

"BUT ONE THING IS NEEDFUL"

The scene is laid in Bethany, a small but pretty village on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives and therefore "nigh to Jerusalem, about fifteen furlongs off".

This beautiful residential site, situate in a flowery dell, rich in honey and well-watered by an abundant spring, was called Bethany, which means a place of dates, because of the number of palm trees of the date species that adorned the spot.

Not far from this point the road leading down to Jericho, the famous and fragrant city of palm trees and roses, began its rapid descent to the Valley of the Jordan.

The house where the incident occurred was that of "a certain woman named Martha", who had a sister Mary and a brother named Lazarus, of whom it is written: "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus" (John xi. 5); and the presence of Jesus in the house, threw a sacred splendor around the home that otherwise would not be there.

The humblest home in all the land becomes a palace fit for a king, if only Jesus be there; and the most gorgeous mansion that was ever built, can give no lasting comfort, if the Prince of Peace be there unknown.

The time of the event was in the third year of our Lord's ministry, when having been repulsed by the Samaritans, because he would go up to Jerusalem; he there appointed and commissioned seventy other disciples to go "before his face into every city and place whither he, himself," the incomparable teacher would afterward surely come.

This mission he duly performed teaching and preaching with his unequalled eloquence, emphasis and authority the blessed gospel of the kingdom, which so frequently and effectively swayed the hearts and the affections of the admiring multitudes who heard him so gladly.

In the meantime he retired for a short period to the hospitable home at Bethany where "Martha received him into her house". She at once in order to show her gratification, love and joy, set herself diligently at work, to provide and get ready for him the nourishing sweets of an evening meal.

Mary on the other hand, "sat at Jesus' feet" (a form of speech used by the ancients to describe the posture of a pupil), charmed by the words of him who spake as never man spake.

In the scene before us, we have portrayed types of character and disposition with which we are all more or less familiar.

On the one hand we have the active, bustling anxiety of Martha, eager to provide suitable entertainment for our Lord; and on the other, the quiet earnestness of Mary more desirous to profit by this golden opportunity of gaining wisdom by the words which fell from the Master's lips.

Martha is the worker, heeding only the present, but Mary is more of the seeress type, looking into the future.

The former was a woman of lively susceptibilities and subject to rapid changes in disposition, more impressible and easily influenced, and consequently calling for greater mental watchfulness; while the latter was given to much study and meditation upon divine things.

There was a great dissimilarity and almost contrariety of disposition between the two.

By course of nature neither were exempt from the evil impulses of the flesh, but Mary being the more reflective and contemplative had them under better control—her mind was less easily impressed thereby.

Martha, however, whose love for the Master was undoubted and unquestioned, had become much engrossed with the cares of the household and without perceiving the fact, had permitted the evil impulse of the flesh to tincture her mind with suspicion and distrust, which gave shape and form in her mind to certain supposed faults, in both Jesus and Mary, which in reality had no existence.

Her hands were heavy laden and her heart was full of care, so with one eye scanning the scrupulously appointed table, and the other—a judging and slightly jaundiced eye, glancing obliquely at the interesting couple nearby—Jesus and her sister, she quite lost her patience, and

becoming the hapless victim of her own evil impulses, gave vent to a petulant outburst of envy, in which she actually upbraided and reproached the Master charging him with censurable negligence and inattention to her needs, and indirectly condemning Mary's better choice.

Jesus doubtless was cognizant of the dire conflict raging in Martha's heart or mind, where the impulse of the flesh—the diabolos had for the moment gained the ascendancy, and he no doubt pitied her; but instead of indulging in recriminations, which is the customary human wont, he, in a kindly but unmistakable manner, reproved her in the wholesome words of that now famous judicial pronouncement which has come down through the ages for our learning, 2nd reads as follows:

"Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things, but one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her"—Luke x. 41, 42.

The repetition of Martha's name adds emphasis, and denotes the solemn earnestness of our Lord's reproof.

Christ here defends Mary against the capricious envy of Martha and cautions the latter against the temptations incident to her activity. Envy assails the excellent and the wise, in the same ratio as the raging winds that howl around the highest mountain peaks; the higher the mount, the more loudly and fiercely the wind howls.

Let all who suffer in like manner as Mary, commit their cause to Jesus, who will in his own good time become their Advocate as he did in her case.

Note the antithesis drawn by Christ:

MARTHA—"MANY THINGS".....MARY—"ONE THING."

Martha's mind was distracted by many cares, but Mary's happy choice was the "one thing needful".

The ardent pursuit of this "one thing needful", was what Paul had in mind when he wrote that he would have the sisters,

"Attend upon the Lord without distraction"—1 Cor. vii. 35.

As to what constitutes the "one thing needful", there can be but one answer, for—

"Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom; and with all thy getting get understanding. all THE things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her. She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and happy is every one that retaineth her"—Prov. iii. 16, 18; iv. 7.

The wisdom of the Word should be sought for above all other things; and how unlike all other things we seek for on earth it is, in that none ever seek it in vain. "Seek and ye shall find" (Luke xi. 9), is the assurance given by the Master himself, and that should satisfy all doubt. This search is the noblest occupation we can follow, and in it alone our safety lies, because it is the one thing needful.

