

Service: From Drudgery to Delight

It's common these days to talk about burn-out. It's become a buzz word so overused that I'm not even sure we know what it means any more. But when we're in the midst of it, we know it, and we know how serious it is.

A few years back I found myself in a place in ministry where I was burned-out. Like many of you, I started with a full tank of passion and love for Christ that overflowed from my life in a heartfelt commitment to ministry. It wasn't forced; it came naturally out of a deep sense of gratitude for His ministry to me. I was loved; I was forgiven; I was secure. And so, I served. I served with a couple of Christian organizations. I went to school so I could learn to serve more effectively. Eventually, I found that someone was even willing to pay me to serve! It didn't really matter; serving Christ was a pleasure.

I don't know exactly when it happened, but little by little I found myself growing weary. I became more aware of the cost of ministry than the pleasure of ministry. I began to resent and envy the people around me who didn't have to carry the kind of load I carried. Worst of all, deep down I felt distant from the Lord. At times, I wondered if I should quit. I privately daydreamed about finding something else to do with my life. At other times I thought maybe I should just put my head down and plow ahead, but when your tank is empty it's hard to even get the motor running. Frankly, I didn't know what to do.

What do you do when your ministry becomes more drudgery than delight? How do you get back to that place where your service comes more out of desire than duty? Fortunately, there's a story that comes out of the life of Jesus where he answered those very questions. It's a story in which someone experienced what I and perhaps some of you experienced, and Jesus spoke to that in a powerful way.

I. A STORY OF A GOOD MEAL GONE BAD

It's a story that is found only in the tenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke. It takes place towards the end of Jesus' life. He

and his disciples are on their way to Jerusalem for the last time. They're passing through the small village of Bethany. It was in Bethany that some of Jesus' best friends lived - Mary and Martha, and their brother, Lazarus. Often in his ministry, their home was a refuge where Jesus would relax and unwind. We know there were times in Jesus' life when he had nowhere to lay his head but the cold, hard ground, but there were also times when he enjoyed the warm hospitality of close friends. When Martha, being the older sister, heard that Jesus and his disciples were passing through, she invited him over for a meal. But this is a story of a good meal gone bad. Oh, I'm sure the meal was delicious, but it was seasoned with frustration and resentment.

“Now as they were traveling along, He entered a certain village; and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. And she had a sister called Mary, who moreover was listening to the Lord's word, seated at His feet. But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up to Him, and said, ‘Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me.’”

It's no small task to have people over for dinner, especially someone as important to you as Jesus was to these two sisters. If you add the twelve disciples and Lazarus to the mix you have 16 people to serve and that's enough to make even Martha Stewart cringe. It's clear as we look at these two women that they responded to this challenge differently. Martha was a frenzy of activity. I wonder if it was one of those meals where nothing was working. She couldn't get the fire just right, or she didn't put enough

leaven in the bread, or the vegetables got cold while the meat took forever to cook. The worst thing about it all was that her sister wasn't lifting a finger. I can imagine Martha calling from the kitchen for her sister to come and give her a hand. When nothing happened, Martha stomped into the living room only to find Mary serenely sitting there at Jesus' feet listening to his

word. We don't exactly know what Mary was thinking, but somehow the presence of Jesus in her home captured her attention so completely that at least for a time serving seemed secondary. At this point, Martha boiled over. Yet she didn't scold her sister; instead she turned to Jesus and yelled, "Master, don't YOU care that my sister has left me to do all the serving? Tell her to give me a hand!"

I'm sure that Martha felt this was a reasonable request. It seems like it to me. I would expect Jesus to send Mary scurrying into the kitchen to do her part. It's only fair, right? But Jesus surprises us. He speaks not to Mary but to Martha. He responds to Martha like a parent might respond to a fretting child. Look at vv. 41-42,

"But the Lord answered and said to her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only a few things are necessary, really only one, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her.'"

You don't have to be a scholar to see that Mary gets the high grade and Martha gets the low one. I don't know about you, but that bothers me a little bit. I would expect Martha to get a pat on the back and Mary to get a kick in the pants.

