

## **“One Thing Is Necessary” (Luke 10:38–42)**

**March 10, 2019**

**Brian Watson**

Does anyone here remember the movie *City Slickers*? The movie came out in 1991 and starred Billy Crystal, Bruno Kirby, and Daniel Stern as three middle-aged men, the city slickers of the title, who are all having what amounts to a mid-life crisis. The three friends leave New York City and go out west to a tourist ranch to take part in a two-week cattle drive. While there, they meet an old cowboy named Curly, played by the leathery Jack Palance, who won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for his performance. At one point in the film, Billy Crystal’s character, Mitch, is riding alone with Curly, and they discuss marriage, love, and life. Curly recognizes that Mitch is like most of the other men who come to the ranch, all in the midst of their mid-life malaise. So, Curley asks Mitch, “Do you know what the secret of life is?” He then holds up one finger and says, “This.” Mitch says, “Your finger?” Curly says, “One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that and every else don’t mean [ahem].” Mitch says, “That’s great, but what’s the one thing?” Curly responds, “That’s what you’ve gotta figure out.”

That’s a question we should all ask ourselves. What is the one thing? What is the most important thing in life, the thing we need to stick to? What is the highest priority? Figure that out, and everything else follows.

We’ve been studying the life of Jesus as presented in the Gospel of Luke. And today we’ll see that Jesus says something very similar to what ol’ Curly said. One thing is necessary. What is that thing? Let’s see.

Today, we’re looking at Luke 10:38–42. Jesus spends time with two sisters, Martha and Mary. One of them has discovered that one necessary thing and the other hasn’t. Let’s read the passage.

<sup>38</sup> Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. <sup>39</sup> And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching. <sup>40</sup> 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.” <sup>41</sup> But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things,

<sup>42</sup> but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.”<sup>1</sup>

On one level, this story is easy to understand. There are two sisters, Martha and Mary, who are with Jesus in Martha’s house. These two women are most likely the sisters of Lazarus, whose story is told in John 11. While Mary is sitting at Jesus’ feet, listening to his teaching, Martha is “distracted with much serving.” She’s probably cooking, bringing Jesus food, cleaning dishes, worried about being a good hostess. And she’s bothered that she’s doing all the work. So, she says to Jesus, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.”

Jesus answers her by telling her that she is worried about a lot of things, but only “one thing is necessary.” He implies that if there’s something to be concerned about, it’s that one thing. But here Jesus sounds like Curly. What’s the one thing?

The answer is found in Mary. Jesus says, “Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.” What is the good portion? On the surface, it seems like Jesus is saying that Mary has chosen to listen to him, to learn from him. And that’s no small thing. In fact, it was not common for women to be allowed to sit a teacher’s feet, yet here we see Jesus teaching a woman.

But is Jesus only referring to his teaching? Is that the good portion?

Perhaps the word “portion” is the key to understanding “the one thing” that “is necessary.” And if we look the Old Testament, we find out what, or who, that portion is.

We’re going to turn to some Psalms see to see how that word is used. The first one we’ll look at is Psalm 16, particularly verses 5–8:

- <sup>5</sup> The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup;  
you hold my lot.
- <sup>6</sup> The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;  
indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.
- <sup>7</sup> I bless the LORD who gives me counsel;  
in the night also my heart instructs me.
- <sup>8</sup> I have set the LORD always before me;  
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.

---

<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Jesus says that Mary chose the good portion. David says that “the LORD is my chosen portion.” Notice how he also says, “I have set the LORD always before me.” David says that the God of Israel, Yahweh, is his portion, he is the one who is always before him, and because of that, he will not be shaken.

I don’t think it’s an accident that in this passage of Luke, Jesus is referred to as “Lord” three times, twice by Luke and once by Martha. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament Hebrew, the covenant name of God, which we pronounce as Yahweh, appears as “Lord” (Greek: κύριος, *kyrios*). Jesus is Lord, the Son of God who has always existed, yet who, over two thousand years ago, also became a man. And just as David chose Yahweh as his portion, Mary chose Jesus as her portion.

Let’s now turn to Psalm 73, a Psalm of Asaph. I’ll read verses 26–28:

<sup>26</sup> My flesh and my heart may fail,  
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

<sup>27</sup> For behold, those who are far from you shall perish;  
you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you.

<sup>28</sup> But for me it is good to be near God;  
I have made the Lord GOD my refuge,  
that I may tell of all your works.

Again, God is called “my portion forever.” The idea is very similar to what we’ve seen so far. Jesus says that Mary’s good portion would never be taken away from her. Asaph says here that though his body would decay and die, God is “the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” Those who are apart from God will perish. The implication is that those who find their refuge in God will live forever.

Finally, we’ll look quickly at one verse in Psalm 119. This is verse 57:

<sup>57</sup> The LORD is my portion;  
I promise to keep your words.

