mary chose the one thing needful. Now he rebukes Judas and the disciples as he upholds her anointing as a beautiful thing, preparing him for his burial.

Read the accounts in Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9; John 12:1-8

Don't miss the rich imagery in the alabaster jar and its contents. The beautiful vessel, filled with precious oil is broken, and the contents flow out as a blessing and anointing.

Discuss the symbolism.

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## **Make It Personal**

List the qualities and characteristics of Mary that flowed from her well-fed faith.

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This kind of love and countenance only comes from a heart that has feasted on the Word. We cannot conjure up this kind of love, humility or generosity. It is a gift of faith. God assures us that as we spend time in the Word we will grow in our faith and the Holy Spirit will produce fruits of faith. These are not thoughts or actions we produce on our own; they come from the Holy Spirit as he is working to restore the image of God in our lives.

As we look at lists and qualities of Christian believers, there is an important point to remember: our sanctified life is not a law driven list but a Gospel motivated out-pouring. Romans 8:3 tells us that the law is powerless to produce faith and its fruits. God does those things in us through the Gospel.

It is also important that we don't imagine Mary of Bethany as a serene saint that never struggled with heartache or sin. Scripture records three stories from her life where we see her radiant faith and love for Jesus. But don't miss the heartache and hurt that she must've felt as well. She certainly felt embarrassment or hurt when she was publicly criticized for her actions of faith! In the first account it was her older sister, a family member calling her out for spending time listening to Jesus. In the last account Judas was a respected disciple who seemed to sway the thinking of others as he insisted the money could've had a better use (in his pocket). Even the loss of her younger brother Lazarus shows us what real struggles Mary faced in her life. The moments before Jesus defended her and days before Lazarus was raised from the dead must've been very hard on Mary. As a woman with a sinful nature we can also be sure that she faced temptation. Whether she hesitated in her acts of love or whether Satan tempted her to be prideful about those actions, the fact remains – she had a sinful nature that tempted her to sin.

We need to remember that so we don't get discouraged at our own inability to live the third commandment (or the other nine) like we should. Those few moments in Mary's life are a beautiful example for us. When we see such acts of love in Scripture or in the lives of those around us we can delight that the Holy Spirit has moved our family in Christ to such actions. But we can also remember that everyone struggles, as we will, to be consistent in love and obedience. That's why we have a Savior, and that's why we cling to the Gospel rather than the law. The goal isn't to be like Mary, though as we grow the Lord may produce fruits of faith that are similar. Praise God for her faith (and Martha's!) and trust that God will work in your life as well.



## Closing thoughts and applications

As we've looked at the life of Mary and Martha, what attributes of their faith seem most difficult for you to emulate?

Gifts of service?

Stillness?

Prayer? (though Martha's comments to Jesus hardly constitute a prayer)

Love for the Word?

We strive to read to Scripture each day, but brainstorm about additional, creative ways to bring God's Word into your daily routine. With the endless resources of media and technology at our fingertips, we have a wealth of possibilities!

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Explain why these points from our lesson are important

- Source of spiritual life is Jesus (Gospel not law)
- Single focus (not distracted)
- Stillness (peace of Christ amidst hardship)
- Sanctification that flows from faith (not guilt)

- Savoring the Word (not trying to live our faith without connection to Word)

Review the concept that Jesus will defend you as he defended Mary. He will bring you peace and quietness through grace and forgiveness when you fail or are misjudged by those around you. More importantly, he will defend you before the throne of the Lord, reconciling you to God through the righteousness purchased with his own blood (Read Eph. 2:13-18).

- How does that truth comfort you in your current struggles?
- How will you remember Christ's defense when Satan attacks you with guilt?  
Make a plan (it may help to identify the ways or messages Satan uses to assault you).

Finally, let these women become a part of your life as you remember the power of God's Word and the love of Christ. They are your sisters in Christ and are meant to be an encouragement to you. Their failures remind you that we are all human and need a Savior. Their faith reminds you that God graciously blesses the lives of his children and strengthens us all through the Word. Remember them with a focus on their Redeemer, the anointed Messiah who gave his life for you.

## **Closing Prayer**

Wisdom's highest, noblest treasure, Jesus, can be found in you.

Let me find in you my pleasure; Make my will and actions true,

Humility there and simplicity reigning, In paths of true wisdom my steps ever training.

If I learn from Jesus this knowledge divine, The blessing of heavenly wisdom is mine. (CW 290).