

# Truth for Today

*The Bible Explained*

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## Luke's Gospel: Martha and Mary and Prayer (Luke 10:38-11:13)

Welcome to *Truth for Today*, where we are continuing with our series on the Gospel of Luke. Today we shall be considering Luke 10:38-11:13. Last week my colleague, Ernie Brown, took us through the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:21-37), whereas today I shall be considering an incident in the life of Martha and Mary for the first part of our time together. Following this, we shall be studying the Lord's teaching on prayer, as we read together the portion from Luke's Gospel that includes the so-called "Lord's Prayer".

To set the scene, I shall read Luke 10:38-39: *"Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching."*

Those words are from the English Standard Version of the Bible, which is where all quotations will come from during this broadcast. Though the passage does not tell us where Martha lived, we learn from elsewhere in the Gospels. (Matthew 21:17, Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3; John 11:1 and John 12:1-8) that Jesus often lodged in Bethany, sometimes in Martha's home in that village which was about two miles from Jerusalem. The last mention of Bethany, in Luke's Gospel, is the precious reference in Luke 24:50 where we are told that the Lord led His disciples as far as to Bethany, then ascended to heaven. So we have this village as the last spot of earthly soil to be touched by the feet of the Lord.

From Luke 10:38-39, which we read a few minutes ago, I trust you noticed that Martha welcomed the Lord into her home, a gesture that allows us to focus for a moment upon the act of hospitality. The writer of Hebrews instructs his readers to practice hospitality (Hebrews 13:2). I have chosen to cite this verse because it includes a reference to the practice of hospitality in the Old Testament. The passage immediately before ours in Luke 10, which is the incident we call the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:21-37), also includes the practice of hospitality. Here a man was robbed and left for dead. Indeed he would have died except for the ministrations of the man who stopped to help. It may be that our world today does not lend itself to show hospitality to travellers as did the New Testament world. It does not prevent us, however, from showing friendliness to our neighbours or lending a helping hand whenever necessary.

Of the two sisters, Martha is mentioned first, not only here but also in John's Gospel, so I think it can be confidently suggested that Martha was the one of the household who tended to take the lead. She is certainly the one who invited the Lord into her house, an act may I suggest that it is good for us all to copy. There used to be a motto on the wall of many Christian homes that stated that the Lord was the head of the house. Looking back, I think that this motto fell short for it stated that "He was the silent listener to every conversation." I know what is meant by the "silent listener", but do we want the Lord's voice to be silent in our homes or His influence ignored? He was certainly heard in Martha's house for as we read a moment or two ago, Mary was sitting at the feet of Jesus listening to His teaching. What a picture of tranquil serenity, resulting from Martha's kind welcome, as the home was filled with the words of life flowing from the Saviour's lips! I am reminded of a "Sankey's" hymn:

*"Sing them over again to me,  
Wonderful words of life!  
Let me more of their beauty see,  
Wonderful words of life!"*

*Sweetly echo the Gospel call!  
Offer pardon and peace to all!  
Wonderful words, wonderful words,  
Wonderful words of life!"*

Philip Paul Bliss (1838-1876)

If I have not quoted correctly I feel I have the main message of the author. We need to listen to the voice of God speaking to us through His word, especially as we sit as learners at His feet. It has been noted by another that the feet of the Lord are twice more linked with Mary in the Gospels. Here we have described how she sat and learned. In John 11:32, she fell at His feet to be comforted while in John 12:3 she worshipped at His feet. We have not the time to explore these references further, but each one is significant.

In Luke 10:40, Luke shatters the peaceful scene of domestic harmony, described in Luke 10:38-39, as we can read: *"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.'"*

Before criticising Martha by suggesting that she had misrepresented the Lord when she used the words, *"Do you not care?"*, let us remember that she was not preparing a snack for the Lord alone. Rather the invitation would have included a substantial meal for Him and His twelve disciples. She retained this human tendency to gripe when she saw her sister doing nothing to help. We are all marked with the same features of wanting the Lord to act in the ways we suggest. We need, therefore, to learn to wait upon Him with patience and faith. There is another feature of Martha's attitude that I wish to comment on. If we are exercised to start a work for the Lord, we should not always expect others to do our bidding and join in. Perhaps we ought to look again at Luke 9, where the Lord tells a series of parables, or sayings, instructing us to count the cost before we engage in any service for the Lord. John 11:5 explicitly states that Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. It is a pity that on this occasion Martha had not a sense of the Saviour's heart-felt love for her. We also should remember that we love Him because He first loved us. Do we have a sense of the Saviour's love for us? (1 John 4:19)

Let us look for a minute at Mary's action that was the cause of Martha's complaint. She was sitting at His feet listening to His words which the Lord calls *"The good portion that will not be taken away from her"* (Luke 10:42). I think we can rule out the suggestion, by some commentators, that the *"good portion"* refers to food. Rather does it mean the action of sitting listening devotedly to His teaching. How prone we are to be so busy in our service that we have no time to sit quietly in communion with our Lord. I would further suggest that at that time women were usually expected to cook and prepare meals for the household; how good that Mary was commended by the Lord Jesus when she took the place of a disciple listening to the Lord, a place not usually allocated to a woman.

