

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

Yves I-Bing Cheng, M.D., M.A.

Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

www.meetingwithchrist.com

ONE THING IS NEEDFUL

Luke 10:38-42

It is more important to hear and obey the words of Jesus than to be busy with other matters, even though they may be commendable of themselves. This is in essence what the Lord Jesus is saying in Luke 10:38-42. Let's read this passage.

Luke 10:38. Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house.

39 And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word.

40 But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me."

41 And Jesus answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things.

42 "But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her."

This is the Martha and Mary whom we know about from other passages in John 11 and 12. They are the sisters of Lazarus, the man Jesus raised from the dead.

We have here the Lord Jesus telling Martha, *You are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed.* 'Mary has that good thing. She chose the good portion. And it will not be taken away from her.'

There is clearly something of great importance in these words. The key question is, What is this 'one thing' that is so necessary? *One thing is needful.*

Two contrasting attitudes

In this account, Martha welcomes Jesus into her home. Most likely, Jesus did not come alone. He had twelve disciples with Him who all needed to be taken care of. Martha is doing her best to prepare a meal for Jesus and the others. We are told that there is something wrong with her hospitality by Jesus' use of the word 'troubled'. *Martha, Martha, you are ... troubled about many things.* 'Troubled (*turbazo*)' means to be 'pulled away by something' and implies that Martha's attention was drawn away by the burden of her duties.

Mary, however, is relaxing at Jesus' feet, not doing anything – at least according to Martha. So Martha turns to Jesus and asks Him to tell Mary to get to work. 'My sister is not doing her part. She is sitting there on the floor while I am slaving away. You should tell her to help me.' If we are

honest, most of us would agree with Martha. 'Martha is being practical. She is doing the right thing at that moment. Somebody has to make the meal and that's what she is doing. Certainly, she should be helped in the task.' To our surprise, Jesus says that it is Mary who has done the right thing. She has chosen the 'one thing' that counts.

In the history of the interpretation of this passage, Martha and Mary have been variously taken to represent the active and the contemplative life, the present world and the world to come, Judaism and Christianity, justification by works and justification by faith. I will attempt to expound this passage by putting in contrast Martha's worrying about so many things to Mary's having the 'one thing' that is needful. As you can see, it is a contrast between being distracted and being one, between lacking in concentration and being focused.

You will notice that in the Scriptures the notion of 'being one' is a recurrent theme. It is used in reference to a concentrated person, a person who is single-minded. In contrast, we also find the opposite, people who are occupied with so many things that they are scattered, unable to focus.

Lacking the one thing

Let's look at Jesus' teaching to see how we can define this 'one thing.' A few chapters later in Luke, Luke 18:22, we find this term 'one thing' appearing again. This is the account of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus to ask a question in v. 18, *What shall I do to inherit eternal life?* Jesus said to him, 'You know the commandments.' The young man answered, 'Yes, I know them. I have kept them as best I know how.' Then notice Jesus' reply in v. 22.

*Luke 18:22. You still lack **one thing**. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.*

'One thing you still lack.' This person seems to have everything. He has money. He has religion. He is a nice guy who keeps the commandments. He has everything, except the 'one thing' that matters. How tragic it is to have all kinds of things but not the only thing that counts. The person who has the one thing that is necessary is truly rich, spiritually rich – even though he does not have anything else.

'You still lack one thing, the one thing that is needful.' What is it? *Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.* The 'one thing' here is to follow Christ. The call to discipleship is the call to the 'one thing.'

The young man's saying that he had kept all the commandments led Jesus to focus on his relationship to his material possessions and on his relationship to God. Jesus perceived that his wealth was an area of weakness and so told him that it was his money that was standing in the way of his reaching eternal life. He then asked him to sell everything he owned, give away his money to the poor, and then follow Him.

The task of selling everything would not, of itself, give eternal life. In this particular case, Jesus asked the man to give away his wealth because he was more concerned with his possessions than he was with following Jesus. Wealth, not God, occupies a central place in his life. What this person lacks therefore is an undivided loyalty to God.

Having money is not intrinsically bad. And Jesus does not ask all believers to give everything away. He does ask each person however to get rid of anything that has become or that can potentially become more important than God. He wants us to remain focused by removing from our life anything that could shift our attention away from Him. So in this passage, the 'one thing' that is lacking is the readiness to renounce, for the sake of the kingdom of God, whatever it should prove necessary to renounce.

Fit for the kingdom

The same idea is expressed by Jesus in Luke 9:62. Jesus says to this man, this would be a disciple, *No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is **fit for the kingdom** of God.* If you have the 'one thing,' you are fit for the kingdom of God.

What does it mean to be fit for the kingdom? To be fit means very basically that you have the kind of quality which is desired or needed in a particular context. When you say for example that you are fit physically, you mean that you have that quality which is described as health. If you are not fit, it means that you are not as healthy as you ought to be. To be fit for a task means that you have what it takes to do that task. To be not fit for a task means that you don't have those skills or those qualities. You are not equipped to do that job.

The Lord Jesus uses this word 'fit' elsewhere in His teaching to say that salt which has lost its taste is not fit for anything but to be thrown out and trampled by men (Matthew 5:13). Salt that has lost its taste is no longer fit. Because it has lost its quality of saltiness, it cannot function as salt anymore.

Luke 9:62 is a metaphor that refers to plowing with the eyes ahead so that one plows a straight furrow. It is a picture of total dedication to a task. A person who tries to follow Jesus but looks back to his old life is not fit for the kingdom. He does not have what it takes to serve in the kingdom of God. The disciple is to go forward and travel a straight path. He must go ahead with a singular dedication to the task and not allow anything to distract him from service for the kingdom.

