

Luke 10:38-42 (NIV 1984)
Where to Find Our Significance?

38 As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. 39 She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. 40 But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" 41 "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, 42 but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Introduction

Heng Juan was a boy driven to distinction. His father now feels he may have driven himself to death.

Doctors say he died of a virus attack on his brain. His father, Mr Heng, 45, has his own theory, one based on emotion. He feels his son worked himself too hard, was too stressed, and this led to a coma, and death.

Heng Juan wanted to be first in everything, says Mr Heng, a graphic designer. He worried when he scored less than a distinction, as his journal had revealed.

Still, Mr Heng told himself his son was mature enough to be left alone. Until one day in November, 1993, after exams.

A virus attacked Heng Juan's brain. He slipped into a coma and died on Feb 10, just one day short of his 15th birthday.

Doctors say there is no medical proof that stress brings on encephalitis, the condition caused by the virus attack on Heng Juan's brain.

Voicing a general medical opinion, Dr Wong Meng Cheong, department head of Neurology at Singapore General Hospital, says: "The link is tenuous. Stress can suppress the immune system in some and you may be more open to certain diseases and infection. But if you and I get stressed, we are unlikely to come down with encephalitis the next day."

Mumps, herpes, chickenpox and cold sore viruses lead to encephalitis, a brain inflammation.

But even scientific fact has not stopped Mr Heng's brooding: "I want to tell students out there not to give themselves too much pressure. So long as you try your best, your parents will be happy."

Heng Juan was a school swimmer and waterpolo player. In the Sec 1 exams, he won awards for art, literature, being first in class and second in standard.

In Primary 6, he told his dad he would one day be a director of a well-known bank. One incident taught Mr Heng to believe this.

Students had been asked to list their target marks for an exam. Heng Juan confidently filled in "100" for science and maths. Father and teacher told him to change it. He refused so his father had to alter the marks for him.

But Heng Juan scored 100 in both papers.

Adding that his son often came home too tired to eat, Mr Heng says, in an interview at their four-room flat off Serangoon Road: "I had to tell him not to study and to relax!"

At the end of 1993, Heng Juan was selected to be a prefect. Yet he was torn between that position and class monitor. Says Mr Heng: "He told me that if he was to do something, he would do it well or give it up."

His father does not know what choice he would have made, he didn't have the chance to—he was dead before he could make the choice, driven by an intense need to achieve significance in life.

(<https://www.comp.nus.edu.sg/~tanhw/life/misc/drive.html#:~:text=attack%20on%20Heng%20Juan's%20brain>)

If we are honest with ourselves, many of us would have to admit that there is also this need in us to strive for personal significance. We yearn to achieve some measure of significance in what we do in life. Not necessarily wrong in itself, but this yearning can easily become an obsession in life.

For most of who are working, that avenue where we seek to satisfy our need for some measure of significance is our work. After all, work is that very activity that keeps most of us going for the greater part of the time when we are awake. Even if we are retired from full time work, we are still trying to keep ourselves occupied every day in one way or another.

Our text today tells the story of a woman's need to achieve some measure of significance in what she was doing, perhaps even without her actually realising it.

- The woman's name was Martha.
- She had started off with the noble intention to honour Jesus whom she was hosting in her home.
- But her need to achieve some measure of significance in what she set out to do that day had strayed her away and she ended up the day badly—she was not only busy, but also grumpy; instead of celebrating the presence of Jesus in

her home, she was complaining about the absence of help from Mary (her sister) in the kitchen.

- In fact, Jesus gave her a gentle admonition in spite of all her busyness and diligence that day.

However, let's first get our theology right.

- Jesus was not disapproving the hospitality showed to Him by Martha. Christian hospitality is an excellent trait and we should uphold it.
- But the bigger issue here has to do with this question—"In our busyness and diligence, what has our attention most and whose agenda are we following?"
- In a nutshell, our story today tells us that the way to follow Jesus is not by way of a frenzy of activities, but by way of giving attention to the Lord and His agenda in all that we do.
- In we neglect this way of following Jesus, even our Christian work is likely to become much religiosity in form, but little spirituality in substance—we are likely a mere workman and hardly a worshipper.

Indeed, in our pursuit for personal significance, we can be strayed away from giving attention to the Lord and His agenda for us. Our story today gives us two admonitions to help us check this straying away.

I. We are to find our significance not solely in our good work, but ultimately in the Lord's goodwill and grace.

When Jesus and His disciples entered the home of Martha, Mary (probably her younger sister) "sat at the Lord's feet listening to what He said" (v. 39).