Psalm 119 is the longest Psalm, and it’s the longest chapter in the Bible. It’s a Psalm that praises God for revealing his word. And there’s a strong connection between praising God and praising his word. In a sense, God’s word is an extension of himself. Because God is true and never lies, his word is true. He always says what he means. Our words are an expression of ourselves, but we don’t always say what we mean. I don’t mean that we always lie, though we can be dishonest. Sometimes we struggle to find the right words. Sometimes we say things that aren’t

very meaningful. We say things just to avoid silence, we say things that are foolish, we say things that are wrong. We say things just to please other people. God doesn't do any of these things. There's a strong bond between him and his word. That's why the psalmist can say, "The LORD is my portion," and then, without changing topics, say, "I promise to keep your words." If God is really your portion, you will pay attention to his words and you will do what he asks you to do.

That's what Mary is doing. Because she recognizes that Jesus is Lord, she has chosen him as her portion. Because she has chosen Jesus as her portion, she's sitting at his feet, listening to his teaching. And she's surely doing that not because his words are entertaining, or because they satisfy her intellectual curiosity. She must understand that his words give life, and she is likely learning from Jesus so that she can live rightly.

As we start to think about what this short passage in Luke has to do with us, how it informs our lives, we need to think about what that "one thing" is in our lives that is most important, that is truly necessary. In fact, if you're talking to non-Christians with the hopes of sharing the good news, the gospel, of Jesus Christ with them, you might want to ask them what they think that "one thing" is. What is most important in life? People might say that one thing is family, or being a good person, or doing something that truly matters, like leaving a positive impact on future generations. But Jesus is saying that one thing is God; specifically, he is saying that one thing is him.

Now, that might sound arrogant. If you or I said, "I am the most important thing in life, so choose me!" we wouldn't be just arrogant, but crazy. But Jesus isn't just a man; he is God. God the Father sent him to do his will. And if we want to know God, we must know Jesus.

In John's Gospel, Jesus often talks about his relationship to God the Father, how his words are the Father's words and his work is the Father's work. In John 6, he talks quite a bit about his own identity and work. In verse 27, he says, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal." We might paraphrase that, in light of today's passage, as "Don't focus on all those 'many things' like Martha is doing, because they won't last. Focus on 'the one thing that is necessary.' Make that your food, your portion. I'm the one who can give that to you." In the next verse, John 6:28, Jesus' audience says, "What must we do, to be doing the

works of God?” And Jesus replies, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (John 6:29).

Jesus says the key to having food that is eternal is to believe in him. That doesn't mean believing he exists, or believing facts about him. We believe a lot of things to be true, but that doesn't mean those things give us eternal life. He means that we need to trust that he is the Son of God, and we must trust him personally. We must believe that he and he alone is the one thing necessary to give us eternal life, to make us right with God, to fix our major problem in life, which is our separation from God caused by our sin, which is rebellion against God.

If we keep reading in John 6, we see that Jesus makes this more and more clear. In verses 35–40, he says,

<sup>35</sup> Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. <sup>36</sup> But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. <sup>37</sup> All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. <sup>38</sup> For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. <sup>39</sup> And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. <sup>40</sup> For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”

What he says here matches up with what he says in Luke. Mary's good portion will never be taken away from her. Those who make Jesus their “bread of life” will never be cast out, they will never be removed from God. They will be raised to eternal life on “the last day,” the day of judgment. And Jesus makes it clear later in John 6 that if people do not trust him, they will not have that eternal life with God (John 6:53). He says that those who do not believe that he is God (“I am he”) will die in their sins (John 8:24).

So far, we've seen that Jesus is the “good portion,” the “one thing” that “is necessary.” Those who make him their good portion will never lose their relationship with him. They will be with God forever. Though they die, they will live forever, raised to eternal life on judgment day. We also see that, somehow, this is connected to Mary choosing to sit at Jesus' feet.

Now, if we're thinking about this carefully, we should ask a pretty obvious question: How do we sit at Jesus' feet? Jesus was there in the flesh, and Mary could literally sit down in front of him and hear his words. How do we do this when Jesus is now in heaven?

The way that we have access to Jesus' teaching is through the Bible, the written word of God. If Jesus is truly our portion, if we realize that he is the God-man, the bread of life, the only one who gives us eternal life, then we will want to hear from him. In John 6, after all that talk of bread that gives eternal life, one of Jesus' followers, Peter, said to him, "You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God (John 6:68–69). The way that we access Jesus' "words of eternal life" is through the pages of the Bible.

