

Feasting With Jesus
Luke 10:38-42 & John 12:1-8

December 9, 2018

SI: Between Thanksgiving and Christmas we do a lot of eating together.

That's one of the significant activities of the holidays.

In the Gospels, Jesus does a lot of eating with people.

It was one of the significant aspects of his ministry.

In fact, Jesus himself makes the point that he did not come to fast but to feast.

He says about himself: The Son of Man came eating and drinking.

Once his disciples were criticized for not fasting and he said:

How can the friends of the bridegroom fast when they with him.

So the way Jesus eats with people, and the how and why of his eating with them is an important part of his message.

Over this Advent Season we're going to look at Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, on four occasions where food and drink were being served.

Today we're going to look at two times Jesus was in the home of his best friends, the sisters Martha and Mary and their brother Lazarus.

Both times he dealt with a very ugly sin that blocks love—a sin all of us are susceptible to.

INTRO: I read a tragic news story recently, a crime story.

It was about a little boy who was beaten to death by his mother's boyfriend. Everything about that story was horrible, but the detail that haunted me was that the boyfriend became enraged when he discovered the child had eaten some cake he was told not to eat.

All parents have food rules.

We tell our children what they have to eat, what they aren't allowed to eat, how much, when, in what order. Some parents have rules about how you have to eat at least one bite of everything being served, or have to clean plate.

It's easy to imagine parents saying:

This cake is off limits. It's for dessert. Do not eat this cake.

But what kind of person would respond this way?

I'm sure drugs or alcohol were involved, but it was the breaking of the rule and the perceived slight or disrespect that enraged this man to the point of murder.

Once again, the question, what kind of person would respond this way?

A person who loves rules more than other people, and who loves rules more than God. That's a description of all of us apart from God's grace.

The Father Brown detective stories were written by GK Chesterton.

The main character Father Brown is a Catholic priest and an amateur detective.

Father Brown once explained his method of detection this way, he said:

"You see, it was I who killed all those people."

In other words, he could understand the mentality of the criminal and get inside his head because he could see the same mentality in himself.

We've all been guilty of loving our rules more than other people, and using our rules to manipulate and even hurt people.

Let's see how Jesus exposes us and then how he heals us.

We'll look at these passages under three headings.

1. The way we treat people reveals the rules that control us
2. The rules that control us come from the things we worship
2. We need Jesus to put our rules in the proper place and enable us to love God and love our neighbor

MP#1 The way we treat people reveals the rules that control us

We don't know how Jesus first met Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

But this was a special relationship.

They were not only Jesus' disciples, they were his friends.

Jesus felt comfortable staying with them. He enjoyed coming to their home. Martha was apparently the eldest sibling and the hostess of the home.

You notice right away that Martha and Mary, though sisters and both followers of Christ, were two different women.

Martha was direct and matter of fact, Mary reflective and emotionally sensitive.

Christians are not the same—different personalities, different birth orders, some introverts, some extroverts, and that means different approaches to Christian life. And that's as it should be. Lord doesn't intend for us to be the same or do the same.

You can picture this incident so perfectly in your mind's eye, can't you.

Jesus and all his hungry disciples showed up.

Of course, that didn't rattle Martha at all.

That was the sort of challenge where she was at her best.

So she started pulling everything together for meals and sleeping arrangements.

But Mary sat at Jesus' feet and began listening to his teaching.

As Martha passed by she became more and more irritated.

I preached on this passage a few years ago and I mentioned a preacher I heard who envisioned some swinging saloon-type doors into Martha's kitchen.

Every time Martha passed by the living room and saw Mary just sitting in there, she would hit those swinging doors—bam!

Then, she just couldn't take it any longer and she let Jesus have it.,

“Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself.”

What was Martha's rule? I think her rule was:

When there's work to be done, we should all pitch in and help.

That's a very good rule. All hands on deck.

But the problem is that right then Martha loved the rule more than her sister.

She could have asked for help if she really needed it. She didn't.

She was obviously capable of handling all the work herself.

She got upset with Mary for breaking the rule, with Jesus for not enforcing the rule.

She used the rule to try to make people feel bad and coerce them into doing what she wanted. She appealed to principle but it was a mask for her judgmental spirit.

She accused Mary of wasting time and Jesus of not caring for her,

but she herself did not care enough to see the joy this was bringing her sister. There was an abrasiveness and an accusatory tone in Martha's words that are almost always indicative of loving rules more than people.

Notice how Jesus responds to Martha. He's looking at her, he's focused on her.

He shows an attentiveness to her as a person.

Maybe they've stepped through those swinging doors into the kitchen.

He says her name twice to show his regard and affection—Martha, Martha.