There are some words running through my mind from a hymn by JG Deck (1802-1884) which I think are particularly apt at this point:

*"With joy our wondering hearts retrace  
Thy ways on earth of power and grace;  
We sit as learners at Thy feet,  
Thy words than honey far more sweet."*

Do we fully appreciate the privilege of sitting quietly in the Lord's presence, reading His Word and listening to Him speaking to us? It does not mean that we have to stop serving the Lord, but it does mean that we must not be so busy that we have no time to meditate and spend time worshipping Him in company with other believers in our churches and assemblies.

We must now move onto the Lord's teaching about prayer, but before we do so can I remind you that you are listening to a Bible Study by *Truth for Today* covering Luke 10:38-11:13. When I was young, there would have been hardly any need to read Luke 11:1-4, as most people were familiar with the passage, which we call "The Lord's Prayer". Not so today, at least according to the weddings and funerals I have attended recently, as most of the congregation stay silent when the Lord's Prayer is announced. Consequently, I shall read Luke 11:1-4 using the English Standard Version of the Bible: *"Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' And he said to them, 'When you pray, say: "Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation.'"*

For those of us that learned to repeat this prayer at school, or some other place, it is a shorter version than the familiar one recorded in Matthew 6:5-15. I would suggest here that the prayer is slightly different in form because it was never the Lord's intention that time after time we should repeat exactly the same words (see Matthew 6:7). In my judgment it is the model prayer. If we look at the invocation, or Person to whom it is addressed, we see it is the Father, meaning that this is a prayer for those who believe in the Lord Jesus. Often in the Gospels the Lord begins His prayers with "Father", expressing His own relationship to God. We do not share that relationship for the Lord Jesus was uniquely the Son of God. There are other references in the New Testament, however, that instruct us that God is our Father and we should address Him as such. Therefore as the Schofield Bible states: "...all Christian prayer is grounded upon this relationship".

The five petitions that follow the invocation are of two groups, namely two relating to God and three to the disciples, which must include every believer in the Lord Jesus. The first one of these: *"Hallowed be your name"* (Luke 11:2), expresses a desire for worship, which should be fundamental to all prayer for, by saying this in sincerity, the believer is exalting the holiness of God. From Ezekiel 36:22-23 we learn that God told the house of Israel that because they failed to honour His name, He was about to vindicate His holiness, in order that the nations would know that He was LORD. Likewise, if we as believers do not praise the name of the Lord Jesus, the very stones would cry out. One of the habits prevalent in modern society, which upsets me is the frequent repetition of the Lord's name in careless conversation, or using the expression "O my God" when a person is surprised or amazed. When John Newton penned the line,

*"How sweet the name of Jesus sounds  
In a believer's ear"*

he was expressing a sentiment that is true for all time in the realm of faith.

The second petition is a plea for the kingdom rule of God to appear. That this has not yet happened, in the sense of the universality of a kingdom, ruled over by God, which incorporates every country on earth, is apparent to all. Despite the efforts of men of goodwill, there is an abundance of fear and a scarcity of peace in many states. Hunger, thirst and violence abounds. God's law and rule, however, ought to extend to and be seen in the lives of Christians every day. According to Romans 14:17-18: *"For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men."*

In my judgment, the kingdom at this present time has been set up in the hearts of believers, but it will come in fullness when the King returns.

The third petition is a request for bread or food in its generality. We, in the western world, have lost the sense of famine and the scarcity of food owing to the failure of the harvest. As believers, we should always be grateful for the bounteous mercy of God. If food shortages arise through our methods of distribution and corruption of markets, along with a lifestyle that damages the environment and ecology, we cannot blame God. Two thousand years ago there was a Man in the world who fed 5,000 people with five loaves and two fishes (see Luke 9:10-17). He obviously had an answer for the food problem, yet we crucified Him because we did not want Him to rule over us,

When we read the fourth petition, regarding forgiveness, it could appear that we are forgiven because we in turn forgive others. This is not the ground of forgiveness in the New Testament which is, as the reformers claimed, based solely upon the death of the Lord at Calvary and our faith in Him. God's pardoning grace is based on Christ's merit graciously applied to us. If our actions and behaviour in this world are governed by His rule over us, as we discussed a few minutes ago, then we must conform to His example by forgiving those that sin or trespass against us. If our hearts and attitudes are hard and unforgiving, perhaps we have never really known God's rich forgiveness in Jesus.

The last petition of the prayer is that we might not be led into temptation. From other verses in Scripture we know that God does not entice us to do evil. *"Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God'. For God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one"* (James 1:13).

