

THE JUGGLER'S PERIL

Luke 10:38-42

Suppose you start tossing one ball up in the air and catching it when it comes down. That is not difficult to do. It takes very little concentration or effort. Now suppose you add another ball, so you are tossing two balls into the air and catching them. That is going to require considerably more concentration because you have to track both balls simultaneously. This is not a terribly difficult task, but it does demand that you pay attention to do it reasonably well.

Now suppose that someone comes along and throws yet a third ball into the mix. All of a sudden tossing those balls around requires a lot of concentration. In fact, most of us find it difficult, even nearly impossible to do that. We have a name for it. We call it juggling, and most people simply cannot do it. We can learn how to do it if we are willing to devote enough time and energy into practicing it. But let's imagine that now you add a fourth ball and even a fifth into the equation. By that time almost no one can keep juggling all those balls. There are a few people in the world who can do it, but not many. At some point if you keep adding balls it will be impossible for anyone.

Let those balls represent the tasks and demands of your life. If there is only one, or maybe two, most of us can handle that with little trouble. But at some point we end up juggling, and often it is simply too much for us. Today I want to talk to you jugglers out there who are feeling overwhelmed in your efforts to keep those balls in the air. For direction on what to do about this we will look at Luke 10:38-42.

MARTHA WAS STRESSED OUT

This passage evokes an image in my mind. It is Thanksgiving Day at our house. I love Thanksgiving. It means family, fellowship with those I love and great food. Laurie and my Mom working in tandem produce one of the highlights of the year for me, the Thanksgiving dinner. To make the meal happen is a monumental amount of work. So picture Laurie and my mother working feverishly in the kitchen all day long preparing the meal and I'm sitting in the living room watching a football game on television. Does Laurie ever pray, "Lord, don't you care that my husband has left me to do the work by myself?" The Lord responds, "Only one thing is needed, Laurie, and that's watching football!"

Well, actually the Lord wouldn't say that exactly. However, let Martha be the substitute for Laurie and put Mary in my place and you kind of get a sense for the

central conflict of this episode. Martha lived with Mary, her sister, and Lazarus, her brother in Bethany, all of them believers in Jesus. The fact that Martha is listed first suggests she was the oldest of the three. She was apparently the head of their household, the hostess.

Jesus came by for a visit. When Jesus came for a visit he didn't come alone. His disciples came with him. That meant Martha was preparing a meal for at least 13 guests. That would be fine, I suppose, if she was running a bed and breakfast inn, but she just had her home and now she was feeding an entire football team with two substitutes. Can you envision how much work that was? I struggle with getting a meal together for six people every year when we celebrate Mother's Day and Laurie's birthday, which happens about the same time. Invariably Laurie has to come to my rescue.

Poor Martha had a much more complicated and demanding task to deal with than my little lunch. She was flying around the house at Mach 1 trying to get everything done and what was Mary doing? Sitting at the feet of Jesus. She was sitting. She wasn't helping at all. No doubt Martha was stewing over her sister. As she worked she had to be thinking, "Look at her sitting there doing nothing. She's as useless as a screen door on a submarine."

It's easy to empathize with Martha. Most of us have been in a situation where somehow we ended up having to do all of a job that was supposed to be shared. Maybe it was a group project at school where the rest of your team just didn't pull their weight. Maybe it was a task at work that other people were supposed to share and you ended up doing it all without getting all the credit. Maybe it was serving in the children's ministry at church and getting stuck because no one else would help out. We know the resentment that builds up when that happens. Martha seems to have a legitimate gripe.

Martha could serve as a symbol of our culture. People today are living with a boat load of stress because of the demands of a hectic and fast paced lifestyle. So much is expected of people these days. Like Martha an awful lot of us are flying around at supersonic speeds feeling totally stressed, buried under a mountain of constant demands. Stress is the new normal. An article on stress in the *Huffington Post* recently started with the statement that the current mantra is, "if you're not stressed out, you're not working hard enough."

