

The One Thing Needful

(The Gospel According to Luke, Part II)

First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois — March 12, 2017

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Luke 10:1-42 ESV

After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to go. And he said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go your way; behold, I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no moneybag, no knapsack, no sandals, and greet no one on the road.

Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace be to this house!' And if a son of peace is there, your peace will rest upon him. But if not, it will return to you. And remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide, for the laborer deserves his wages. Do not go from house to house.

Whenever you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you. Heal the sick in it and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' But whenever you enter a town and they do not receive you, go into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town

that clings to our feet we wipe off against you. Nevertheless know this, that the kingdom of God has come near.' I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town.

"Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more bearable in the judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades." The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me."

The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" And he said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." Then turning to the disciples he said privately, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it."

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live."

But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?"

He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise."



Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."

Today we continue our journey with Jesus through the Gospel of Luke, as we move on toward Palm Sunday and the beginning of what we call "Holy Week," the week of Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem and his arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection. We have only four Sundays to look at this Gospel before we come to Palm Sunday, so of course we'll have to skip a lot of Luke's material. Hopefully, as we do so, we'll remember many other things that we learn from Matthew, Mark, and John. But out of necessity in this study of Luke we'll be picking up some things that only he tells us about.

All four Gospels follow the same general outline, with a major concentration on that last week in Jerusalem. Here we see the traditional symbols of the four Gospels: the winged man, for Matthew; the winged lion, for Mark; the winged ox, for Luke, and the eagle, for John. We could relate these symbols to the content of each of the Gospels, but I will save that for another time. The point is, each evangelist (as we call the Gospel authors) draws on his own special sources, and therefore each writer has his particular angle on what Jesus did and said in the years leading up to that critical week — I would say, "crucial week," because it climaxes in Jesus' crucifixion and his Easter triumph over the cross. Today we're looking at what we know as chapter 10 of Luke's Gospel.



Do we sometimes have a picture in our mind of Jesus trekking over the hills of Galilee with just a handful of disciples trailing along with him, or do we entertain an image of Jesus in the boat or on the shore of the Sea of Galilee accompanied by just a few humble fishermen and the like? If that's the case, we need to get a more accurate picture in our minds. Jesus wasn't some wandering guru with a small following. He was actually the head of a larger movement that sprang up around his teaching about the kingdom of God, and his announcement that the Lord had finally returned to his people after their centuries of exile. Jesus wasn't just a poor beggar without financial resources. Remember, he was a substantial businessman, a *teknon* or general contractor. His disciples maintained a treasury from which they gave aid to the poor — because *they* weren't poor! Some wealthy people supported their ministry; we read about several women who went along with Jesus and took care of the disciples' needs, including the wife of one of King Herod's officials. The image of the penniless, totally destitute Jesus needs to be cast aside and replaced by a more accurate image developed from the text of Scripture.



We see this as we launch into today's reading from Luke's chapter 10: "After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to go" (Luke 10:1). The "after this" refers to what we read in chapter 9, where we're told about Jesus' preaching in Galilee and how "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to

Jerusalem" (9:51). So we're at the point where Jesus is just putting his mission into "high gear." And to do this, he picks out seventy-two people to go through the land with his same message. If he had seventy-two candidates for this job, in addition perhaps to his core group of twelve disciples, he must have been able to pick from a much larger group. This was no small movement Jesus had going, and it's no wonder the "authorities" — the traditional Jewish teachers, the Herodians, the priestly hierarchy, and the Roman occupation forces — were beginning to get a little nervous about him!

What I want to focus on here is what Jesus told these seventy-two missionaries to do. They were to be his advance party, going to each town where he was about to go himself — and, in fact, to do what he would be doing there: "Heal the sick in it and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you'" (10:9). And when they returned from this mission this is what they reported: "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" (10:17). It wasn't only Jesus who could do these mighty works — deeds that made it evident that God was on the move again! Jesus gave his missionaries the same authority he had over the powers of evil, just as he tells them in John's Gospel: "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father" (John 14:12). After the resurrection he told his followers, "These signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents with their hands; and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover" (Mark 16:17-18).



"The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!' And he said to them, 'I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.'" -- Luke 10:17-18

We're supposed to be followers of Jesus today; do we really believe we can do what Jesus told us we could do, as the seventy-two were able to do? And that was before Jesus rose from the dead; today he has conquered death and lives in each of us who have united with him. "He who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him" (1 Corinthians 6:17). So we need to be bold in confronting situations where people are in bondage to evil spirits: feelings of inadequacy, dysfunctional behavior patterns, crippling addictions, false ideas about what's right and good. We need to dare to lay hands on the sick and pray for them, exercising our faith for their healing. We need to make it clear, in our manner of life, that *God is here*, Jesus is Lord, and we don't march to the "politically correct" drumbeat of a corrupt culture. When Jesus heard what the seventy-two had been able to do, Luke says "he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit" (10:21). The Greek word Luke uses here is *angalliazō*, meaning to celebrate, even perhaps to dance with joy. Jesus gave exuberant thanks to God that the hidden power of his kingdom had at last been revealed, that his followers could see at last what kings and prophets of old had longed to see, but which had been withheld from them. I would ask, Will Jesus so rejoice over us because the works of God are manifest in *our* life and witness? Something to think pretty seriously about, isn't it? Think about it as individual followers of Jesus, and also as a congregation of believers?