God does, however, allow His people to be tested, as James 1 indicates. Many years ago, when I worked in a machine shop of a motor car manufacturer, I had to occasionally prepare a steel bar for testing to destruction. The idea was to stress the test piece under tension until it snapped. God will never allow this to happen to us when He tests our faithfulness, as 1 Corinthians 10:13 makes clear: *"No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."*

I would judge that we are to remain vigilant at all times so that we may, through God's grace and power, triumph completely over sin, the world and the devil.

Luke 11:5-6 continue the Lord's teaching on prayer with a parable recorded only by Luke: *"And he said to them, 'Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything?'"*

This man, who was surprised by the appearance of an unexpected visitor, had a problem of how to feed the traveller so he goes to the house of a friend to borrow some loaves. The sleeping friend is reluctant to rise and disturb his family, but eventually answers the request and supplies the needed loaves. This parable seems to have two applications, one being persistence in prayer is sometimes necessary, a habit which is often illustrated when we read the biographies of servants of the Lord. Isaiah 40:31 is a passage I have preached on many times. Here we are urged

to “*wait upon the LORD that we might renew our strength*”, for in such waiting we learn dependence. Alternatively, this parable could be presenting not a comparison with God, but a contrast. If a man would reluctantly respond to a request if persistently pressed, surely God would respond far more graciously. In his book of New Testament Words, WE Vine records that the word “lend” in Luke 11:5 has the meaning of supplying what is needed without any security or assurance of return, which is how the Lord supplies our needs.

The lesson of the parable is outlined for us in Luke 11:9-10: “*And I tell you, ask and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.*”

Even if you are not familiar with the passage, I am sure that many of us learned these words by singing a children's chorus based upon them:

*Ask! Ask! Ask! and it shall be given unto you  
Seek! Seek! Seek! and ye shall find  
Knock! Knock! Knock! it shall be opened unto you.  
Your Heavenly Father is so kind.  
He knows what is best for His children.  
In body soul and mind.  
So Ask! Ask! Ask! Knock! Knock! Knock!  
Seek and you shall find.*

Anon

By saying “*And I tell you...*” the Lord stamps His own authority upon the effectiveness of prayer, whilst underscoring the necessity of perseverance. Asking for something involves a consciousness of need which must also include a measure of humility. Luke 18:9-14 records the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee. When the Pharisee prays, he asks for nothing for he is too busy telling God about his good works (Luke 18:11-2). The tax collector is not too proud to plead for the mercy of God (Luke 18:13).

The next instruction, from the Lord, in Luke 11:9-10 that we have just read is “*seek and you will find*”. This, I would judge, is more proactive than “asking”. For instance, if we have a desire to understand the Scriptures in a deeper, more discerning, way then we have to do something about it. The Holy Spirit will lead us into truth, yet if we do not actually read the Bible we can never be led into the truth that is contained in Scripture. The Lord noted that despite the men of His day searching the Scriptures, they had not realised that the Scriptures testified of Him. The Bereans, in Acts 17:11, searched the Scriptures daily to ascertain the truth of Paul's teaching. I emphasise again that prayer is involved in this searching and seeking.

The third prayerful action of “knocking” uses the imagery of a closed door. Just before I sat down to write the second part of today's talk, I visited a house a few miles from where I live. I knew the householder was at home for his car was on the drive. After knocking several times and waiting for a few minutes, we returned to our car and drove home. He never answered the door! Was he asleep? Or in the garden? Or perhaps he pretended not to be home. Whatever the reason no one opened the door to us. This is not the way God deals with us for His ear is ever open, “*Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep*” (Psalm 121:4). What we learn from these famous “ask, seek, and knock” lines is that Jesus teaches that everyone who asks will receive an answer from God, though sometimes that answer will be different from the one we were hoping for. This is a promise of great assurance and comfort.

The last three verses of our study passage, further gild our understanding of prayer: “*What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent, or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!*” (Luke 11:11-13).

We have no need to enquire about the meaning of these words for they are self-explanatory No father listening in to this broadcast would think of feeding his children a snake or a serpent in place of a fish supper! Neither would they serve up a scorpion or any form of lizard instead of an egg! Consequently, says the Lord Jesus, if we being part of a sinful people know how to give good gifts, we can be confident that God will only give us those things that are best.

Before we close, will you notice that the Lord described us in Luke 11:13 as “*evil*”. A famous commentator on Scripture, Leon Morris, once referred to this statement as “An illustrious testimony to the doctrine of original sin” (*The Gospel According to Matthew*). This leaves me to emphasise that everything I have said about prayer only applies to those who believe in Jesus. Have we, through God's grace, accepted the salvation that is in Jesus, who bled and died for Adam's helpless race?

I pray that we might be followers of Jesus, the Son of God, the Son of Man, who died and rose again to bring new life to all who believe.

Greetings to you all and many thanks for listening.

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