One of the effects of the recent economic meltdown combined with global competition is that more than ever is expected of employees. People are working a lot harder and making less money. They are asked to do more with less resources. Laurie recently called our health insurance company to find out where she would be allowed to get a routine mammogram under our current health insurance plan. I don't want to get political here, but we are still waiting to encounter the "affordable" part of the Affordable Care Act. Our costs have shot through the roof given that our insurance premium is a little higher than ever, but now it essentially provides us with nothing. When she called after a torturous, tedious and eternal excursion through the company's recordings she was finally able to talk to a human being. He looked up our situation on his computer and then concluded, "Huh, there's no place within 50 miles of you that you can get that done under your policy." Even he could see that was a problem. He said he would submit a request for an exception, which would surely be granted. It should take no more than a week. We would receive a call informing Laurie of where she should go within a week. Do you know where this is going? I did. I told her, "you'll never hear from them again." I was right. She didn't hear a peep from them. It's been 6 weeks. She called again this week and after a frustrating 45 minutes finally got to talk to a human being who informed her that the first information she had been given was wrong and the place she originally wanted to go for the test was fine. This was not an aberration. It is a consistent problem with our health insurance company and they're not the only ones. Many companies replicate this failure. We talk to employees; they tell us they will handle something. Then nothing is ever done. We have to call back and start all over, and it usually takes three or four tries to accomplish anything. Sometimes it never gets done.

Is this because somehow our nation has become populated by total incompetents? Or is this some corporate ploy, a devious plan to make people go away? I submit to you that most of the time it is not because of incompetence or deviousness, it is because the employees are so overburdened, so overwhelmed by the tasks dumped on them because the company does not hire adequate staff, that much of what they are supposed to do falls through cracks the size of the Grand Canyon.

Stress is on the rise. A recent report revealed that 77% of Americans now say they have experienced stress induced physical symptoms. It's not just demands at work. Parents run themselves into the ground taking kids to music lessons, soccer, baseball, volleyball, horse riding lessons, violin lessons, ballet, and the list could go on indefinitely. Pastor and author Charles Stanley said, "We live in a fast paced

culture. There is simply more to do in one day than there is time to do it. Many of us feel overwhelmed by our hectic lifestyle, yet don't know how to slow down."

Do you ever feel like there's just too much on your plate? Do you feel like you barely hang on as you're juggling the balls in your life and someone keeps tossing new balls into the mix? Is your life simply moving too fast?

Being stressed and overcommitted has negative effects. Notice how Jesus described Martha. "You are worried and upset about many things." Do you think "worried and upset" is a peaceful and joyful place to be? Worry is not peaceful and upset is not joyful. Is that the life that anyone wants?

Stress has terrible physical effects. High levels of stress increase our risk of a stroke by 50%. Stress is the cause of 60% of all human illness. The cost of stress in medical bills and lost productivity is estimated at \$300 billion each year in this country. This problem is greatly exacerbated today by the prevalence of smart phones, tablets, email, texts and Facebook. So many people in our culture are convinced that they can multitask. The research on multitasking is unanimous and, contrary to folk wisdom, it applies equally to both men and women. Studies reported in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology* revealed that multitasking causes a 40% loss in productivity. You may think you're working faster, but you are producing less. In fact if you try to multitask two things it will take you longer to do them than if you just did one then the other. The studies also revealed you will make many more mistakes.

Dr. Clifford Nass of Stanford who has been researching multitasking says, "multitaskers are terrible at every aspect of multitasking." Dr. Glenn Wilson of the University of London says trying to do multiple things at the same time knocks 10 points off your IQ. It increases frustration and causes higher stress levels as well as anger and rage.