II. PRINCIPLE: THE KEY TO SERVICE IS PLACING YOURSELF IN A POSITION WHERE THE LORD CAN SERVE YOU

A. Martha's service was commendable: You see, like many of you, deep down I connect with the Marthas of this world. Martha is a realist. A realist knows that if you're going to feed 16 people, someone has to hustle. It doesn't happen sitting down. I mean, let's face it, if it weren't for the Marthas of this world, nothing would ever get done. Very few businesses would make a profit. Very few children would get bathed and ready for bed at night. Very few churches would grow. I have a deep appreciation for the Marthas in this church. They work the sound booth, serve in the nursery, and watch our kids so we can get away for an evening. They are servants. Jesus doesn't fault them for that. Service is a good thing.

In the passage just prior to this one Jesus told a story about a Samaritan who served; he saw a need and did what he could do to meet that need. In so doing, he exemplified what it means to obey one of the two great commandments - love

your neighbor as yourself. It seems to me that it's the Marthas of this world, not the Marys, who are the good neighbors. When they see people who are weary and need a place to rest and eat, they are the ones who open their home, extend their hand, and work to meet that need. That's the kind of woman Martha was. Jesus doesn't fault us for that.

B. Martha's spirit spoiled it: So what's the problem? The problem is not our service, but the spirit of our service. Our spirit can spoil our service. That can happen in a number of ways. Notice Jesus describes Martha as "worried and bothered about so many things." It seems Martha felt like she had to prepare a five course feast, and that caused her to be anxious and irritable. Many of you know exactly what this feels like. In one week, you've got kids who need help on their homework, parents who need help with their yard, a demanding job, and a church that expects you to not just show up but to serve. It's easy to feel like you have to do it all, and you have to do it all well. Recently, I had a week like that. It was busy to begin with, but then my daughter's car broke down, and she lives in LA, and then my sprinkler system went out, and then my water heater. At times like that, I get overwhelmed. I can't even see through the pile; I can't do one thing without being preoccupied with all the other things. I may serve, but in my spirit, I'm worried and bothered.

The spirit of our service also affects those around us. Martha's spirit affected Mary. She doesn't quietly come into the room and whisper, "Mary, could you help me for just a minute." No, she announces to Jesus and everyone within earshot that her sister is a slug. Think of how Mary felt about that. Think of how the disciples felt watching it. Have you ever gone to a home as a guest and as soon as you walked into the house you could feel the tension? You're not sure what, but something is going on between the courses that is thicker than the gravy. The meal may be wonderful but you can't wait to get out of there. That was how the disciples felt.

Finally, our spirit can at least temporarily spoil our relationship with the Lord. In Martha's mind, this was to be a night to remember. God's Son would be at her table! But she ends up not just angry at her sister but angry at the Lord. "Lord, don't you care...?" That's an accusation. She even tells him what to do about it! If you've ever blown up at someone you care about, you know what Martha was feeling. Most of you look forward to being with people you love on special occasions. Imagine you're out for dinner and somehow your conversation turns in the wrong

direction and before you know it you shoot a word across the table that cuts into them like a sharp knife. That's what Martha felt like. That's what happens when we serve with the wrong spirit, and sometimes the one on the other side of the table is Jesus Christ. It wasn't Martha's service that ruined the evening, it was the spirit of her service.

C. Mary placed herself in a position where the Lord served her: But Jesus not only diagnoses the problem, he also points out the solution. He says Mary has chosen the "one thing necessary; the good part which can't be taken away from her." What did Mary choose? She chose to sit at his feet and listen to his word. I don't think that's a plea for us to serve less and sit around more. Jesus isn't telling us to watch more T.V. or take a longer vacation. What Mary chose to do was to place herself in a position where the Lord could minister to her. While Martha started with trying to do something for Jesus, Mary started with trying to receive something from Jesus.