- We see here someone who was discerning enough to recognise her need for the Lord.
- Jesus was now sitting down with His disciples around Him, and He was teaching them the very things heavy in their heart.
- When Mary came along and joined the group, the Lord accepted her participation.
- And this was a very revolutionary thing to do in that culture. This had to do with the social status of women in Jewish society at that time.
- Women then played a low profile in religious affairs—no women were ever admitted into the rabbinical circles; no women were allowed to sit and learn together with men at the feet of rabbis.
- But in Mary's case, she sat at the Lord's feet and listened to Him together with the other disciples. Her participation had not been refused by the Lord.
- Thus, it seems that the Lord had accepted her as someone on equal terms with His other disciples. In this sense, implicitly accepting a woman as a disciple was indeed revolutionary in Jewish society then.

You might say that Mary had been accorded significance by Jesus when He accepted her as on equal standing with His other disciples. She did not have to work or fight hard for it; she just received it as the Lord's goodwill and grace towards her.

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On the contrary, we see Martha struggling to be a good hostess. She wanted to honour the Lord in her home, to accord Him the best hospitality she could possibly give. And that's a noble intention indeed.

But as she worked hard to be a good hostess, her busyness strayed her off-course.

- She thought the Lord needed her attention more than she needed His attention.
- She was more concerned about the Lord's appetite for her food than her own appetite for the Lord's spiritual food.
- Instead of receiving what the Lord had to give her by His goodwill and grace, she was busily trying to give to the Lord by way of her own display of good work and gracious hospitality.
- Yes, instead of finding her significance as one accepted by the Lord because of His goodwill and grace to all who would receive Him, Martha tried to work hard for her own sense of significance.
- In v. 40, we are told that Martha became "distracted" as a result. The word "distracted" means "pulled away". She was pulled away by all her busyness, and failed to give the Lord her necessary attention.
- What an irony!
 - The Lord was right there in her home, yet she was so far from His presence.
 - She wanted so much to be a good hostess-in-attendance, yet she was not giving the Lord the right kind of attention.
- Her complaint in v. 40 further reveals a sad change of attitude as she was pulled away from giving her attention to the Lord—"Lord, don't you care that my sister has left ME to do the work by MYSELF? Tell her to help ME!"
 - She had started with the noble intention to honour the Lord in her home, but now that intention had turned into a cry for the honouring the big "ME", not the Lord.
 - Martha's complaint revealed her demand for significance—"I want to honour the Lord ... but I also want to look good and significant myself."
 - Martha was distracted by all her busyness, and she ended up with the desire to serve her own significance, not to serve in the Lord's presence.
 - The big "ME" in her had taken the place of honour which was supposed to be reserved for the Lord.

In a social culture where no good things are for free, we need to appreciate afresh the free gift of the Lord's goodwill and grace.

- Our significance rests in the Lord's goodwill and grace; our significance had already been bestowed upon us in Christ.
- Perhaps, the sad thing is that many of God's people are still searching and striving for significance in their own strength.
- Our significance as a child of God is not based solely on performance, power, prosperity, or position. Rather, it is ultimately based on who we are in Jesus Christ.

- Sadly, many are struggling with their feelings of insignificance because they have worked so hard, yet receive no or little human approval, appreciation, applause, or affirmation.
- As a child of God, you and I do not generate our own significance; it is already granted us in Jesus Christ.
- Also, we do not have to protect or enhance our significance by resorting to all kinds of destructive behaviours—e.g. gossiping, slandering, boasting, murmuring, manipulating, controlling others.
- As a child of God, each of us is significant regardless of performance. Yes, while performance is important as a demonstration of our good works and faithful discharge of responsibilities, our significance in Christ is not secured by our finest efforts. Rather, it is secured by the finished work of Christ on the Cross.
- Though we need affirmation from time to time, yet we no longer work for the applause of men; though we need encouragement from time to time, yet we no longer seek our significance in it.

Returning to our text, notice that while Mary showed contentment, busy Martha became dissatisfied with herself and others. And this leads us to another pitfall to avoid—i.e. in our busyness, we can end up searching for more significance, yet feeling even more and more discontented.

- Discontentment undermines the goodwill and grace of the Lord in that it makes us less appreciative of what we have been blessed with by the Lord. Discontentment makes us feel that God has somehow short-changed us; that God has somehow not given enough to us.
- Thus, we have to go about striving and trying hard to top up our apparent deficiency in our own strength.

On the contrary, contentment is found not in the more of material things and more of running in busyness, but it is found in the more of Christ and more of resting in Him.