Recently I personally saw the effects of being overly stressed. A few weeks ago I went through a very stressful week. We had a very busy schedule and I had to deal with a big distracting problem during the week, so I was very stressed. I am amazed at how that affected me. Each week I email the outline for my sermon to Debbie and Linda. Debbie has it printed out for the bulletin and Linda creates power point slides for it. I've done that for years. That week I sent them the outline without the title of the sermon and the passage that it was covering. They both informed of my error so I corrected it by sending them the title and passage, only

this time I gave them the wrong passage. So Linda had the wrong passage on the power point slide. I usually print out the passage to bring with me on Sunday morning, but I forgot to do that. I also forgot to bring a Bible with me. So on Sunday when I started preaching I found I had no way to read the passage. I also forgot to pay our mortgage that was due that week. I never forget things like that. Then that Sunday after church I left my tablet computer here at the chapel when we went home. It was just mistake after mistake after mistake. That's what stress does!

That's bad, but there's more. Another side effect of stress is that it damages relationships. Martha shows us that. The stress leads her to be resentful of Mary and angry at her. Do you suppose this created more love and a stronger bond between the two sisters? The loving way to deal with that situation would have been for her to simply talk to Mary directly. Tap her on the shoulder, ask if she could help. By doing what she did Martha publicly was shaming Mary and trying to pull a power play. Those are always devastating for relationships. Her big to do list and the stress it created caused her to do an unloving thing. That's what stress will do to us. It causes us to be angry at others and to cut loose with unloving and unhelpful outbursts. It causes us to wallow in self-pity and blame others for our problems. It will distort our priorities so that getting things ticked off our to-do list becomes the goal and if we have to sacrifice caring about people in order to accomplish that goal then so be it. People become an interruption in our lives.

Stress and over commitment can and will also damage our relationship with the Lord. We can start with the fact that Martha is not doing what Mary was doing. Mary made being with Jesus the priority. The task was the priority for Martha. So think of these two women as representing two priority systems. Of the two, which did Jesus endorse? Here's a hint: it wasn't Martha's.

But you can go beyond that to Martha's statement in verse 40. "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself?" Here she is questioning the Lord's character. She is implying that he is at the very least uncaring, and possibly even unjust because he is favoring Mary over Martha. How do you think your relationship with God is going to be if you don't think he cares about you? How do you think it will be if you think he cares about other people more than you? Will you trust him? Will you desire to praise him? Will you want to serve him and love him? Martha's relationship with the Lord was dealt a blow by her hectic life, and if our lives are over stressed and over committed and over busy they will experience the same.

Notice also the last thing Martha said to the Lord. “Tell her to help me!” Verbs in the Greek language that Luke wrote this account in have several aspects one can identify by the form of the verb. They have person, number, tense, voice and mood. Is it first person, second person or third person? Is it singular or plural? Is it past, present or future? Is it active or passive? All of these you can tell from the form of the verb. You can also tell mood, meaning what kind of statement is this? Is it a statement of fact or a statement of possibility? The verb in that last sentence is in the imperative mood. That means it is a command. Martha wasn’t asking Jesus. She wasn’t requesting something from him. She was *ordering* him to tell Mary to get to work. She started by addressing him as “Lord” but ended up speaking to him like he was her servant. That’s what stress can do to us. It can cause us to think God should serve us, not the other way around.

MARTHA FOCUSED INCORRECTLY

Jesus’ response to Martha is startling. Rather than sympathizing with her plight he essentially reprimanded her. He said, “Only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen it, but you haven’t. So there’s no way I’m going to tell her to quit doing what is most important in order to do what isn’t.”

Was Jesus saying hospitality didn’t matter? Was he saying that they didn’t have to prepare a meal for everyone? We just had our first Anchorman breakfast after our summer break. Laurie makes breakfast every other Saturday for any of the men in the church who choose to come. This causes her some stress. Every week we have the event she ponders if she would make something new for the guys. She frequently thinks of things to make it special. On Cinco de Mayo it had a Mexican flair with little sombreros on the table. On St. Patrick’s Day there was a green theme to the table setting, that kind of thing. The funny thing is often the guys don’t notice. This is because they’re guys. Guys frequently aren’t especially observant. Put some food in front of them and they’re good to go. I had a guy friend once who often said, “You can’t eat atmosphere.”

