

Martha, Martha, Martha...

In our Christian walk, sometimes it's easy to get distracted. We get our priorities mixed up, lose focus, and take our eyes off the ball. Many things can distract us and distort our priorities — even good things.

In Luke 10:38-42, we find an illustration of how even good things can become a distraction:

38 Now it happened as they went that He [Jesus] entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house.

39 And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word.

40 But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me."

41 And Jesus answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things.

42 "But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her."

Is it bad to serve others? Is it wrong to show hospitality? Of course not! This wasn't Jesus' point.

In fact, God commands us to do these things. Here's Gal. 5:13-14: "Through love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

1 Tim. 5:9-10 adds, "Do not let a widow under sixty years old be taken into the number, and not unless she has been the wife of one man, well reported for good works: if she has brought up children, if she has lodged strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has relieved the afflicted, if she has diligently followed every good work."

But beyond serving our fellow brethren, God tells us to do good even to our enemies. In Ex. 23:4-5, He said, "If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall

surely bring it back to him again. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden, and you would refrain from helping it, you shall surely help him with it.”

And to this, Prov. 25:21-22 adds, “If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; for so you will heap coals of fire on his head, and the LORD will reward you.”

We could turn to many other Scriptures as well, but these should be sufficient. No, it’s certainly not wrong to serve others, help them, or tend to their needs. God expects us to do so.

But here’s what Martha overlooked, and here’s what Yeshua/Jesus reminded her: serving isn’t THE most important thing. Knowing, then, that it’s right and good to serve others, but also that serving can distract us from more important things, let’s look at a few things to keep in mind.

Serving Doesn’t Make Us Righteous

Serving doesn’t punch our tickets into the Kingdom of God. In fact, it doesn’t even make us righteous. Preparing snacks for church, mowing the neighbors’ lawns, serving in soup kitchens, giving money to charity — none of these things make us righteous.

In fact, none of these things mean God is pleased with us, either. Many Muslims, Buddhists, and atheists — even gangsters and hoodlums — do things like these.

What pleases God?

Obedying Him. Listening to and following ALL of His instructions — not just the parts we like, the parts that make us feel good, or the parts we want to do.

Here’s another example. In Luke 11:27-28, while Yeshua/Jesus taught the people, “a certain woman from the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, ‘Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts which nursed You!’ But He said, “More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!””

Hearing and studying the Word of God comes first. Obeying it comes next. As the Apostle Paul wrote, “For not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified” (Rom. 2:13).

Again, God says in Isa. 66:1-2,

1 “Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of My rest?

2 For all those things My hand has made, and all those things exist,” says the LORD. “But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word.”

There’s no replacement for heeding and obeying God’s instructions. God gave us His instructions for our own good (Deut. 10:13), and there’s nothing we can do to please Him more than simply obeying Him.

We can’t lie, cheat, and steal and then decide we’ll make up for it by mowing our neighbor’s lawn. We can’t break the Sabbath and then decide we’ll make up for it by serving in a soup kitchen. We can’t indulge in sex outside of wedlock and then decide we’ll make up for it by giving an extra large offering at church.

In Mat. 7:21-23, Jesus said,

21 “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.

22 “Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’

23 “And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’”

We can do all the good works we want to do, but none of them will replace simple obedience. So many people and so many churches focus on doing “good works” and neglect obeying God. And why wouldn’t they? It’s much easier to serve in a soup kitchen for a few hours than it is to submit to God in every area of your life!

King Saul thought he could disobey our Creator and then make it up to Him with lavish sacrifices. What did God think of this? In 1 Sam. 15:22-23, we find,

22 So Samuel said: “Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams.

23 For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He also has rejected you from being king.”

God wants us to obey Him from the heart. He wants us to give our whole selves to Him. As the Apostle Paul wrote in Rom. 12:1, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.”

And this brings us to another point.

Serve God First

Our first duty in life is to serve God, that is, to obey Him. Heb. 12:28 admonishes us to “serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.” Thus, serving God comes first, then serving others.

Mal. 3:18 adds, “You shall again discern between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him.”

As Yeshua/Jesus said, “‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ **This is the first and great commandment**” (Mat. 22:37-38).

Everything else flows from this. And how do we show that we love God? Yeshua said, “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (John 14:15).

But how can we obey God if we don’t know His commandments? This is why learning God’s Word comes before all else.

To some degree, it even comes before repenting and accepting Jesus’ sacrifice. Why? Because we must know that we have sinned and need Jesus before we can repent and accept Him. And how do we know what sin is? What to repent of? Through God’s Word.

Learning God’s Word is “that good part” that Mary chose. It’s the part that Jesus said “will not be taken away from her.”

Serving ≠ Love

Here’s one final point to keep in mind: serving others doesn’t necessarily mean we love them. It should, but it doesn’t.

It's easy to serve for selfish reasons, and many do. Some serve because it makes them feel good, or because they think it atones for their other sins, or even because they expect something in return.

Serving shouldn't be done for these reasons. We should help others simply to help them. We should do so because we obey and serve God.

In Luke 14:12-14, Yeshua told us not to do good for an earthly reward:

12 When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbors, lest they also invite you back, and you be repaid.

13 But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind.

14 And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just.

Doing good doesn't entitle us to anything, not in this life or the next. We obey God, not for our own benefit, but because we love Him. And God will reward us for obedience, not because we deserve it, but because He is good.

Obedience is the minimum standard — the only standard — for acceptance into God's Kingdom and His family. Jesus told us, "So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do'" (Luke 17:10).

Conclusion

So by all means, we should serve others when we have the opportunity. But we must remember that, although important, it's not the most important thing we can do. Nor will it make us righteous or punch our tickets into God's Kingdom.

We can spend every waking moment serving others, and still miss God's Kingdom. In fact, that'd make it almost a certainty that we'd miss His Kingdom, because we'd have no time left for Him!

This is where Martha got her priorities mixed up, and it's where we can, too. Whereas she devoted herself to serving, undoubtedly going far above and beyond what was needed,

her sister Mary devoted herself to hearing Jesus' teaching. It was Mary who had her priorities straight.

Remember the words of our Savior: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:41-42).

"Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (Luke 11:28).

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