And Jesus' words are not limited to the "red letter" words of the Gospels. Jesus makes it clear that his words are the Father's words (John 12:50). Jesus also says that the Holy Spirit would speak to the apostles, and that these words were also from him and the Father (John 16:13–15). The entire Bible is "breathed out by God" (2 Tim. 3:16), authored by him through human authors (2 Pet. 1:21). Peter says that Jesus' own commandments came through the apostles (2 Pet. 3:2). And there are times when the New Testament writers attribute Old Testament passages to Jesus (Heb. 10:5–7, which attributes Ps. 40:6–8, written by David, to Christ). So, to know Jesus' words is to know the Bible.

And we need to come to the Bible again and again, to learn, to revisit what we've already read, to think on it again and again. Psalm 1 talks about someone who is blessed, who doesn't do what the wicked do. It says that this person's "delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night" (Ps. 1:2). Then, it says,

- <sup>3</sup> He is like a tree  
planted by streams of water  
that yields its fruit in its season,  
and its leaf does not wither.  
In all that he does, he prospers.
- <sup>4</sup> The wicked are not so,  
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

Those who delight in God's word and think on it are like well-nourished trees that do not wither. Those who reject God's word whither away.

The Bible uses organic metaphors when it talks about growing in faith, or being connected to Jesus. Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches (John 15). The Bible doesn't often use transactional language, like, "Take the treasure that is Jesus and store it up your vault." A relationship with Jesus is living, and it needs to be nourished constantly, the way that a tree needs water, nutrients, and light. If those things are removed from the tree, it will die. We need

God's word to be nourished. We also need things like prayer and fellowship with other Christians. I think those are also aspects of sitting at Jesus' feet. Without those things, we wither, we get spiritually sick and weak. Without those things, we are ineffective.

Now, at this point, I'm anticipating an objection. This objection might not come from within this room, but there are certain people who say that we put too much emphasis on the Bible. We do too much Bible reading, Bible study, Bible discussions. There is a kernel of truth in this criticism. The kernel of truth is that we might listen to Jesus' words but not do what he says. And that can happen. And that is wrong. Jesus says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). He says that we must not only hear what he says, but do what he says. So, it is possible to study the Bible and not live according to what we read. And that is wrong.

But the answer is not to ditch the Bible and just get busy serving. In that case, we would become like Martha. If we don't come back to the Bible again and again, we'll end up doing what we believe to be God's work for us, but we'll drift away from what God has actually said. We'll do certain things that appeal to us, but not the things that are hard, that are contrary to our desires and inclinations. And perhaps the greatest danger is that we'll believe we can achieve a right standing with God by doing certain things.

Last week, we looked at the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), when a Jewish religious scholar who tried to test Jesus asked the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus asked this man what the law (the Old Testament commands) said. The answer, more or less, was to love God and love other people perfectly. Jesus showed the man what this looked like, telling him that if he did this, he could have eternal life. But the point is that we can't do that. We don't love God and others perfectly.

And if we try to achieve a right standing through our own efforts, however much good work we do, we're not sitting at Jesus' feet. We're not doing the work of God, which Jesus says is to trust him. It's very possible to a religious person, a doer of good works, and avoid a relationship with Jesus. You can avoid a personal relationship with Jesus by rejecting his words, by rejecting the Bible, and avoiding church. You can also avoid a personal relationship with Jesus by being a very busy person in church, doing a lot of good works, but shutting him up by keeping your Bible closed. If Martha realized exactly who it was that was in her house, she

would have served Jesus, yes, but she also would have stopped and listened to him, fallen at his feet and realized that he is the Lord whose words give eternal life.

So, the answer to the criticism that we are a bunch of Bible-worshipping hypocrites is not to make less of the Bible, but to make sure that we are doing what it says we should do. We should adopt Jesus' views of Scripture. He called it God's unbreakable word (John 10:35). He quoted favorably Deuteronomy 8:3, which says, "man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD" (see Matt. 4:4; Luke 4:4). Our food is God's word. But Jesus also said that his food was to do the will of God (John 4:34). We must be hearers of God's word *and* doers of it (James 1:23–25).

In fact, I think that we need to be soaked in Scripture, to read it often and meditate on it often, in order to do what it says. God asks his people to do hard things. And we won't do them unless we believe that the story told in the Bible is true. If we don't believe that God is the creator of the universe, that we are all sinners who deserve condemnation, that Jesus is the world's only Savior, and that the only solution to our problem of sin, we won't understand who he is, let alone trust him. I'm also convinced that if we don't believe that this life, in this fallen world, corrupted by sin, is temporal, and that life either with God or apart from God is eternal, we won't have the perspective on life that is necessary to do what God says we must do.