So did Jesus say these things because...well...after all, he was a guy? Was he saying, “Hey Martha, just order in some pizza we’ll all be good?” No, I don’t believe Jesus was downgrading the importance of hospitality. We get a clue about the nature of the problem from how Martha was described in this passage. Notice verse 40 says she was distracted. What does distracted mean?

Here’s a scenario. Laurie and I are in the living room talking. But for some reason she turns on the television and when it comes on there is a football game on. She

continues to talk. What happens? I hear sound coming out of her, but I'm looking to see what is going on in this football game. My attention gets diverted. One time I was watching television and became vaguely aware that Laurie was talking to me. I tuned in, but all I caught was her saying, "Did you hear what I asked you?" The honest answer would have been no I was listening to the television. But I didn't want to admit that I was ignoring her. After all, I claim I love her. So I decided to fake it. I said, "Oh, yeah, I did and the answer to your question is yes." I gambled that this was the correct answer. She shook her head in disgust and said, "I asked you what you want to eat for dinner." I got distracted and stopped doing the most important thing, which is to listen to my wife when she talks.

The Greek word that is translated "distracted" literally means "to drag away." That's how it feels to me. I was pleased to hear Laurie say recently when the television is on it is like a magnet. It drags her attention away. That's what happened to Martha. According to Jesus she was dragged away from what she should be focusing on. The result was that she was worried. The Greek word Luke used there was *merimnao*. The root of it was the word *meros*, which means "piece" or "part." So the word means she was being pulled apart or she was going to pieces. Have you ever felt like that? It is a good description of what happens when life just seems to be too demanding for any human being.

The key element here is that Jesus said only one thing was necessary. That one thing was relationship with Jesus. It was listening to his teaching and following him. Mary had chosen that, but Martha had not.

What happened here? I do not think Jesus was saying that feeding people who come to your home does not matter. I believe that Jesus was saying that there was a way to keep the focus on learning from him and loving him while still meeting the practical needs of hospitality. Martha had lost track of putting the first thing first. I think Martha made a crucial mistake. She got dragged away, distracted by things that weren't necessary. She made the unnecessary necessary. That is a crucial step in making sure your life will be stressed out.

My suspicion is that a subtle switch got flipped. Martha and Mary started with the goal of providing what was needed for their guests, but Martha got distracted by wanting to make everything *perfect*. Hey she admired Jesus so much. Didn't it make sense that she would want to show how much they cared about him? In order to do that didn't she have to make the meal special? Didn't it have to be just right?

It could be that Martha had decided that just providing a meal wasn't good enough. It may be that in her mind it had to be an event, a gala, that would blow Jesus away. She may well have decided that she had to put on an event that would be unforgettable for Jesus. If that was the case her problem was that she was actually making the event about what she could do and about how she looked. In other words, it might have slipped into being about her.

We don't know that. What we do know is that Jesus said there was a way to make the main thing, relationship with him, the priority while still providing what was needed for the guests. Mary did that, Martha did not. Perhaps the two sisters had already made enough preparation that needs were covered, so Mary could now focus on Jesus, but Martha wanted to do more. It could be that Jesus was saying, "Listen to me first, and you can do all the other stuff later." Perhaps Jesus was saying, "Sit here with me and I will make sure that whatever you have here is enough." After all, if he could use one boy's lunch to feed thousands of people he surely could make whatever the sisters had on hand be enough for him and his buddies.

The key to this incident is Jesus' statement that only one thing was needed. Martha had gotten distracted by and focused on things that were not necessary. They might have been good things, but they weren't the most important things. She sacrificed what really matters for what is, at best, good. That's what caused her to be stressed. Jesus claimed there was a way to pursue the most important thing while still meeting the demands of the practical necessities of life. Mary had found that way.

APPLICATION

What can we do to have a life that does not involve juggling more balls than it is humanly possible to handle?

