

HEARTCHECK: BALANCING PRIORITIES

By Andrew Wilson
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Ephesians 5:8-17
Luke 10:38-42

You've got to love Martha in that story. She's doing what we'd probably do if Jesus suddenly appeared at our door. She's freaking out. She's pouring drinks, kicking stuff under the beds and firing up the stove.

Martha's sister, Mary, meanwhile, is just sitting at Jesus' feet. And she's staring at him with a dreamy look in her eye. Martha is understandably annoyed, and she complains to Jesus and asks him to tell Mary to get to work. But Jesus defends Mary, saying that she has made the better choice to sit and do nothing.

You sympathize with Martha for three reasons.

First, she's doing exactly what we all thought God wanted us to do. She's doing her very best to serve Jesus.

Second, Martha's sister, Mary, is doing exactly what we all thought God *didn't* want us to do. She's listening to Jesus' words, but not doing anything to show she has taken them to heart.

And third, the houseguest, Jesus, doesn't seem to appreciate Martha's hospitality. He seems to be telling her that, instead of pouring and baking, she should have done nothing at all.

Anyone who's making a sincere effort to follow Jesus can relate to both of the sisters. Martha isn't some lost soul who has no idea who Jesus is, or what it means to follow him. Instead, she's a good-hearted admirer who has become confused about what's most important in life. Like so many of us, she finds her identity in her activities. She defines herself by what she does. She thinks that by serving the Lord she'll win the Lord's approval. She's really more interested in impressing him than she is in pleasing him.

Mary approaches Jesus with the spirit of a true disciple. But she isn't some saint who has turned the world upside down. She's just an ordinary seeker who has fallen in love with Jesus, and is hungry to know him better. She's motivated by the same things that brought many of you here today. There's nothing on her personal agenda – nothing on her daily to-do list – that's more important than worshipping the Lord, and feeding on his Word. She looks to him, and not to any works of her own, for meaning and purpose and validation.

At the practical level, this story is about balancing priorities. The message is that we should center our lives on Christ, and organize every area of our life around him. At a deeper level, the story reminds us that the void that all of us feel in our hearts can only be filled by God. We may chase down a million-and-one good things, but if we fail to grasp the one thing that's above all things, all of our striving will come to nothing. We may be admired by hundreds for our achievements, or envied by thousands because of our wealth. But if Christ isn't alive in us, we'll never become the person God created us to be.

The author and speaker Jean Fleming challenges us to set priorities for ourselves that reflect the Lord's claim on our lives. She has first-hand experience of family life in the suburbs. She knows what it's like to rush from one activity to the next, and to go to bed tired and get up wishing you could slow things down.

Jean Fleming discovered peace and freedom not by escaping from suburbia, but by centering her life on Christ. She uses the image of a tree to illustrate how each activity and commitment in her life is connected

to the Lord. Notice that she's really talking here about how Christ enables us to balance our priorities and fulfill our divine purpose. She writes [PAPER]:

The trunk represents my relationship to Christ; the limbs represent major areas of God given responsibility such as family, job, ministry and personal development; and the branches represent the activities and opportunities of life. Even without special care, activity branches soon multiply. Soon the profusion of branches becomes more prominent than the trunk and the limbs. When this happens, I feel trapped, frustrated and empty... because my life is shaped and drained by activities that have lost their pertinence to Christ.

Jean Fleming concludes:

I must go beyond defining life by activities. I must focus not on the branches, but on the trunk and the limbs. I do what I do because of Jesus and his claim on my life. I don't do what I don't do for the same reason.

- Finding Focus in a Whirlwind World

When our life is centered on Christ – when the Lord truly is the trunk that sustains our limbs and branches – it becomes easier for us to weather any storm. We're able to hang in there when we lose a job, knowing that our job doesn't define who we are. We're able to relax when our retirement portfolio is shrinking, knowing that our inheritance is secure in heaven. We're able to get back up when someone knocks us down knowing that God still loves and accepts us.

When we're centered on Christ, it's also easier for us to establish priorities that make sense for us. When opportunities come along, we don't embrace them just because they seem attractive. We evaluate them according to our long-term goals. And when our branches become dense and wild so that they block the sun and keep the air from moving, we know it's time to get out the tree saw and start cutting. We get rid of everything that isn't contributing to our spiritual growth. We invest ourselves only in activities that serve God's purposes for our life as we understand them. We make absolutely sure that the good things in our life remain subordinate to the very best thing

What keeps many of us from finding a sense of balance in our lives is that we're focused on things that cost a lot but don't bring us personal fulfillment. Some of us, for example, are slavishly committed to building up our status and wealth. We've sacrificed everything for the sake of our career and our personal fortune. Some of us indulge in hobbies that eat up huge portions of our time and give us little or nothing in return. We carve out plenty of time for TV, web surfing, online gaming or other distractions, but we neglect our friends, our spouses, our kids and our God.

I recently heard about a man who had great tickets for the Super Bowl. As he sat down, another man arrived and asked if anyone was sitting in the empty seat next to him.