- Our contentment rests in our confidence that the Lord will supply all our needs (NOT wants) because of His goodwill and grace.
- Contentment does not mean that we deny our gifts and abilities to succeed and excel in our field of work.
- Indeed, we should fulfil our God-given responsibilities with our God-gifted abilities, and be blessed with the joy of work well done and fruitful labour.
- And as we are so blessed, we should in turn contribute to others less endowed, convinced that we are always blessed to be a blessing to others.

The great American entrepreneur John Rockefeller made a promise to be rich when he was young. He drove himself to the limit.

At 33, he earned his first million. At 43, he controlled the largest company in the world. At 53, he became the world's only billionaire.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, he was stricken by a mysterious disease. His hair began to drop, and eyelashes and eyebrows began to disappear. He could only take milk and biscuits even though he had more than enough money to eat at all the top-class restaurants in the world.

Also, he was much hated by his business rivals, and he needed body guards to keep him safe from them. He could not sleep; he stopped smiling for a long time; he enjoyed nothing in life. When doctors told him that he had only one year to live, the newspapers started to prepare for his obituary in advance.

And during this period of personal struggling, he began to reflect and think about his own significance in life. He then realised that money was not everything. He became a new man; a “new creation” of sorts. He helped churches and the poor, and donated huge sums for medical research.

Then, he began to sleep well, eat well, and enjoy life. The doctors said he would not live beyond 54, yet he went on to live up to 98.

(<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/81465/john-d-rockefeller-s-transformation-by-sermon-central>)

Yes, the “good life” is not to hold all that we have in this life with a tight fist as if we are the ultimate owner. The “good life” is to hold all that we have in this life with an open palm because all that we have comes from God because of His goodwill and grace. God is the Ultimate Owner and Giver of what we have in this life. Yes, we find our significance in who we are not solely in our good work and the good life it brings to us, but ultimately in the Lord’s goodwill and grace towards us.

In our search for significance, we can be strayed from giving attention to the Lord and His agenda for us. There’s a second admonition for us, and that is ...

II. We are to find our significance not by first working on our feet, but worshipping at the Lord’s feet.

Martha was very much in action, but that didn’t seem to give her much meaning in all that she was doing. In fact, all her busyness only brought her worry and upset feelings. The Lord said to her in vv. 41-42—“You are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed.”

- The Lord was speaking metaphorically here. In essence, He was saying something like this to Martha—“You are unnecessarily preoccupied with too many dishes because only one dish is all we need today.”
- What a waste of effort! She was working hard to honour the Lord with so many things, but missed the only one that was essential. She was cooking up a storm for the Lord, but only one dish would be enough for the Lord.
- You see, what the Lord wanted most from Martha that day was not so much her cooking, but her company.

Martha's situation can be our situation as well.

- Think of the many things we have been busy with this week.
 - Have our professions become an obsession with motions?
 - We race from one point to another, working hard to achieve the maximum output at the shortest possible time.
- But honestly, we can't have it all. If we want to conquer the world, the price may be that of our own soul. Jesus said in Matt. 16:26—"What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?"
- In a performance-oriented culture, an obsession with motions is a real temptation. Yes, success symbols do fulfil our need for significance. This in turn fuels us to move round in a vicious circle of endless motions.

Someone once lamented that we no longer pray the Lord's Prayer, but the Humanist's Prayer instead. It goes like this:

Our brethren who art on earth hallowed be our name.
 Our kingdom come, our will be done on earth for there is no heaven.
 We must get this day our daily bread.
 We neither forgive nor are forgiven.
 We fear not temptation for we deliver ourselves from evil.
 For ours is the kingdom and the power.
 And there is no glory and no forever.

Indeed, the endless motions in life can lead us to find our significance by first working on our feet, and not worshipping at the Lord's feet.

Looking again at v. 42, we read that Mary was praised by the Lord for making the better choice.

- She had chosen to be still at the Lord's feet rather than busy working on her feet; she had chosen devotion before motion.
- Hers was the better choice because she was giving attention to the Lord and His agenda for her. And Jesus said that her better choice would "not be taken away from her".
- Indeed, this choice is a lasting privilege (i.e. not be taken away) because at the end of time, the only "work" left for us to do when we are with the Lord is to worship Him forever in His presence as we fellowship at His table.

For this very reason, we need to remind ourselves each and every day as we live and work that we are a people of divine destiny. We are moving towards a destination—i.e. to be with the Lord forever together as His people in heavenly bliss. And to prepare for that, we need to cultivate this habit of giving attention to the Lord, of fellowshiping with Him, and of being still and worshipping at His feet as He teaches and guides us by His Word and Spirit.

Yes, we are to be like Mary, making the better choice of finding our significance not by first restlessly working on our feet, but by restfully worshipping at the Lord's feet.