To be fit for the kingdom therefore means to be totally committed. It means to have that 'one thing.' What is the 'one thing'? It is to be concentrated toward the kingdom of God, to be focused on Christ no matter what. This is the kind of person who is so focused on the things of God that you cannot cause him to swirl to the right nor to the left. He is determined to live for the glory of God and nothing will get him off course. You can spit on his face, you can punch him on the chin, you can try what you like to distract him away from the kingdom, he will not allow that to happen because he is fully committed to love God and to serve Him.

That is what Jesus means by being single-minded, as opposed to being double-minded. He says in Matthew 6:22, *The lamp of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be **single**, thy whole body shall be full of light.* The word 'single' here means 'steady, devoted to one object.' The 'one thing.' Jesus represents our affections as if they were an eye. If the eye is single, i.e., if it is not looking two ways, then the man receives through it clear views of the outside world and his inner man is full of light. Jesus said these words in the context of His warning against laying up treasures on earth. If the heart of a man is single in its love toward God, if he is focused on the things of God, then he has clear views as to the relative value of earthy things and heavenly things. But if he looks with double interest upon both earthly and heavenly treasure, it makes him double-minded and God does not permit that kind of double service.

The multiple concerns of life or even the activity associated with ministry can sometimes make us forget the essential matters of Jesus' teaching : love, mercy, faithfulness, justice. This account on Mary and Martha's experience with Jesus gives a timeless lesson on the importance of staying focused on Jesus. Are we so busy doing this and that for Him that we have neglected to be with Him, that we are not connected with Him anymore? Jesus wants diligent service, but even more He desires that we pay attention to Him. He wants us to set aside worries and urgent responsibilities, and come to Him in singleness of mind so that He can touch us with His word.

One thing I do

The apostle Paul is a man who can talk from experience about singleness of purpose. This ‘one thing’ appears again in Philippians 3:13-14.

*Philippians 3:13. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this **one thing** I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*

Notice the concentration and focus. ‘This one thing I do.’ The consuming passion of Paul’s life is summed up in this ‘one thing.’ He describes his Christian life as involving the continual forgetting of ‘what is behind,’ and the relentless centering of his energies and interests on the course that is ahead of him. ‘I have had a lot of things. I am a Hebrew of the Hebrews. I had a wonderful education. I sat at the feet of Gamaliel, the greatest teacher of my generation. I did everything right as far as the law is concerned. I have kept the law from my youth, like the rich young ruler.’ But unlike the rich young ruler, he forgot about all those things. He forgot his past with all its credentials and accomplishments (and shortcomings). And now, like a runner in a race, with his whole body reaching for the finish line, he is pressing on toward the goal.

Paul tells us in this passage that one goal absorbed all his energy. It was to gain full knowledge of Jesus Christ. He is an example of someone who has the ‘one thing.’ Learning from Paul, we should not let anything take our eyes off our goal – knowing Christ. With the single-mindedness of an athlete straining toward the finish line, we must lay aside anything that may be in the way of our fellowship with Jesus.

The oneness of God

There is a verse in the OT that is quite relevant to our lesson. The Jews were told never to forget that verse, but to meditate upon it and to recite it everyday as though the Lord wanted to drive this point of oneness into their minds. Deuteronomy 6.4 reads like this.

*Deuteronomy 6.4. Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, **the Lord is one!***

‘The Lord is one.’ God is one. He is not two. He is not five. He is one. The emphasis here on the oneness of God is rather surprising. Have the Jews ever thought of God as more than one person? No. You see, the doctrine of the Trinity is not explicitly taught in the OT. To tell them that ‘the Lord is one,’ what is it supposed to mean?

Well, the concept of oneness in this passage indicates the uniqueness of God. He is THE one. He is unique in Himself. ‘O hear Israel. Remember this. That your God is THE one.’ He is unique above all the gods of this world, above all the things that would claim your devotion and attention. The God of Israel is THE only and true God.

It is worth mentioning that the verb form of ‘one’ in Hebrew is ‘to unite.’ In that sense, the word ‘one’ can mean ‘united’. ‘The Lord your God is united.’ The meaning of this will become more obvious to us if we turn to Psalm 86:11.

*Psalm 86:11. Teach me Your way, O Lord; I will walk in Your truth; **unite** my heart to fear Your name.*

‘Unite my heart.’ The idea is that of constituting one. Make my heart one. So here, it is the heart which is to become one. Make my heart so that it becomes concentrated, focused upon You. Unite my heart to honor Your name. Give me a heart that has a single vision of Your glory. The

implication of course is that one can have a divided and distracted heart. And the request here is that the heart of the psalmist might be single in its purposes, that nothing may be allowed to interfere with the one supreme goal.

We just read Deuteronomy 6:4. Look at the next verse. *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength* (Deuteronomy 6:5). The various parts of the human being, the heart, the soul, the strength, are completely concentrated, united into one objective of loving God with the whole being. This kind of person has the ‘one thing.’ He is a focused person, a person whose eye is single.

Devoted to one object

Jesus’ visit with Martha and Mary is a lesson on the priority of responding to the Lord over the numerous concerns of life. Martha was concerned over many things, Mary with only one. Hence, Martha’s behavior is negatively assessed, Mary’s positively. What is this ‘one thing,’ this ‘better part’ Mary has chosen? Mary was fixed, concentrated on the guest, Jesus, and His word. One of the facts of life is that its multiple demands capture us and this can fragment our attention. Jesus asks us not to be distracted. Singleness of vision on the things of God is the quality that He highlights in this passage. This is the one necessary thing.

There is a certain shock value in the way that Jesus, quite in the face of common sense, completely bypasses the practical question about preparing a meal. After all, somebody had to do it or no one would have eaten. But Jesus’ point is that such concern (or any other concerns) should never be allowed to compete with the necessity of being in constant contact with Him and the hearing of His word.