Think about some of the things that God asks us to do. He asks his people to give generously. We're supposed to give to those in need and give to the church, to support those who preach and teach, to support other Christians. Giving generously is hard for a lot of people. If you believe that this life is all there is, then you will want to live comfortably. You will want to seek as many pleasures as you can. If you give generously, you're going to make sacrifices. You're going to sacrifice some vacations, some gadgets, some clothing, some meals in restaurants, or tickets to sporting events or concerts or whatever. You can't do all these things and give generously. But if you understand that everything you have is from God, that he entrusted these things to you to use wisely, that this life is not all there is, and that if you know Jesus you will live an eternal life in a new creation that is full of pleasures beyond what we can imagine, you can make some sacrifices in this life.

Christians are called to be ambassadors of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20), witnesses of Jesus who tell others about him. We're supposed to share the gospel. We do this because we want God to be known, to be glorified and worshiped. We do this because we believe that those apart from

Jesus are truly lost, destined for condemnation. If we love others truly, we will be concerned about their souls. But evangelism is hard. One evangelist called our willingness to open our mouths for Christ crossing “the painline.”<sup>2</sup> Evangelism is hard because it’s hard to change the course of a conversation toward Jesus. It’s hard because when we do that, we might be regarded as fools. It’s hard because we may lose friends, or we might be shunned by others, not we might not receive a promotion at work, or perhaps we may experience some other consequence, including persecution. But if we believe what the Bible says, if we meditate on the biblical narrative again and again, we will cross that “painline” and speak.

Christians are called to believe that certain things are right and other things are wrong. We are called to take unpopular stances, particularly with respect to ethical issues that are controversial. If we hold fast to what God has revealed in his word about sex and marriage, about the exclusivity of Jesus (that he’s the only way to be right with God), or any number of topics, we’ll experience some level of persecution. The world will think that we’re stupid, or bigots, or whatever. There’s a great temptation for Christians to compromise their beliefs in order to fit into the prevailing culture. There’s a temptation for Christians to keep their unpopular views to themselves. The only way to fight against this temptation is to keep coming back to God’s word, to trust that it is true, and to know that the world can often be wrong.

Christians are called to deny some desires, urges that feel natural to us. Sometimes, like in the area of sex, those urges can be quite physical. If you don’t sit at Jesus’ feet, reading the Bible and praying to him, and being part of a group of believers in a church, I don’t think you can fight against your sinful desires. And we all have them. Because of sin, we have distorted desires. We are born into a sinful world, and as a result, our thinking isn’t right, and neither are our hearts. As Paul says it, because of the power of sin, people “became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened” (Rom. 1:21). We have pride, anger, lust, greed, and all kinds of desires that have to be mastered and even put to death. How can we do this if we don’t fill our minds and our hearts with God’s word? If it is true that you are what you eat, you will never rise above the level of what you’re putting into your mind. And I don’t think you can change the desires of your heart if you don’t change your thoughts and your behaviors. They’re all connected. If we understand that this life is not all that there is, that our desires can be wrong,

---

<sup>2</sup> Rico Tice, *Honest Evangelism: How to Talk about Jesus When It’s Tough* (Croydon, UK: The Good Book Company, 2015), 15.

and that in eternity, our desires will be perfected and no joy will be withheld from us, then we can put some desires to death. We can deny ourselves.

Christians are also called to suffer. We're called to endure difficult situations and circumstances. That might be a health problem, a job that isn't fulfilling, a marriage that is a struggle, raising kids when it's really hard. In some of these circumstances, it might be tempting to blame God and quit following Jesus. It might be tempting to get out of our commitments, to leave a marriage, or to abandon a family, to be irresponsible in the name of finding our true selves and making ourselves happy. We might be tempted to escape life through suicide. But that's not the way of Jesus.

It's not the way of Jesus because he is faithful. He knows what it's like to endure, to even put some desires to death. Jesus never had bad or sinful desires. But, in his humanity, he didn't want to experience God's wrath. He didn't want to die on the cross. At the least, he didn't want to experience that physical and spiritual pain. I'm sure it wasn't pleasant to be rejected, mocked, ridiculed, abandoned, betrayed, tortured, and killed. But he went through all of this to do the Father's will. He did this because it was his will, to bring glory to the Father, and glory to himself, and also to rescue his people from condemnation. To do all this, Jesus had to stay rooted in Scripture. He prayed often. He knew the biblical narrative because he is its author. He knew the story didn't end in suffering and death, but in resurrection and glory. So, he endured the cross, despising its shame, because a greater joy was set before him (Heb. 12:2).

So, we need to sit at Jesus' feet, to have our relationship with him nourished. We need to feed on his words, so that we can be strong in our faith and strong in our obedience. We need to pray to God through the Son by the power of the Spirit to keep a strong connection to our good portion, and to do what that portion tells us to do.

So, what is the one thing? We might answer the way Jesus did: "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matt. 6:33). Everything else will perish, but the kingdom of God will endure, and it cannot be shaken. I urge us all to sit at Jesus' feet, to trust him, to hear from him, to talk to him,