

Martha and Mary

By **Camille Fronk Olson**

Emeritus Professor of Ancient Scripture,
Brigham Young University

Regardless of the way we choose to serve, it is essential to accept and follow Christ with all our heart and mind.

At a time when many in Jerusalem expressed confusion over the Savior’s identity, Jesus taught, “If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine” (John 7:17). If we want to go beyond simply learning doctrine and learn who Jesus Christ is and become His disciple, we must put our faith into action. The story of Martha and Mary shows there is more than one way to serve the Savior in our own lives.

Shortly after this sermon, Jesus and some of His disciples went to Martha’s home in Bethany to teach the gospel. Martha took the primary responsibility for responding as a gracious host, perhaps providing food and shelter for her guests, while her sister, Mary, sat at Jesus’s feet and listened to Him speak. (See Luke 10:38–42.) The sisters’ different approaches to serving the Master teach us to respect and honor those who manifest discipleship in different ways. Jesus’s teachings in this story also show His perspective that women were free to

choose how to serve and how to show discipleship, just as men could choose.

Service through Giving

Immediately before Luke introduces Martha and Mary, he records the parable of the good Samaritan. In this story, the Savior taught us to show mercy to others, such as feeding, sheltering, and caring for anyone who stands in need (see Luke 10:30–37). Martha’s attempts in “much serving” (Luke 10:40) indicate her acceptance and interpretation of this principle as she put faith into action.

Illustrating His teaching that he who is greatest ministers to others (see Matthew 20:26–28; Luke 22:26–27), Jesus spent His life in service. Martha responded with her desire to serve Him. The account of Martha and Mary shows two women who exemplify true belief and discipleship through serving and learning. Just as Martha showed her love for Christ through service, we can

provide service to those around us that is centered in our love for our Savior and our willingness to learn and follow His gospel.

As we serve, we need to remember that there are other ways to serve and that we are not to judge those participating in them. When Martha became “cumbered about” (Luke 10:40), her reaction introduced contention and threatened the goodwill of the Savior’s visit.

Although hospitable and responsible, Martha was also harried and absorbed with her busyness. She complained to Jesus, “Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me” (Luke 10:40). Her protest implies her perception that she alone was serving. She was blind to differing modes of service rendered by others at the time, including Mary and the Savior Himself. Martha depicted the principle of giving but with an attitude that



We can take Martha's and Mary's examples into our lives and ask for the Spirit's guidance to serve in the best way.

wasn't conducive to the Spirit. In our lives today, we can also demonstrate our love for others by our actions *and* our attitude.

Service through Receiving

With a voice of caution, Jesus acknowledged Martha's efforts to serve and her resultant frustration: "Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things" (Luke 10:41). The Savior's words were meant not to devalue Martha's chosen way to show hospitality but to acknowledge the right that Mary had to serve through listening and learning. Mary's actions show us what is essential for all those who

desire to follow Him, independent of their chosen manner of service.

Mary allowed the Savior to serve her by receiving His word. Her example demonstrates that we can show love for the Savior through sitting at His feet to learn and grow in the Spirit.

One Thing Is Needful

The answer to Martha's conflict was recognizing that "one thing is needful" (Luke 10:42). The profound power of simplicity is implied, but *simple* can mean something different to each of us. The standard of "needful" is found in our motives. Regardless of the way we choose to serve, what is important is

accepting and following Christ with all our heart and mind.

It may be that serving in a "Martha manner" may be the best in some moments, while other situations will seem to suggest a "Mary response"—or even one that doesn't fit those two categories. We can take Martha's and Mary's examples into our lives and ask for the Spirit's guidance to serve in the best way.

Let us look at our attitudes while serving in our own chosen way, remembering that our conviction to follow Him is what matters most. May we always find ourselves at the feet of the Savior. ■