

What is the best choice?

Luke 10.38-42

Rev Dr Jos M. Strengholt

Have you ever done a Myers-Briggs personality test? I did. The result: I am what in terms of Myers-Briggss is called an INFJ.

Last week I did a Dog or Cat test. You can find so many ‘useful’ things on the internet, can’t you. Are you more like a cat or a dog? I am 90% a dog, and 10% cat. Whatever that means.

And I must admit, I did a second test elsewhere, and then I was 56% cat and only 44% dog. Duhhh. :)

It seems that Matthew, in his Gospel, also gave us a test. Are you more a Mary or more a Martha person? More contemplative, or more an active personality?

1. Clash of temperaments?

With an amazing economy of words, Matthew presents to us these two sisters, Martha and Mary.

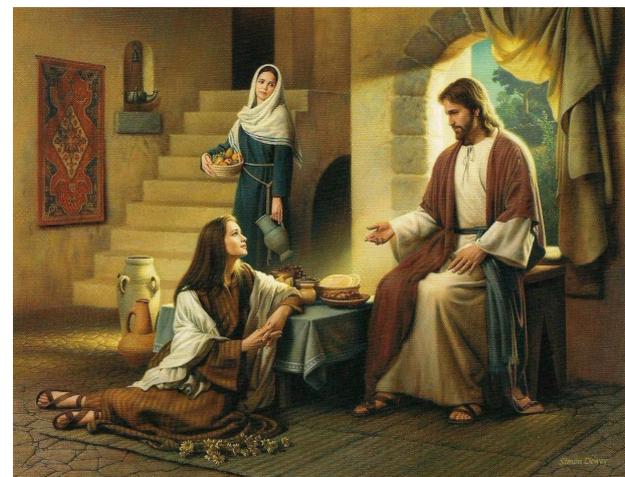
With just a few words Matthew has been able to sketch these two women, and we have made them into symbols of contemplation and activist service for 2000 years since he wrote the words down.

Poor Mary and Martha, just based on this one incident, we have made them into symbols of personality types.

It is true, I think, that some people are more prone to quiet contemplation, a life of prayer, thinking, and more prayer.

And other people seem, by nature, more like dynamos of activity. It is hard for the active person to understand the person who sits and contemplates. “Can these people not see that we have work to do in the vineyard of God?”

And the person who is devoted to quiet times and meditation is apt to misunderstand the person who would rather be active. “Can’t they just see that the Christian life is all about being with Jesus?”



When Jesus entered the home of these two sisters, in the village of Bethany, he was on the way to Jerusalem. And Bethany was not far from Jerusalem.

Present day Bethany is the Palestinian village known by the Arabic name of El-Azariya, meaning, the place of Lazarus. Lazarus was the brother of Mary and Martha, whom Jesus raised from the dead. Eventually ofcourse he died, and his tomb is still in that village of El-Azariya.



Bethany, El-Azariya, is just 2.5km east of Jerusalem. So Jesus had come very close to the city where within days he would die.

This Jesus, with his face set to Jerusalem, came into the home of the sisters.

His whole being was taken up with the intensity of the inner battle to bend his will to the will of God.

Martha did not notice this; she was eager to celebrate the presence of Jesus by laying on the best her house could give.

So she rushed and fussed and cooked a gourmet meal; and it seems that this was precisely what Jesus did not want. All he wanted was quiet, maybe some bread and olives, some wine.

Martha, with the best of intentions and in her love for Jesus, destroyed the quiet moment Jesus desired to have with his close friends.

After this visit, it would only be crowds, and people shouting Hosanna, and the stench and noise and busyness of Jerusalem at the feast, and crucify him...

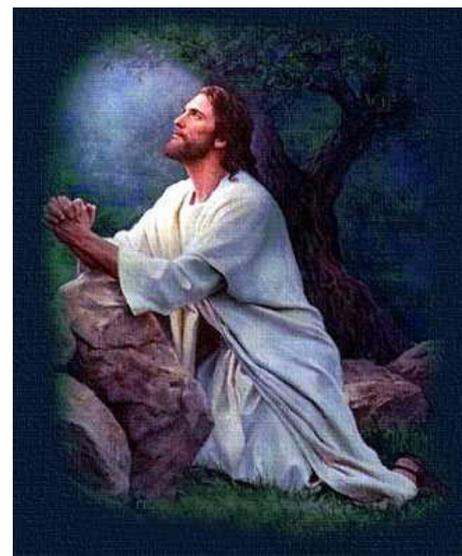
"One thing is necessary", Jesus tells Martha. Possibly he meant, "I don't want a big spread; one course, the simplest meal is all I want. And I just want to have some relaxed moments with you!" Maybe Mary understood this and Martha did not.

Mary sat at the feet of Jesus and listened to him.

2. Listening or doing?

For understanding what the story of Martha and Mary teaches us, for our life today, we have to listen carefully to Jesus, not only in this one instance, but in all he says and does in regard to contemplation and busyness in serving God.