DO THE NEEDED THING

Martha's critical failure was not focusing on the one thing that is really necessary. When we get stressed out almost always we make that same mistake. We make everything necessary, and when everything is necessary we are going to get buried by the pile. ***The surest way to become utterly stressed is to make everything necessary.***

Our daughter and her husband are in Europe on vacation right now. Their trip began with some excitement. They flew standby because Michael's dad is a retired airline pilot, so he can get them standby tickets at ridiculously low prices. They

were to fly to Paris, and just days before the flight they told us they were sure they would get on their flight because there was lots of space available. Unfortunately, hours before the flight, suddenly a bunch of standbys showed up. The problem for Michael and Carissa is the airline has a priority system. Current airline employees and their families have a higher priority than families of retired employees. One after another people with higher priority showed up for the flight until there was no more room. Carissa and Michael were bumped from the flight. They ended up having to fly to London and taking the train to Paris, but the key here is to note how the priority system works.

If people with a higher priority than you show up they get on the airplane before you do. And if they use up all the available resource, meaning seats on the plane, then you don't get on the plane. We often talk about having priorities.

Unfortunately what we often mean by saying something is a priority is that this thing is really important and we want to do it, so we feel awfully guilty about it because we haven't done it. How often do you hear people say family is a priority to them, or their faith, or friends or their own health, and they feel bad because they have not been spending the time on those "priority" things that they should?

Think about how the priority system works. In the airline suppose there are priorities listed as A, B and C with A being the highest and C the lowest. The A people get on the plane first, then the B's and finally C's. If there is no space after the A group board, the rest get left behind. If the airline worked the way many of us do they would let B's and C's on in some random fashion and find there was no room for the A people. But they would feel really bad about it. Jesus told Martha she needed to know what is necessary, what is the most important priority. She needed to do that first, and if other lesser things didn't get done, then so be it. That's how priorities work.

One day when we were on vacation Laurie and I were going back to our hotel. I was driving the car on a road that had one lane in each direction and we were behind a woman riding on a motor scooter. The woman began signaling to make a left turn. At the place she wanted to turn the road widened and there was a left turn lane. She pulled into the left turn lane. As I got near that spot I had this sudden sense that I should slow down. I was only going about 30, but I took my foot off the gas. Sometimes I think Laurie has some supernatural abilities because there have been some occasions where she has sensed things before they happen. Every now and then she will warn me that someone driving next to us is going to shift into our lane even though there is no sign of that. She's usually right. In this case, I

had that odd sense that I should be ready for something unexpected. Sure enough instead of turning left the woman on the scooter suddenly whipped her bike toward a driveway on the right side of the road, pulling right in front of me. I don't know where that anticipation of something dumb like that came from. I wasn't looking at the woman, but maybe I caught some odd movement in my peripheral vision that I wasn't even conscious of. Whatever the case I was ready for it, hit the brakes and swerved. At the last minute she stopped, realizing she'd made a terrible mistake. Our car stopped about two feet from her. I don't know what that woman was doing. But I do know this: she lost track of what is necessary. Anytime a person is driving, but especially if driving a scooter, a person needs to remember what is most important is to pay attention to driving and to what is happening around you. She lost track of that priority, apparently distracted by something she suddenly decided she needed to do, and it could easily have cost her her life.

Jesus is the model for us. He never was in a hurry. He never was too stressed. That's because he went through life listening to the Father. He said he did what the Father had for him to do and said what the Father told him. He tuned out all the other unnecessary stuff.

This incident tells us two things. Jesus says the solution for being worried, upset and distracted is to understand what is necessary and do that even if it means other things don't get done. He also clearly says that what is necessary is relating to him. It is letting him instruct us about how to live. This is the one thing that we absolutely must do.

TRUST

Martha came to believe that everything was up to her. She had to do it all, and if she didn't then it wouldn't happen. Jesus says something radical to her. Essentially he says, "Put me first and I will make what you have be enough." Mary believed that her preparations for hospitality were bounded by her need to be with Jesus and learn from him, but that if she did that one necessary thing the rest would be sufficient. You've heard about it from me ad infinitum. The heart of the message of the new covenant Jesus came to bring, the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ, is "what God supplies is enough."

