

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,

And Many Explanatory Notes.

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LUKE X. 38–42.

38 Now it came to pass, as they went, that he entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house.	dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me.
39 And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word.	41 And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things:
40 But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord,	42 But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.

THE little history which these verses contain, is only recorded in the Gospel of St. Luke. So long as the world stands, the story of Mary and Martha will furnish the Church with lessons of wisdom which ought never to be forgotten. Taken together with the eleventh chapter of St. John's Gospel, it throws a most instructive light on the inner life of the family which Jesus loved.

Let us observe, for one thing, how *different the characters and temperaments of true Christians may be*. The two sisters of whom we read in this passage were faithful disciples. Both had believed. Both had been converted. Both had honoured Christ when few gave Him honour. Both loved Jesus, and Jesus loved both of them.—Yet they were evidently women of very different turn of mind. Martha was active, stirring, and impulsive, feeling strongly, and speaking out all she felt. Martha was quiet, still, and contemplative, feeling deeply, but saying less than she felt. Martha, when Jesus came to her house, rejoiced to see Him, and busied herself with preparing a suitable entertainment. Mary, also, rejoiced to see Him, but her first thought was to sit at His feet and hear His word. Grace reigned in both hearts, but each showed the effect of grace at different times, and in different ways.

We shall find it very useful to ourselves to remember this lesson. We must not expect all believers in Christ to be exactly like one another. We must not set down others as having no grace, because their experience does not entirely tally with our own. The sheep in the Lord's flock have each their own peculiarities. The trees in the Lord's garden are not all precisely alike. All true servants of God agree in the principal things of religion. All are led by one Spirit. All feel their sins, and all trust in Christ. All repent, all believe, and all are holy. But in minor matters they often differ widely. Let not one despise another on this account. There will be Marthas and there will be Marys in the Church until the Lord comes again.

Let us observe, for another thing, *what a snare to our souls the cares of this world may be, if allowed to take up too much attention*. It is plain from the tone of the passage before us, that Martha allowed her anxiety to provide a suitable entertainment for our Lord, to carry her away. Her excessive zeal for temporal provisions, made her forget, for a time, the things of her soul. "She was cumbered about much serving."—By and bye her conscience

pricked her, when she found herself alone serving tables, and saw her sister sitting at Jesus' feet and hearing His word. Under the pressure of a conscience ill-at-ease, her temper became ruffled, and the old Adam within broke out into open complaint. "Lord," she said, "dost not thou care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? Bid her therefore that she help me." In so saying, this holy woman sadly forgot what she was, and to whom she was speaking. She brought down on herself a solemn rebuke, and had to learn a lesson which probably made a lasting impression. Alas! "how great a matter a little fire kindleth." The beginning of all this was a little over-anxiety about the innocent household affairs of this world!

The fault of Martha should be a perpetual warning to all Christians. If we desire to grow in grace, and to enjoy soul-prosperity, we must beware of the cares of this world. Except we watch and pray, they will insensibly eat up our spirituality, and bring leanness on our souls. It is not open sin, or flagrant breaches of God's commandments alone, which lead men to eternal ruin. It is far more frequently an excessive attention to things in themselves lawful, and the being "cumbered about much serving." It seems so right to provide for our own! It seems so proper to attend to the duties of our station! It is just here that our danger lies. Our families, our business, our daily callings, our household affairs, our intercourse with society, all, all may become snares to our hearts, and may draw us away from God. We may go down to the pit of hell from the very midst of lawful things.

Let us take heed to ourselves in this matter. Let us watch our habits of mind jealously, lest we fall into sin unawares. If we love life, we must hold the things of this world with a very loose hand, and beware of allowing anything to have the first place in our hearts, excepting God. Let us mentally write "poison" on all temporal good things. Used in moderation they are blessings, for which we ought to be thankful. Permitted to fill our minds, and trample upon holy things, they become a positive curse. Profits and pleasures are dearly purchased, if in order to obtain them we thrust aside eternity from our thoughts, abridge our Bible-reading, become careless hearers of the Gospel, and shorten our prayers. A little earth upon the fire within us will soon make that fire burn low.

Let us observe, for another thing, *what a solemn rebuke our Lord Jesus Christ gave to His servant Martha*. Like a wise physician He saw the disease which was preying upon her, and at once applied the remedy. Like a tender parent, He exposed the fault into which His erring child had fallen, and did not spare the chastening which was required. "Martha, Martha," He said, "thou art careful and troubled about many things: but one thing is needful." Faithful are the wounds of a friend! That little sentence was a precious balm indeed! It contained a volume of practical divinity in a few words.

“One thing is needful.” How true that saying! The longer we live in the world, the more true it will appear. The nearer we come to the grave, the more thoroughly we shall assent to it. Health, and money, and lands, and rank, and honours, and prosperity, are all well in their way. But they cannot be called *needful*. Without them thousands are happy in this world, and reach glory in the world to come. The “many things” which men and women are continually struggling for, are not really necessities. The grace of God which bringeth salvation is the one thing needful.

