

One Necessary Thing

Scott Grant · Luke · Luke 10:38-42; John 11:27-28; John 12:2-3

AT A GLANCE

Scott Grant unpacks Jesus's claim that only 'one thing is necessary' by tracing the Greek clause linking it to 'the good portion' Mary has chosen. Following that portion through the Old Testament, he identifies it as the Lord himself — so Jesus is not praising contemplation over service but locating both sisters' devotion in himself. Anxiety, not activity, is what Jesus corrects in Martha, and what he offers now is not a new posture but Christ already present.

- 'The one necessary thing' is not silence or activity but Jesus himself, the good portion no circumstance can strip away.
- Martha's failure was not her busyness but her anxious distraction; Jesus corrects her heart, not her hustle.
- Mary and Martha both chose Jesus — later scenes show Martha serving undistracted, proof the choice matures rather than divides them.

“He does not chide her for hustling and bustling, but for fretting and fussing.”

EXPOSITION

Scripture engaged

[Luke 10:38-42](#) — While Jesus and his followers were traveling, he went into a town, and a woman named Martha let him stay at her house. She had a sister named Mary. Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to him teach. But her sister Martha was busy doing all the work that had to be done. Martha went in and said, “Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me!” But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are getting worried and upset about too many things. Only one thing is important. Mary has made the right choice, and it will never be taken away from her.” (ERV)

[John 11:27-28](#) — Martha answered, “Yes, Lord. I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God. You are the one who was coming to the world.” After Martha said these things, she went back to her sister Mary. She talked to Mary alone and said, “The Teacher is here. He is asking for you.” (ERV)

[John 12:2-3](#) — There they had a dinner for Jesus. Martha served the food, and Lazarus was one of the people eating with Jesus. Mary brought in a pint of expensive perfume made of pure nard. She poured the perfume on Jesus' feet. Then she wiped his feet with her hair. And the sweet smell from

the perfume filled the whole house. (ERV)

The argument

The Good Portion Is a Person, Traced Through a Single Word — Scott Grant's own path from a Greek conjunction to an identity claim

Scott Grant admits he was 'flummoxed' by verse 42 until he noticed, in his own translation work, that the sentence naming 'the good portion' begins with the Greek word 'for' — tying it directly back to 'one thing is necessary.' He then traced the Old Testament word behind 'portion': sometimes food, sometimes the tribal land of Israel, and most significantly the Lord himself, as David says in Psalm 16:5, 'The Lord is my chosen portion.' Pairing that with Jesus's own later statement that 'no one is good except God alone,' Grant lands the identification: 'the good portion is the Lord, and who is the Lord? Jesus.' The one necessary thing has a name.

Insight — Patient attention to a text's grammar can surface an identity claim a quick reading misses.

Martha's Trouble Is Anxiety, Not Activity — why Jesus corrects her heart, not her hustle

Martha's 'much serving' is not the problem — Grant is careful to note it as 'good.' What Jesus names is that she is 'distracted' by it, and the cause runs deeper: 'you are anxious and troubled about many things.' Her irritation with Mary is a symptom, not the disease. Grant contrasts her with the Good Samaritan, who is 'extremely busy' and yet the hero of the previous parable, and with Brother Lawrence, who found he could 'possess God in as great tranquility' amid the noise of his kitchen as on his knees. 'He does not chide her for hustling and bustling, but for fretting and fussing.' Busyness was never the target — anxious distraction was.

Insight — Anxiety, not activity, is what disqualifies a life from rest in Christ — busyness itself is not the enemy.

Martha, Too, Has Chosen the Good Portion — reading Luke 10 through Martha's later devotion in John

Grant resists the popular reading that crowns contemplation over service: 'Jesus here is not contrasting listening to Jesus with serving Jesus, not in this passage favoring the reflective and contemplative life over the active life.' Martha welcomes Jesus, serves him, and turns her home into a place where 'the great rabbi teaches' — that is faith, not merely hospitality. Grant points ahead to John 11, where Martha's exchange with Jesus is 'a profound theological interaction,' and to John 12, where she serves at a meal 'apparently happily so, in an undistracted way' while Mary again sits at Jesus's feet, now anointing them. Same devotion, two shapes: 'I would submit to you that Martha also has chosen Jesus as the good portion.'