And he challenges her not to forget that the most important thing is knowing him.

That way our serving him and other people comes from a response to his grace.

That's what Martha forgot in her busyness.

What's so interesting in this next story in John 12 happened months later—

the sisters are in the same roles—Martha is serving, Mary is with Jesus.

But Martha has grown and she's loving and she's learned to serve as a response to

God's grace. If she needed help, she would ask folks to chip in, but she

has learned not to use that rule as a weapon to coerce and hurt people.

But who does that in this second story? Judas does. What was Judas' rule?

His rule was: Don't waste money. Is that a good rule? Yes!

This pint of nard Mary poured on Jesus cost 300 denarii, a year's wages.

Likely Mary's dowry.

It was an extravagant act of love that Jesus not only defended,

but in Mark he declared it to be the supreme example of worship and devotion

that Christians throughout the ages are to seek to emulate.

Judas said that it should have been sold and the money given to the poor.

He seemed to be standing on principal, but he was motivated by selfishness.

He wanted access to that money for himself.

Jesus also challenged Judas' love of rules more, just like Martha.

In different words he said the same thing.

The poor you always have with you, but me you will not always have.

The most important thing is knowing Jesus, so serve poor in response to grace.

If you do it as a rule or principle, serving yourself and blocking love.

But Judas didn't respond like Martha.

He eventually betrayed Jesus for money and died unsaved.

So let's peel back and look at where our love for rules comes from.

We could say selfishness, wanting our own way. True. Passage goes deeper.

MP#2 The rules that control us come from the things we worship

In both these stories, Mary is commended for worshipping Jesus.

That's a clue to what's behind both Martha's and Judas's love for rules. It's worship. More specifically it's the worship of an idol.

We've covered the subject of idolatry countless times over the years.

It's a subject of enormous importance that permeates the Bible.

The first commandment is, You shalt have no other gods before me.

The first sin is having other gods besides the one true and living God.

Idolatry is taking some created thing

and trusting it to give you what God alone can give.

Trusting it for security, for comfort, for affirmation, for affection, for control.

Trusting it to save you from whatever unhappiness or fears you face.

And just like the true God gives us commands to follow through which

we show him our affection and through which he blesses us—

so false gods and idols have commandments and rules.

Do this or don't do that and I'll bless you. Idols promise blessing.

Let's start with Judas.

What was his life organized around? What was most important to him?

Money. Money is the idol of a great many people.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus uses money as the premier example of idolatry.

He says you cannot serve both God and Mammon. That's the actual word in Greek.

Some Bibles translate it money. You cannot serve both God and money.

But its actually a more specific than that—it's money as a power, money as a god.

Money with a capital M.

The reason Mammon is such a compelling idol for so many people is that it promises almost everything—security, pleasure, approval, power.

The money idol has rules depending on what it is promising you.

If you are looking to money for security, one rule is: Don't waste money.

You're going to need me, says Money.

And if I'm spent on other things, like perfume for Jesus, not around to help you.

So keeping the rule becomes much more important than loving people.

Especially if they are members of your household or if their economic decisions will in any way negatively affect you.

Now the thing is, in Bible, Proverbs, lots about stewardship and not wasting money.

But the book of Proverbs starts saying: The fear of the Lord beginning of wisdom.

So all those rules and counsel about money is in that context.

You are called to steward your money and resources as a way to honor God.

And when that is the motive, then it doesn't keep you from loving people.

You don't use the rules to try to browbeat them or make them feel bad—like Judas did to Mary.

So what about Martha?

What was her life organized around? What was most important to her?

I think it was work, or more deeply, order and efficiency.

She liked everything to be just so and perfectly organized.

Work was a way to achieve that and everybody doing their parts.

You can see, can't you, how our personalities push us toward different idols.

What was Martha trusting work, order, and efficiency to give her?

Probably a sense of control, maybe the approval of other people.

Her idol had a rule:

When there's work to be done, everybody has to chip in.

As we've said, nothing wrong with that as far as it goes.

A person who loves God can say: I really, really need you to help me.

You can even say: It's wrong for you to sit on the couch while I do all the work.

Jesus himself said something like that to disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Could you not stay awake with me and watch for one hour?

But the problem was that in that moment, Martha was serving her idol.

The rule had to be followed, and that made her demanding and full of self-pity.

The very thing she was working for, to provide Jesus with a comfortable place

to stay so he could teach his disciples—she almost ruined that with her outburst!

Because it wasn't an offering of love, it was service to her efficiency idol.

Well, it was really both. She did love Jesus. She really did. And her sister.

Martha was a believer, so like us, she had mixed motives.

Read her conversation with Jesus in John 11.