First, Jesus himself is our prime example. We so often see him praying to God, his Father. Again and again. In all crucial moments. He was prayerful. A "Mary", if you like.



And it is not easy to overlook how much Jesus contemplated God, and the Word of God. He knew his Holy Scriptures, he was able to quote from them all the time and in a relevant manner, and he had his own views of how those Scriptures had to be interpreted. He was an original thinker.

So he prayed much, and he spend much time in considering the meaning of God's Word. You could say, he was the perfect Mary. Sitting at the feet of God, listening and learning.

But we we can hardly deny that Jesus was also very active. Always on the move; always with the people; healing them, touching them, teaching them, feeding them.

So Jesus was the perfect "Martha" as well. And he gave a good summary of this, as quoted by Matthew in his Gospel:

"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20.27-28)

Jesus did abundantly what Martha was doing. He served; he worked hard.

And he tells us to do likewise. In fact, in John 13:15 he tells us, "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."

His life is an example for us. In being active in serving, and in always being with the people who needed help.

So Jesus gives us an example of complete commitment to God, that expressed itself in hard work.

But he also gave us the example of contemplation and prayer. He says,

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matthew 11.28-30)

That was what Mary did - she came to Jesus to learn from him. To find rest with Jesus.

Now, how can we get out this dilemma! Pray ? Or work hard?

First, let me say, I think this was, even for Jesus, a great dillema. Let me give one example, from Luke 5.15-17:

"...great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities. But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray. On one of those days, as he was teaching..." Luke continues.

Jesus was overwhelmed by the needs of the people and at the same time, he tried to squeeze prayer times in. And that did not always go easy. So even for him, to find the right balance was hard.

3. The practical lesson: the dialectics of life

We cannot deny, that we all have different personalities; some people do indeed gravitate to being more contemplative, more focused on the heart, on prayer, while others are more activist, more doers. There is nothing wrong with being the person you are.

We must not misuse Mary and Martha for saying that this or that personality type is better or worse. The issue in the story is more that there is a time for everything. And Martha chose the wrong moment for her activities.

In the story of the Good Samaritan we see that disciples are called to 'go and do.' There is a time for activism.

In the story of Martha and Mary we see that disciples are called to 'sit and listen.' There is a time for prayer and meditation.

Those who gravitate to being meditative, must be challenged by the words of Jesus - they must like Jesus also be active, with the people and their needs. Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick. We must all work like Jesus did.

And very actively minded people, must be challenged by Jesus: very active people must also find times for prayer and meditation. We must all find time to pray like Jesus did.

Prayer without deeds, without action, is a dead faith. If you only pray, Christ tells you, go into the world.

Very prayerful people who do not engage with the world around them as Christians, must ask themselves seriously: are you not avoiding the engagement with this world that God asks of you, by withdrawing into your inner room of prayer?

So if you are more prayerful than active, try to find balance in your life. Involve yourself in some practical -Jesus-like - forms of Christians outreach. Force yourself.



A ACTION
C CHANGES
T THINGS



But action without prayer, is also a dead faith. If you are in the world and you don't pray, Christ tells you, go into your inner room and pray. An active life, forgetful of union with God, is useless and barren.

If you are always active and you do not pray much, you have to ask yourself a serious question: is your activism maybe a manner to cover up the fact that in regard to prayer and meditation, you have lost touch with God?

If you are an activist, always busy, take your agenda and force yourself to times of prayer, reading the bible, meditating.

The key lies ofcourse in being able to combine these two lives. But even if we try this, we will still find that our Christian life is like a continuous swing between prayer, meditation, and then activities, activities, and then prayer again.

And because we all have different characters, different personality styles, we must not look down on each other - we are all different, we all try to follow Christ, we all have to find a sort balance between praying to Christ and working for him.

Prayer changes the world. And our actions change the world. And actually, we ourselves benefit as well. Both prayer and ministry in our world help us to see who we are , and to grow into the people God desires us to be.

So with our prayers and labor, we obey God. We also impact our world. And we allow God to make us more mature people. Because prayer to God works as a mirror for ourselves. In our lonelines with God we better learn who we are.

And serving people has similar impact. Other people are a mirror - people helpe us to better see who we are. And how we can be thankful and develop ourselves.

Conclusion

So, please Mary and Martha, forgive me for using your names as symbols for a lifestyle that was maybe not yours at all...

if you realise that you are more a meditative Mary, or more an ministring Martha, ask yourself what you must do to not be unbalanced.

Maybe you need to pray more, read more bible. Then tell yourself that you will do this, and adopt a system for prayer and bible reading. Force yourself to do this.

And if you need to be a bit more active as a Christian, tell yourself that you will find out what you can be involved in, and then do it.

And also share this with someone else. Maybe he or she has a good view of who you are. And telling someone works as a wonderful psychological tool to help you really do what you want to do.

It is awesome to be able to pray to God and to read his word.

And it is just as awesome to serve God in practical ways.

God needs such people, to shake the world by their prayers and their actions. And to shake us, and mature us more.

We can be those people.

Amen.