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When we are distracted from the Lord as our ultimate focus of attention; when we stop seeking Him and begin busily seeking other things as our primary sources of satisfaction, this distraction will lead to certain dangers.

- One, the danger of plenty. But the danger is not in material abundance itself, but in our tendency to forget the Giver. The issue is not how much we have, but how dedicated and devoted our heart is in remembering God and His grace of provision.
- Two, the danger of religiosity without relationship. We must not allow our busyness to cause our worship of the Lord to become just a ritual rather than a relationship—i.e. merely going through the motion without experiencing the Lord in meaningful ways.
- Three, the danger of the big “ME”. When we become busy seeking to inflate the “ME”, the tendency is that our longing for the divine “THEE” becomes weaker. Christ then becomes a heavy load rather than the Heavenly Lord in our lives.

Around AD 400, Emperor Honorius ruled over the Roman Empire. At that time, state sports were popularised, and these became the greatest passion among the people.

Honorius built the great Coliseum for the purpose of holding and enjoying these sporting events. Without fail, thousands would come to fill up the Coliseum.

Now, what sports are we talking about? These were ruthless and bloody sports of life and death—men fighting wild beasts or with one another either to kill or be killed. And the Romans found sheer delight in the death of a human being.

One day, the crowd came to the Coliseum and again hungering and hollering for blood in the arena. Among the crowd that day was a Syrian monk named Telemachus.

Two gladiators began their fight. One soon fell and the other was about to thrust his sword into the fallen one. As usual, the crowd screamed for blood. But Telemachus was totally troubled by the complete disregard for human life. So he leapt into the arena. And standing between the two gladiators, he pleaded, “This is not right. In the name of Christ, stop!”

The crowd was angry and cried for him to be killed. The gladiator who was standing looked at the Emperor for a signal who then nodded his head. And while Telemachus was still pleading, the sword ran through his side. As Telemachus laid dying on the ground, his last words were—“This is not right. In the name of Christ, stop!”

Ancient history records that not long after this, such kind of ruthless sports and bloody combats began to decline, and eventually faded away. Why? Because someone had dared to make a stand for the Lord.

Yes, our “dog-eat-dog” world today challenges us to find our significance in frenzy motion, not in quiet devotion to the Lord. Let’s learn to be like Telemachus who dared to make the better choice of saying, “This is not right. In the name of Christ, stop!”

(<https://bible.sabda.org/illustration.php?topic=1079>)

The Bible reveals to us that our God is a creating God; He is a working God. And our work on earth is not meant to be a curse, but a gift from Him. But in the course of doing our work, where do we find our significance? Do we find our significance in the gift of work itself, or do we find it in the Giver of this gift of work Himself? Put in another way, as we work hard and well in life, are we so preoccupied with our work (in the workplace, or home, or school) that we have neglected to give attention to the Lord and His agenda for us?

Conclusion

Yes, we are to discharge the gift of work that God has blessed us with faithfully and responsibly. Yet, our text today warns us not to be strayed away by our human tendency to find our significance in the work we do here on earth. We are cautioned today not to lose our alignment with God’s will and call, even as we do His gift of work for us; not to become negligent of Him and His agenda for us in what we do.

We are given two admonitions today to help us keep in step with the Lord and His agenda for us.

- One, we are to find our significance not solely in our good work, but ultimately in the Lord’s goodwill and grace.
- Two, we are to find our significance not by first working on our feet, but worshipping at the Lord’s feet.

How do we engage in our work so that we can glorify the Lord and not ourselves? Let me humbly suggest three things.

- One, include the Lord in our work by constantly praying and checking ourselves. Ask, “Is He pleased with the way I am going about my work?”
- Two, make our relationship with the Lord a priority no matter how busy our schedule may be. Schedule and guard time to be still before Him in worship and His Word.
- Three, be thankful to the Lord for who you are and what you have. If you have honestly done YOUR best, learn to celebrate and rejoice in holy contentment even if you are not THE best.

What will we each be known as when we enter eternal heavenly bliss in the presence of the Lord?

- Not as the CEO of a MNC.
- Not as the world champion in a certain sport.

- Not as the billionaire owner of a successful business.
- Not as the senior pastor of a mega-church.
- Not as the Nobel-Prize winner in a certain field.
- Not as the top-earning lawyer in a big law firm.
- Not as the most skilful surgeon in a certain speciality,

No, we are not known by any of these identities when we enter eternal heavenly bliss in the Lord's presence. Rather, we are each known by the Lord in His presence as "child of God"—so simple an identity yet with such eternal significance.

Let's seek the Lord to so help us find our ultimate significance in who we are in Him—that we are each a child of the Almighty God and so loved by Him regardless of our status in life here on earth. Amen!