Let's go on to the next section of Luke's chapter 10, what we call the parable of the Good Samaritan. What's a parable? It's a story drawn from everyday life that makes a point about how God operates, what he's up to in this world, and how we can get in line with his purpose. Jesus is the master of parables; no one else in the ancient world, or in the history of literature since, has developed the parable as a form of literature the way Jesus did. So all four Gospels record parables of Jesus, but Luke has a special interest in them and records several found only in his Gospel. The story of the Good Samaritan is one of them.

Jesus tells the parable in response to a question by a "lawyer," an expert in the Law of Moses, who asked him how he could enter into the kind of life God wants for his people. Jesus first gave him an answer directly from the Torah, the Law of Moses: Love the Lord with all you've got, and love your neighbor as yourself. But that wasn't good enough for Jesus' questioner. Like all lawyers, he wants to get into the fine print: "Who's my neighbor?"

In response, Jesus tells this story of a traveler attacked by robbers on a deserted road and left for dead. Two Jewish travelers pass by the site: first a priest, one of the managers of the Temple, because the road leads from Jerusalem; then a Levite, perhaps one of the Temple singers or a rural priest taking his annual turn at the Temple sacrifices. Now, you would think that these men, pledged to serve the Lord, would at least check into the status of this poor victim lying beside the road. But they don't; they skirt the poor man, passing by on the other side. Why don't they help him?



"But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds."— Luke 10:33-34

My dad, preaching about this passage, used to suggest that maybe they were so busy going about their *religious* duties that they couldn't stop to help someone in need. Their mind was on other things; they just didn't care about the suffering of others enough to get involved. Maybe, but there's another reason: the Law of Moses stipulated that if you touched a corpse you became unclean for a certain time. If the man beside the road were dead, then if the priest or Levite touched him he'd be disqualified to perform their religious duties. Yes, it was exactly because these men thought their service to the Lord was more important than their service to their

neighbor that they didn't try to help him! But along comes a Samaritan, of all people, a member of a split-off group the regular Jews despised because they had their own temple and didn't worship in Jerusalem. And the Samaritan rescues the poor traveler and provides for his care.

Why does Jesus tell this parable? Is it only to urge his followers to care for those in need? I think there's much more to it. Remember, in the account of the mission of the seventy-two he has just upbraided a couple of cities that refused to accept his gospel of the kingdom of God. It will be more bearable, he says, for the notorious Sodom and Gomorrah in the judgment than for a community that rejects his message. And what was that message? That God has returned to his chosen people, calling them back to his original purpose for them, which was to be a blessing to all people of the world and welcome them into the family of God. Yet, in the parable, the priest and the Levite thought it was more important to *protect their special status* as God's representatives than to *do what they were supposed to do* as his representatives! Only the outcast Samaritan did what an Israelite was supposed to do!

So Jesus concludes by asking the lawyer, "Which traveler was the neighbor to the man who was robbed and left for dead?" And the lawyer had no choice but to answer, "The one who had mercy on him, and helped him." To us, that seems like the obvious answer, and it is. It's the responsibility of those who follow the Lord to help people in need, people made in God's image just as we are, because the Lord cares for them in their suffering more than he cares for the way we perform our "religious" duties or traditions. That message comes through loud and clear in the writings of the Israelite prophets, like Isaiah whom we've just been studying.

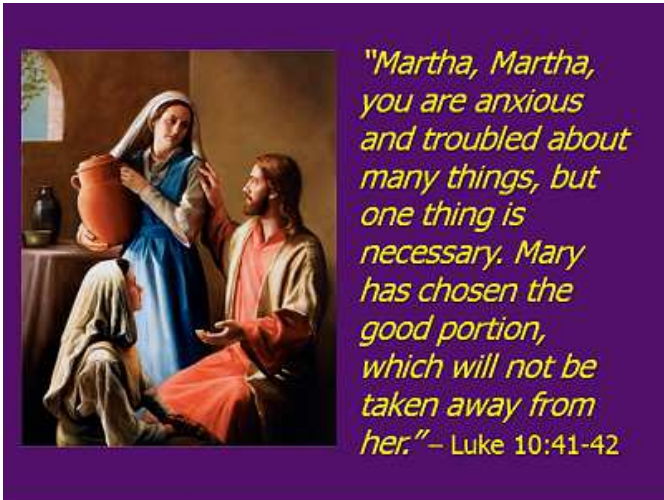
But I want you to notice something odd about this parable. The lawyer's question was, "Who is my neighbor?" But Jesus doesn't answer that question. Instead he answers a different question: "To whom are *you* a neighbor?" When we consider how we can serve the Lord by "loving our neighbor as ourselves," we don't first ask about other people and whether *they're* qualified be our neighbors. No, first we ask *whether we're the neighbor* to the person in need. We ask whether we, like the Samaritan in the parable, have a compassion on the suffering that reflects the compassion of the God we serve.