The Spirit saith: "Happy is every one that retaineth her", and Martha envied the happiness of this humble and "retaining" couple—Jesus and her sister. A deep feeling of resentment rushed into her heart, as she observed the composure and tranquility of Mary's mind, as compared with her own cares and troubles.

There may be some in the humbler walks of life to-day, who make themselves unhappy by permitting their ire to burn when they behold the superior comfort and well-being of others, forgetting the exhortation which speaketh unto them, saying:

"Be content with such things as ye have"—Heb. xiii. 5.

The Scripture saith not in vain:

"The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy."

This was Martha's difficulty, and it involved the fact that her occupation was that of her own choosing. Therefore, she should have been content therewith, and herself happy in the thought of serving such a guest, and so banish from her heart the seductive and depraving impulse of the flesh.

But on the contrary Martha nursed it and cultivated it in her mind, by allowing her thoughts to dwell upon it, until at length, as one of "the works of the flesh", it culminated in that sweeping outbreak of passion in which she sought to elevate the rank and grade of her occupation in "many things", above that of Mary's choice, the "one thing needful".

Envy is a sort of grief crowned praise, of the clumsy variety: an admission of the excellence of others, and therefore a compliment, but bestowed in a very ungracious manner.

In the divine estimation Mary's choice was the one thing needful—"that good part which shall not be taken away"; but Martha's envious fever made her choice the worse, because to nurse envy is to blow a fire that is sure to burn you.

But was Martha's choice of service not a good part? Was there no redeeming quality in the form of service upon which Martha's heart was so intent? There can be no doubt nor uncertainty upon this point.

Without doubt Jesus greatly appreciated the act of hospitality to which Martha so diligently applied herself, for it is written that "Jesus loved Martha".

But for the time being, Martha had become so wholly engrossed in the cares and troubles of those "many things", which to a greater or less degree choke the word (Matt. xiii. 22), that there was a forgetting of the words of the Spirit:

"Wherefore do ye spend your money in that which is not bread and your labor on that which satisfieth not"—Is. iv. 2.

"Labor not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life"—John vi. 27.

In this unguarded moment the human impulse gained the upper hand, and incited by the diabolos, Martha in effect aimed and strove to give to our daily bread first place in our affairs, relegating to a more convenient season the Bread from heaven, which action on her part was incidentally a condemnation of "that good part" which Mary had made her choice.

Thus the principle of sin which dwelt in Martha, being uncontrolled by her (Rom. vii. 20), deceived her, and made her heart the home of thoughts that were not good, for bad indeed it is to speak evil of those who are good.

Therefore, it was by no means Martha's form of service that called forth the reproof and rebuke of Christ, but rather her rash and envious behavior in giving precedence or priority to her work as compared with that of Mary.

It appears from the records that it was quite the usual thing, for Martha to be girded and alert in this form of service, as rendered to the Master and his friends whenever occasion demanded it (see John xii. 2); and we are assured by our Lord himself that all such loving service, however humble in form and character it may be: yea, even that of giving "a cup of cold water only" in the name of a disciple, shall in no wise lose its reward—Matt. x. 42.

Such sacrificing labor in the work of the Truth as that performed by Martha, is frequently required to-day, and Christ's words inspire confidence that such work will never be lost sight of, nor go unrequited by our Great High Priest above who intercedes for us. ~~But it should ever be borne in mind, that whatever the relative consequence of such work may be, it should never be performed with that impulsive consuming zeal that would make it appear as an affair of paramount importance, to the exclusion for the time of the one thing needful—"that

good part which shall not be taken away ".

Undue attention should never be bestowed upon it, either in the home or elsewhere, lest in an incautious moment, through spiritual negligence, the hearts of the workers be overcharged with its cares; and after the example of Martha, fall into some of those subtle temptations which so frequently lead to envy, anger, fault-finding and other works of the flesh, which choke such fruits of the Spirit as love, joy, peace, long suffering, gentleness and meekness, against which there is no law.

All who are engaged in such or similar work should keep a wary watch and ward upon the heart, lest Martha's self-consuming care, ever incident to such labors, should creep in unawares, and so become a barrier and a snare, debarring and precluding the one thing needful.

This is the helpful lesson we should all learn from this striking and instructive episode of Bethany.

While we should never be "slothful in business", we should never overlook the moral excellencies with which the command is divinely coupled:

"Fervent in spirit; serving the Lord"—Rom. xii. 11.

Let us also be constantly mindful of how liable we are to overestimate the value and importance of the things pertaining to this present life, which so frequently mock our ardor and our zeal.

All worldly things, even those of dearest value, hang upon very slender strings which at any moment may break.

"On the tree of life eternal,
There let all our hopes be laid;
It alone forever vernal,
Bears a leaf that will not fade."

Furthermore, it should always be borne in mind that the wisdom which is from above hath the

"Promise of the life that now is"—1 Tim. iv. 8.

as well as of that which is to come: its advantages are not wholly confined to the future.

The evil impulses of the flesh, such as envy, anger, etc., when uncontrolled have a direct tendency to physical deterioration; while a wise and happy heart tends greatly to improve the health, and is therefore a present benefit.

"A sound heart is the life of the flesh: but envy the rottenness of the bones"—Prov. xiv. 30.

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