She was a person of great theological and biblical depth.

And she had this idol that she probably struggled with most of her life.

But she learned to put it in the proper place because she had Jesus in her life, and she listened to him.

I hope that's an encouragement to you. It is to me.

Brings us to the third point . . .

MP#3 We need Jesus to put our rules in the proper place and enable us to love God and love our neighbor

Let's look more carefully at what Jesus says to Martha and to Judas.

Jesus says to Martha:

Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her. Now Jesus certainly said more to her than those two sentences. They had a conversation. This is a summary. We have to tease it out.

What I think Jesus was gently directing Martha to do was to identify and name this idol in her heart she was worshipping. This idol that had these rules she thought were so important and that she used to hurt her sister.

The way Jesus guided her was to draw attention to her problem emotions, to worry and distress. What he wanted her to do and probably helped her with, was to trace those problem emotions back to the source.

Why are you so upset your sister is sitting in the living room with me?

Because she's not helping! Why is that so bad? What are you afraid of, worry? Things will be disorderly and work might not get done.

Why is that so important to you?

Because if it doesn't happen my life feels like it's out of control.

And Jesus says, isn't that something you need to trust me to take care of?

Or maybe, Martha, why is that so important to you, that the work gets done?

She says, because I want everyone to approve of me and think well of me..

And Jesus says: Martha, I already approve of you.. Your value is in God.

Start with your problem emotions. When you've hurt someone with an angry outburst because your rules weren't kept, ask yourself, why am I upset?

This is what Jesus wants you to do and he helps you by his Holy Spirit.

He helps you because this is hard. Hard to see, hard to admit.

It takes peeling back the layers to get to your idols sometimes.

I'm trusting work for my identity. I'm trusting money for my security.

I'm trusting my children's success for my happiness, my approval.

I must have peace and quiet and order or life feels out of control.

Find those things and ask God to forgive you for worshipping them and ask you to deliver you from their enslaving power.

That's the negative. There has to be a positive. Have to fill worshipping center.

Jesus also says to Martha: One thing is needed. Points to Mary listening to him.

And then when Judas criticized Mary and Jesus defended her he said:

Leave her alone, It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial.

What that seems to mean is that Mary had listened to Jesus so intently, and paid such careful attention to what he had to say, that she was maybe his only follower who truly understood that he was going to die.

The others, when Jesus talked about his death said: Surely not, Lord.

They just thought he was being pessimistic, imagined great things were ahead.

Not Mary, she had listened to him and she knew.

And she certainly believed in some way that his death would be for the deliverance of Israel from exile and for the salvation of his people.

She didn't understand everything about the Gospel because Christ not yet raised, but her hope was in Jesus and his great sacrificial work.

After you have traced your problem emotions to the source, to your idols, and repented of them and asked God's deliverance.

Focus the eyes of your heart on Jesus Christ and his good news of salvation.

Fill that worshipping hole in your heart with the Gospel of Jesus.

What's the good news? What's the Gospel.

I always find benefit in John Miller's summary of the Gospel. He says:

The good news is that I'm more wicked and evil than I ever dared to admit, and at the same time, in Christ,

I'm more loved and accepted than I ever dared to hope.

Cheer up, you're much worse than you think you are.

You don't have it all together and you cannot save yourself by rule keeping.

In fact, you're making things worse for yourself and other people. Basket case. And, at the same time,

God loves you in Christ more than you can ever imagine or hope.

So the Gospel simultaneously humbles you and lifts you.

Another reason our rules are so important to us is that they tell us we don't need radical change, we just need to do some things.

All I need is surface change.

And obeying a few good rules will do the trick.

The stance toward other people is then: Obey my rules and it will fix you.

It leads to pride and self-righteousness and it blocks love.

The Gospel humbles you, by showing your sin, raises you, God's love.

Several years ago I got a letter from my mother.

Inside was a newsletter from a church in Florida where my father was serving.

My mother said: I thought you would appreciate reading this article your dad wrote. And I was intrigued by the title:

Mistakes I Made As A Father, by Ronald L. Siegenthaler.

I won't read the whole thing. Starts out thanking God for my mother and for my sister and me and our families and about growing in God's grace. Let me read you two things:

There's a rule: Keep the car neat and clean, be careful.

Another rule: Keep a stiff upper lip and don't show emotions.

Goes on to give praise for God's grace in his life through Christ.

Jesus Christ came at Christmas, entered into our world.

Went to people's homes, ate with them, entered into their sinful struggles,
do deliver us from slavery to idols and rule that destroy happiness.

He went all they way to the cross.

So this Christmas season, be mindful of rules, when harm others—
quick to examine, repent, and refocus on God's grace.