Now let's turn to the final section in our 10th chapter of Luke, the incident of Jesus in the home of Martha and Mary. We learn in John's Gospel that they had a brother named Lazarus, but Luke doesn't mention him for some reason. Apparently the house belonged to Martha, because Luke says Martha welcomed Jesus "into her house," though she shared the home with her sister Mary. It looks like Martha's home was a fairly substantial one, because Jesus was teaching a group of his followers in the house, or more likely in the enclosed courtyard. And among those listening to Jesus, as Luke says, sitting "at the Lord's feet," was Mary. And that sets up the tension in this story.

If you have a group of people coming for an extended time, such as a teaching session with Jesus, proper decorum requires that you provide food or refreshments for them. In the culture of ancient Judaism, the “laws of hospitality” demand such treatment for visitors, as we observe in other incidents recorded in the Bible. (And we follow the same “laws of hospitality” today when we serve a meal after hosting the Lenten service in our church.) So Martha is busy with her preparations — yet here is her sister Mary, her co-hostess if you will, just sitting around giving Jesus her rapt attention as he teaches about the kingdom of God and not lifting a finger to help her poor sister who, as Jesus says in the older translation, is “cumbered with much serving.” So an agitated Martha bursts from her kitchen, or whatever they used for a kitchen, to get Mary to help her out. Maybe she’s hinted to Mary before that she could certainly use a hand, but Mary has ignored the hint. So this time Martha goes to Jesus with her pity party: “Lord, *don’t you care* that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me” (10:40).

If we were to apply our standards of family conduct to such a situation, we would certainly be on Martha’s side, wouldn’t we? When there’s a task like this to be performed, such as hosting a church supper, we expect everyone to pitch in if they’re able. So it puzzles us, doesn’t it, that Jesus looks at this situation from a different angle. “Martha, Martha,” he says — and by repeating her name he shows us he’s just a bit disappointed with her — “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her” (10:41-42).

What’s the one thing needful at a time like this, a time when Jesus has “set his face to go to Jerusalem,” as the Gospels tell us, and there to bring about the fulfillment of God’s plan for the inauguration of his kingdom, his new creation? This isn’t a time to be preoccupied with pots and pans, with wine or lentils or pita bread or whatever else was on Martha’s menu that day. This is a time to understand what God is up to, and how he has come back to his people to restore them to the purpose he always had in mind for them. There will always be meals that need to be prepared, but there isn’t going to be another time like this, because Jesus is to die “once for all” for the sins of his people, and be raised for their deliverance. We’re reminded of what Jesus said, on a later occasion in the home of Simon the Leper, when a woman anointed Jesus with some very expensive ointment and the disciples protested, “What a waste! This ointment could have been sold and the money given to the poor!” But Jesus answered, “You’ll always have the poor with you, and you can help them whenever you want to, but you won’t always have me” (Mark 14:1-8)



Findings from Luke 10

- We’re to be a “neighbor,” reach out to others to include them in the family of God.
- We have the same authority as Jesus to make the kingdom of God evident in healing the sick, opposing evil, spreading truth.
- Most of all, we need to know how we fit into God’s plans in this critical time.

I think many Christians have identified with Martha in this incident. We’re tempted, aren’t we, to ask, “Lord, don’t you care?” when there’s a job to be done in the body of Christ and we don’t get the help we need. If somebody just wants to worship the Lord, but doesn’t pitch in to help keep the cog wheels of the church machinery turning, then we might have Martha’s same reaction. But we need to ask what time it is. There’s a time to be a Martha, and a time to be a Mary. There’s a time to put on church suppers, a time to maintain the building, a time to take care of church business in board meeting or office work. But there’s also a time to sit at the feet of Jesus, to offer him our praise and worship, to give him our attention as he explains how all those church matters that busy us

really fit into God's larger plan to bring people into his family and set them on a course that leads to life in his new creation. Being taught by Jesus — that's what Jesus told Mary was "the good portion," the best part. Let's not let our many distractions take that from us.

So, like the lawyer we read about in Luke 10, we've come to understand that we can't let a false sense of religious exclusiveness keep us from being the neighbor God expects us to be to people in need of his help. Like the seventy-two that Jesus sent out, we come to understand that we've been given his same authority to witness to the good news of God's kingdom, heal the sick, and do battle with the forces of evil and falsehood that enslave others. And, like Martha and Mary, we discover that in a time like this, in the midst of a corrupt and godless culture, what we need most of all is to sit at the feet of Jesus and learn from him what his plans are for this world, and how we fit into those plans.

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