Let this little sentence be continually before the eyes of our minds. Let it check us when we are ready to murmur at earthly trials. Let it strengthen us when we are tempted to deny our Master on account of persecution. Let it caution us when we begin to think too much of the things of this world. Let it quicken us when we are disposed to look back, like Lot’s wife. In all such seasons, let the words of our Lord ring in our ears like a trumpet, and bring us to a right mind. “One thing is needful.” If Christ is ours, we have all and abound.

We should observe, lastly, *what high commendation our Lord Jesus Christ pronounced on Mary’s choice*. We read that He said, “Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken from her.” There was a deep meaning in these words. They were spoken not for Mary’s sake only, but for the sake of all Christ’s believing people in every part of the world. They were meant to encourage all true Christians to be single-eyed and whole-hearted,—to follow the Lord fully, and to walk closely with God,—to make soul-business immeasurably their first business, and to think comparatively little of the things of this world.

The true Christian’s portion is the grace of God. This is the “good part” which he has chosen, and it is the only portion which really deserves the name of “good.” It is the only good thing which is substantial, satisfying, real, and lasting. It is good in sickness and good in health,—good in youth and good in age,—good in adversity and good in prosperity,—good in life and good in death—good in time and good in eternity. No circumstance and no position can be imagined in which it is not good for a man to have the grace of God.

The true Christian’s possession shall never be taken from him. He alone, of all mankind, shall never be stripped of his inheritance. Kings must one day leave their palaces. Rich men must one day leave their money and lands. They only hold them till they die.—But the poorest saint on earth has a treasure of which he will never be deprived. The grace of God, and the favour of Christ, are riches which no man can take from him. They will go with him to the grave when he dies. They will rise with him in the resurrection morning, and be his to all eternity.

What do we know of this “good part” which Mary chose? Have we chosen it for ourselves? Can we say with truth that it is ours? Let us never rest till we can. Let us “choose life,” while Christ offers it to us without money and without price. Let us seek treasure in heaven, lest we awake to find that we are paupers for evermore.

NOTES. LUKE X. 38–42.

38.—[*As they went.*] It is not quite clear at what period of our Lord’s earthly ministry the history here recorded comes in, nor what is the connexion between it and the preceding passage. Stier conjectures that one object is to supply a serviceable caution against the idea that active working charity, like that of the good Samaritan, was the only way to serve Christ, and to show that sitting still and hearing is just as useful in its season as relieving distressed people.—He says, “Is not the inmost fundamental thought of the words directed to busy Martha, a warning against the tendency to an unquiet bustling character? ‘Do’ was the word of the Lord in the parable of the good Samaritan; but now He says, ‘rest.’”—“Do not forget the hearing in thy much doing.”

In any point of view one thing is certain. The Martha and Mary here spoken of, are the same sisters of whom we read in the eleventh chapter of John.

40.—[*Was cumbered.*] The Greek word so translated, means literally, “was drawn about, distracted.”

[*Came to him.*] The word translated “came” implies a sudden coming. See Luke xxi. 34, and xxiv. 4.

41.—[*Troubled.*] The word so rendered is only used here in the New Testament. It means literally “to be in a tumult; to be disturbed.”

Our Lord, we must remember, does not mean to say that Martha’s occupation was wrong, but that, for the time, Mary’s occupation was better than Martha’s.

42.—[*One thing is needful.*] Not a few commentators consider this to mean, “one dish of meat is needful,” and think that our Lord was only referring to the many dishes which Martha was preparing in order to entertain Him.

I cannot entertain this notion for a moment. There is no proof that Martha was preparing a banquet at all, though she was undoubtedly busy about household affairs. Our Lord’s words have a far deeper signification. “Of one thing, even of salvation, there is necessity.” That this is His meaning His subsequent words about Mary appear abundantly to prove. If “one thing is needful” means only “one dish,” we might just as well say, that the “good part” which Mary chose, was the good portion of the feast which she had selected for herself!

Doddridge remarks, “This is one of the greatest and most important apophthegms that was ever uttered, and one can scarce pardon the frigid impertinence of Theophylact and Basil who explain it as if our Lord had only meant one dish of meat.”

The whole verse is a deep elliptical sentence, and can only be rendered by a large paraphrase.

[*That good part.*] This is a general expression, and meant to be interpreted with a reference to the conduct of Mary, at the time when her sister interposed. She was choosing soul-benefit. She was seeking more grace. She was striving after nearer and closer communion with God and His Christ. This was the portion which she preferred to everything else, and to which she was willing for a time to postpone all earthly care. Those who seek such a portion shall never be disappointed. Their treasure shall never be taken from them.

In leaving this passage, we should be careful not to fall into the error of thinking slightly of Martha's grace, or speaking, as some do occasionally, as if the good woman had no grace at all. This is a grave error. In the day of affliction Martha's grace shone clearly and brightly. There is hardly any confession in all the four Gospels, of our Lord's office, which will compare with that which she made in the eleventh chapter of John.

The Roman Catholic writers are fond of quoting the whole passage, in favour of a monastic or conventual life; and insinuate that monks and nuns are like Mary, and people in secular occupations like Martha. Unhappily, their comparison fails completely. If all monks and nuns had been people who "sat at Christ's feet and heard His words," there might have been something in what they say. Unfortunately, convents and monasteries have been proved to be the very last places where successors of Mary are likely to be found. Bucer, in his commentary on the Gospels, dwells ably on this point.

END OF VOL. I.