In Matthew 6:33 Jesus said some familiar words. After mentioning a number of things that people typically stress over he said, "But seek first his (God's) kingdom, and all these things will be given to you as well." Here's the interesting dilemma of the world. If you make the focus of your life be the things everyone

thinks they need to pursue and to do, and you seek those things, you may get them but you won't get the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is the place of joy, peace and love. So you might get the things you are sure you need, or you might not, but you won't get the thing you most long for. But if you seek the kingdom of God you will get it for sure and Jesus guarantees you will get the stuff of the world that you *need* (not necessarily want). Which of those seems like the better deal to you?

So often the stress in our lives comes from failing to believe that. We fear we won't have enough money, or people won't like us and we will feel rejected and worthless, or that our kids won't have the opportunities they need, or that they're going to reject the Lord, or that we will lose our job and end up on the street unless we work ourselves to a frazzle with utterly distorted priorities to get those things we fear we might lose out on otherwise. A friend of mine ran into a problem at work because he was asked to do something unethical. He said to me, "I can get another job. I can't get another soul." He identified what was most necessary and he did that, trusting that what God supplies is enough.

In the end there is no bigger element in dealing with stress than trust. God does not expect you to do what is humanly impossible. God doesn't expect you to do what someone else does, or to do more than they do. He asks you simply to be faithful and to trust him with the outcome. Our biggest stress producer is thinking we control life and that we must make it come out according to our design. Be faithful to God, and trust that what he does with you will be sufficient.

STAY SECURE

Martha might well have wanted to put on the mother of all feasts. She had to be the Martha Stewart of her day. After all, what would people think if all she did was lay out some pita bread and a few fish for Jesus and the boys to eat off paper plates? How bad would that look? I will caution you right now, if you live by Jesus' priorities you are going to be criticized by someone. There will be people who don't like it and won't think much of you as a result. I've been there and you almost certainly have too.

We're going to have to be solid in our identity in Christ, knowing that God loves us and that's what matters. We're going to have to be willing to be disrespected, disliked and criticized by others and not be upset about that if we want to follow Jesus. We're going to need the attitude that Paul displayed in 1 Thessalonians 2:4. There he wrote, "We are not trying to please people, but God, who tests our

hearts.” Then in verse 6 he wrote, “we were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else.” We need to be secure in who we are so if people don’t like it, well, that’s unfortunate, but we aren’t going to stress over it.

That can be hard, especially if it is someone you love. When our son, Toby, was young he started playing hockey. He got his neighborhood friend to start playing too. After several years his friend’s mom became an extreme hockey mom. She paid for hockey lessons from a coach every week and she got her son involved in a high commitment travel ice hockey team. Toby wanted that. He saw his friend getting better and playing at a higher level. Dangling out there was the dream of going to college on a hockey scholarship, or playing juniors and eventually having a shot at the NHL. He badgered us to put him in those programs. We said no. The ice hockey program involved playing on Sunday mornings. We said, “worshiping God is our priority. Hockey is nice, but it is not necessary.” He was upset, he was angry, and we had multiple blowups over that issue. It was really hard to have our own son angry at us for that decision. He didn’t like it and he criticized us severely for it. But today our son believes in the priority of knowing and worshiping the Lord. If you just step back and think about it the decision is easy. Would you be happy if your child grew up to be a great athlete but had no interest in the Lord? What grief that would bring. We had to stay secure in the fact that our Father loved us even if it meant our son was upset with us. The irony is that of the two of those boys today they are both very good hockey players, but Toby might be the slightly better of them.

KEEP AT IT

Finally doing what is most important is going to require some discipline. It means you are going to have to say no and at times keep on saying no to some good things. That can be hard to do, but if you give up on letting your life be ruled by the Lord you inevitably will end up stressed and frustrated.

We live in a fallen world. Keep in your mind the picture of you just tossing one ball up in the air and catching it. Jesus said this is all that is needed. The problem is life will naturally start throwing balls at you. Something about life in a fallen world wants to force you to be a juggler. The problem is when you attempt that you will surely drop the one ball that is needed. Keep making sure that you are not making the unnecessary necessary.