"No," he said. "The seat is empty."

"This is incredible!" says the other man. "Who in their right mind would have a seat like this for the Super Bowl and not use it?"

"Well, actually, the seat belongs to me. My wife was supposed to come with me, but she passed away. This is the first Super Bowl we haven't been to together since we got married."

"Oh ... I'm sorry to hear that. That's terrible. But couldn't you find someone else, a friend or relative, or even a neighbor to take the seat?"

The man shook his head. "No. They're all at the funeral."

Paul tells us in Colossians, "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things" (Colossians 3:2). Jesus tells us that if we want to be his disciple, we need to jump in all the way. We can't follow at a distance; we can't treat him as one priority among many priorities that are competing for our time and attention. He says in Luke: "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62). Elsewhere in Luke he warns: "Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:33).

Many of us are trying to do too much. We have lots of priorities, but we can't decide which ones are most deserving. As a result, we're moving a hundred miles an hour, but we don't really know where we're going. We're doing a million things, but we're not accomplishing anything of lasting value. What we need, more than anything, is to stop and think about what we're doing. We need to decide what's most important – what's worth living and dying for – and organize our life around *that*.

The late Tom Landry, the legendary coach of the Dallas Cowboys, was once asked why he had been so successful. He said this to a crowd of more than 2,000 students at Baylor University:

In 1958 I did something that everyone who [want to be] successful must do. I determined my priorities for my life – God, family, and then football.

Being selective – doing less, and having fewer goals, and having the right goals – that's the key to a satisfying and productive life.

I worry about the "more is better" philosophy that seems to have taken hold in many of our public schools. Driven by the twin goals of raising test scores and helping the best and brightest students to get into top colleges and universities, many suburban high schools put enormous pressure on their students to perform. College-bound students feel the need to fill their schedules with activities that will impress admissions officers. They register for multiple Advanced Placement classes, play on sports teams, join clubs, chair school committees, take private lessons and enroll in expensive Saturday classes designed to bring up their test scores. Students who are unwilling or unable to juggle all those commitments are made to feel like failures.

It's a fallacy to assume that if two AP classes and a commitment to a soccer team are good for a kid, then four AP classes and a commitment to soccer, Model UN and the prom committee will be twice as good for her. More is not always better. In education, for example, where the goal is to help kids to think clearly, less is usually better. *Much* better. Kids need time hang with their friends, walk in the woods, eat dinner with their families and connect with their church youth group. They also need adults who will model for them what it means to lead a balanced life.

As the pace of life quickens, it becomes harder and harder for us to seize control of our lives. All day, every day, people and circumstances demand our attention. That's why it's so important for us to decide, in the quietness of our hearts, who or what is going to take center stage. If we don't decide what our priorities are, the world will make the decision for us. And we'll spend our whole lives taking care of urgent business that leads us no where, and gets us nothing.

I recently read an interview with one of the original founders of Southwest Airlines. At the time of the interview most of the airlines were losing money hand over fist. Southwest, by contrast, had reported many consecutive quarters of profits. The interviewer asked the logical question: "How do you stay in the black when everybody else is swimming in red ink?"

The executive answered: “It’s because of what we *don’t* do. We don’t do food. We don’t do assigned seats. We don’t do interline baggage. Our motto is, ‘Low Fares’. *That’s* what we do.”

What’s the one thing that *you* do? What’s the central vision, the over-arching goal that organizes your life? If you can’t say what it is in one sentence, and you don’t get excited when you talk about it, you probably need to perform a radical heartcheck. That means examining yourself to find out where you stand with God, and whether the life that you’re living is being directed and guided by him, or by you, or by some other influence that has gotten hold of you.

Paul tells us in Ephesians:

Be very careful... how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is.

- Ephesians 5:15-17

If there’s a contradiction or contrast between the things we say we believe in and the thing we actually do, we will be unhappy and unproductive, lacking in purpose. But when our goals, actions and values are congruent, we’re happy, satisfied and productive. The key is to figure out what’s truly important, and then organize around that.

You may not be ready to take the leap of faith and make a radical commitment to Christ. But here’s something we all can do, if we can just get off the merry-go-round and think for a moment. We can stop letting the world set our agenda for us. We can decide for ourselves what is the most important thing in our life – the thing that’s likely to yield the greatest fruit for us for the people we love over the whole course of our life. And we can start to organize our life accordingly.

When we organize around the right priorities, ideas start to fall into place. We start to realize that God truly does have a big, exciting plan for our life. And he really does love and accept us – not because of what we do for him, but because we’re his children.

What if Jesus came to our house? How would we react? The Bible says he’s knocking at the door to our hearts. How will you respond? Will you be a Martha or a Mary?

Lord Jesus, we realize that so much of what we do doesn’t contribute to what is most important in our lives. The many good things you give us sometimes keep us from choosing the best and from experiencing your joy.

Teach us to translate what really counts into our daily lives. Help us to love you with all our heart, and to love others as we love ourselves, that our lives may be anchored forever on the rock of your eternal Word. Amen.