Insight — Devotion to Christ can be embodied in quiet listening or busy service — the test is the heart's object, not the body's posture.

Appreciating What Is Already Ours — the good portion cannot be taken away

Grant closes by returning to Curly's riddle from City Slickers: Mitch discovers his 'one thing' is not new information but 'simply an appreciation for what he already had.' Martha, Grant suggests, needed the same recognition — she already had Jesus in her house; what she lacked was appreciation for the proximity Mary was savoring. From there Grant extends an open invitation, cataloguing gift after gift found in Christ — 'help yourself to the bread of life... to justice and mercy and grace... to every spiritual blessing' — before landing on the promise that anchors it all: whatever else time and loss take from us, 'Jesus will not be taken away from you.'

Insight — The deepest need is not to acquire something new but to recognize and receive the Christ already given.

Cross-references

- [Acts 22:3](#) — explains Mary's posture at Jesus's feet as the recognized stance of a disciple learning from a rabbi
- [Psalm 16:5](#) — David's confession that 'the Lord is my chosen portion' anchors the Old Testament sense of 'portion' as the Lord himself
- [Luke 18:19](#) — Jesus's statement that 'no one is good except God alone' identifies 'the good portion' with God
- [Psalm 27:4](#) — David's 'one thing I have asked' is read as an echo anticipating Jesus's 'one thing is necessary'
- [Luke 10:25-37](#) — the Good Samaritan's busyness as heroic evidence that Jesus does not oppose active service

DEVOTIONAL

Think of the wheel Grant describes: rough edges but a centered axle still turn true; a smooth rim with an off-center axle goes nowhere useful. Most of us spend our anxious hours sanding the edges — the job, the relationship, the season we fear losing — while the center goes untended. Mary sat at the center and listened. Martha, in time, learned to serve from the center rather than around it. Neither posture was the point; the Person at the center was. What would it mean to stop treating Jesus as one claim on your attention among many, and start recognizing him as the portion that cannot be divided or diminished, the food that does not spoil, the land that cannot be seized? David, landless and hunted, said it first: the Lord himself was enough. Mary, at the feet of a traveling rabbi, said it in her body before she said it in words. And Martha — welcoming, serving, later weeping, later worshiping — said it in her hands. We

are not asked to choose between the kitchen and the floor at his feet. We are asked to notice who is present in both. The teacher is here. He is not waiting at a distance for us to arrange ourselves rightly before we may approach; he is already in the house, already calling our name, already offering himself as freely as bread on a table. The only real failure is distraction — forgetting, in the noise of many things, that one thing, one person, has already been given and cannot be taken away.

Reflection

- Where in your life is busyness masking an anxiety about 'many things' that Jesus wants to name and quiet?
- If Jesus is the good portion that cannot be taken from you, what are you currently afraid of losing, and what would it mean to set that fear beside his permanence?
- Martha's devotion looked different in every scene — welcoming, serving, worshiping — yet was always aimed at Jesus. What might your own particular way of loving him look like this season?

Closing prayer

Holy Spirit, thank you for this profound, powerful, and short narrative for us to digest. Lord Jesus, thank you for meeting these two sisters so tenderly. Show us that you are the good portion, the one necessary thing. Would we focus our lives on you, would we taste of you, and would we see and believe that you are good indeed. Amen.

FORMATION

One thing to remember

Jesus himself — not a posture of busyness or stillness — is the one necessary thing, and he cannot be taken from you.

This week

This week, sit with Luke 10:38-42 for a few quiet minutes before your day's tasks begin. Ask God to name the 'many things' making you anxious rather than simply busy, and tell him honestly, in prayer, that you are choosing Jesus as your portion today.

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