Before he told the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus said there is something which comes before loving your neighbor; that's the second commandment. The first commandment is to love the Lord with all your heart and soul and strength and mind. Of course, in order for me to love him I have to first know how much he loves me, but these commands are always in that order. If we get them turned around, we really won't be able to love our neighbor. If you take a pitcher of water and begin pouring it out, sooner or later that pitcher is going to run dry. But if you hold that pitcher under the faucet, sooner or later it's going to fill up, and not only will it fill up, it will overflow. If we give ourselves to service of neighbor first, sooner or later, we'll be an empty pitcher. But if we give ourselves first to cultivating a love relationship with Jesus Christ, where we let him fill us, then our service will have staying power. It doesn't mean we won't get tired. It doesn't mean there won't be times he seems a million miles away, but over the long haul, his ministry to us will sustain us.

III. APPLICATION: WE MUST PLACE OURSELVES IN A POSITION WHERE HE CAN SERVE US THROUGH PRAYER

But what does that look like? How do we allow the Lord to serve us? Some people say this is all about knowing the word, after all that's what Mary is doing, listening to his word. But that can't be the answer. In the previous story the two

guys who knew the word the best, the priest and the Levite, were the ones who failed to do what they should have done. Perhaps we need to look somewhere else for the answer to that question. It's no mistake that immediately following this story, Jesus' instructs the disciples about how to relate to God in prayer. Luke wanted us to know that sitting at his feet and listening to his word is not about knowing the Bible but it has something to do with prayer. Prayer is at least one of the ways we allow the Lord to serve us. I wonder if that surprises you like it did me. For a long time, I viewed prayer solely as a form of service; something I did for God or for my neighbor. But, more and more, I have come to view prayer as a way of letting him serve me. Perhaps that's why when Jesus taught us to pray he said start with these words, "Our Father...." To say that and believe it is to let God minister to you. It's to come into his presence and before you do anything else remember that because of Christ you come to One who takes pleasure in you as his beloved child.

Last year I was the head basketball coach for my eight-year-old son's team. If you have never seen eight-year-olds play basketball you're missing something! Every Monday we had one practice that was 45 minutes long, because that's all the gym time we could get. When those ten boys hit that court they bounced around like pinballs. All they wanted to do was shoot! But I learned that as a coach I had to sit them down at least a couple of times during practice for just a one or two minutes. In those one or two minutes I taught them how the basic skills of the game. It was also my time to really connect with those boys as their coach. If I didn't do that, they would never learn the game, and they would never listen to me come game time on Saturday. They had to hear FROM me before they could play FOR me. One of the ways we hear from Jesus is by sitting at his feet in a spirit of prayer and let him minister to your heart.

People in this church often preface what they say to me with these words, "I know you're busy but..." Sometimes that makes me feel pretty important. But Eugene Peterson says that the worst thing a person can ever say about a pastor is that he's busy. He says that word implies a basic defection from our fundamental call to pray and to listen. Ever since that time of burn-out in my life, I've learned that I have a basic decision to make as a pastor: Will I be a busy pastor or will I be a pastor who sits at his feet and listens to his word? It doesn't mean I don't work hard, but it does mean I serve out of the overflow of what I have received from him. I'm learning that in order for me to thrive in ministry, I have to make the choice to let him minister to me.

CONCLUSION

Some time in your life you have received an invitation that meant a great deal to you. It might have been an invitation to a party, or to join a team, or to attend a school, or to join a group. Whatever it was, you felt honored and blessed to be invited to do that because it came from someone who meant a great deal to you. You wouldn't have missed it for the world.

It's possible to hear this story as a kind of slap in the hand of the "you need to pray more" variety. But that's not what this is; this is an invitation from God Himself to spend time under someone's ministry; someone who has so much to offer that we wouldn't want to miss it for the world.

This is a day we devote to exposing you to all the various ministries of our church. You will see that there is a lot going on here; there is so much you could be a part of; so many opportunities to serve. I hope you take advantage of that. But, don't forget, the spirit of your service is more important than the service itself, and you keep your spirit fresh and alive through letting the Lord serve you.

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