

The Antidote For Anxiety

by Mark Jarvinen

We Americans are a restless people, obsessed and anxious about many things. In 1936, the familiar term, “**stress**,” was coined by a fumbling, 29 year old Austrian endocrinologist named **Hans Selye**. Apparently, Selye had a bad habit of dropping his lab rats during his research experiments. Consequently he would chase them all over the lab until he could corner and recapture them. Upon testing his rats, he found that they were developing ulcers and shrunken immune tissues. He concluded that his clumsiness was making the rats sick. Searching for a word to describe this response to life under tension, Selye borrowed a term from physics, in which bending a piece of metal until it snaps occurs because of the force, or “**stress**” exerted upon it. Now, only decades later, stress is an all too familiar part of the human experience. Some call it a national epidemic. Doctors believe that 75 to 90% of all reported diseases are due, at least in part, to stress. Four out of five Americans report a need to reduce stress in their lives. Ironically, with unprecedented prosperity has come unprecedented stress.

Stress is not any particular circumstance, but rather our **response** to a circumstance. In fact a certain amount of stress is positive and necessary for a happy and meaningful life. The problems arise when we find ourselves overloaded with stress. The complexities of modern life lend themselves to stress overload. Some years ago, child development expert, **David Elkind**, suggested that due to the alarming increase in violence and crime, we are more **afraid** than ever; due to the rapidly changing job market, technology, and economic factors, we are more

insecure than ever; and due to the widespread breakdown of the family we are more **alone** than ever. Stress overload can lead to **depression**, but more generally, stress overload leads to **anxiety**, which is the belief that at any moment things will become horrible and hopeless. Stress overload is a modern day problem, but that's not to say that the Bible doesn't offer help. Let's look to today's text in **Luke 10:38-42**.

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 few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

This brief passage highlights the difference between two sisters, both of whom were close friends of Jesus. The home of Mary and Martha, who lived in the village of Bethany with their brother, Lazarus, about two miles east of Jerusalem, was always open to Jesus and his disciples. On this occasion, near the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, they took advantage of this standing invitation and stopped in for dinner. Just think, thirteen guests to prepare for. You can imagine the work there was to be done. This situation could produce a stress response in even the most able hostess.

The burden of preparation fell on **Martha**. She was the doer. You can just picture her, can't you? Wiping her hands on her apron and brushing the hair out of her eyes as she bustles about the kitchen making

her preparations. And then there's **Mary**, a dreamer more than a doer. While Martha hurries, Mary sits at the feet of Jesus, engrossed in the Master's words, awed by His wisdom and power.

Martha wishes Mary would be as engrossed with the job at hand. Martha loved her sister deeply; she just wished she would do her share. There were vegetables to chop, fruit to be washed, tables to set. Why couldn't Mary just once see the need and lift a finger to help? Martha's stress response mechanisms kicked in, causing a cascade of neuro-hormonal changes. Her blood pressure became elevated. She became noticeably agitated. Finally, the volcano inside her erupted. She stormed into the living room and in a grandstand play went right to Jesus with her complaint, no doubt expecting the Master's support.

"Lord, don't you care that I have to get this meal by myself? Tell my sister to come and help me!" (v. 40).

Jesus placates Martha, but with an edge. I'm paraphrasing now, but in essence Jesus said -

"Martha, Martha, one dish would have been enough. Don't worry about serving us. Mary has chosen the one thing needful, the good part, and that will not be taken from her."

Jesus, in so many words, was saying to Martha, ***"Get a grip! First things, first."*** Jesus knew her well enough to be straight with her, yet, He spoke the truth in love. After all, Martha's actions were noteworthy. **She was both a servant and a realist.** In fact, if it wasn't for the Marthas of this world, nothing much would get done. As a pastor for almost 40 years, I've been exceedingly thankful for the **"Martha-types"** that have attended the churches I've served, because they've offered so much service and sacrifice to the overall life and mission of the church.

This incident, in **Luke 10** follows on the heels of the **Good Samaritan parable**, where Jesus defines a "**neighbor**" as anyone in need. Anyone who helps a person in need in Jesus' name is a good neighbor and is worthy of the Master's praise. That was Martha all the way. Jesus couldn't fault Martha for her lack of servanthood. His critique was the **spirit** in which her service was rendered.

It's probably fair to say that Martha was a "**type A**" personality, a bit of an "**obsessive compulsive.**" Her motto was "**anything worth doing is worth doing well.**" Jesus was not against excellence or quality effort. In fact, He taught his followers to go the extra mile for others. However, based on our text, Jesus would not agree with the "bottom-line" drivers of today who believe that "the end justifies the means." Rather, Jesus would say that **the process by which the goal is reached is as important as the goal itself.** If what you're doing, even if inspired by the best of motives, causes a stress overload, marked by extreme or prolonged irritability or frustration, then it's time to reduce stress. We could say that **Martha's irritation spoiled the party for Mary.** Can you imagine how Mary felt after Martha's grandstand play, placing her in a bad light in front of their guests? **Martha's outburst also spoiled the party for the disciples.** I'm sure they put on their polite faces, but this kind of tension always makes guests uncomfortable. Furthermore, in some sense, **her irritation spoiled the party for Jesus,** the one for whom she had wanted things to be so special. You see, **when irritation is part of the service, it somehow spoils the service.** The job may get done, but it's a downer for everyone in the vicinity and the purpose of the service gets lost.

A more realistic motto for most of us might be this: **"Most things worth doing are worth doing simply."** There are many things in life that are worth doing, but we just can't do them all equally well. You can't prepare a seven-course meal for everyone that you would like to spend time with. Perhaps soup and a sandwich, or just a cup of coffee, is enough to accompany the real and worthwhile blessing of a few moments of fellowship with a friend. In today's complex world, experts say we are faced with as many as 100 choices a day. How can we expect to make the best possible choices in all 100 instances? There wouldn't be enough hours in a day to weigh the pros and cons of each choice to insure that we were making the best possible decision. However, there are probably 10 of these 100 decisions that are important to our overall life's purpose and well-being, and very likely only one or two of the ten are extremely important. We had better give careful consideration to these 10 important choices, being sure to do the one or two extremely important things well. This leads us to the issue of **priorities**, which is the key consideration in reducing stress and the main ingredient in the **antidote for anxiety**.

I find myself getting nervous when people talk about **"simplifying their lives,"** because so often that means leaving the greater things in life for the lesser things. It so often means finding a new form of self-indulgence at the expense of serving others. The kind of **simplifying that satisfies involves leaving the lesser things for the sake of the greater things.** I'm reminded of Jesus' words in **Matthew 6:33 – "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things (life's necessities that we deem so important) will be given to you as**

well.”

In many ways, today’s culture works against simplifying our lives. According to a recent study from **WorkPlaceTrends.com**, 65% of professionals are expected to be available outside of work, both by email and by phone. As a result, many of these professionals feel they don’t have enough free time and that their job is “colonizing” their entire day. A publication called **The Economist** reported that 60% of workers who use smart phones are connected to their jobs for over 13 hours a day and to do less is to stop competing with those who will. People increasingly live by the motto, **"If it can be done, it should be done."** Stress levels rise accordingly. At what point do Christians simply say, **“Enough is enough.”** More than ever before, **"first things first"** must become our intentional approach to life as we seek to live for God’s glory ahead of our own.

What do we mean **by “first things first?”** Jesus says it well in **v. 42: "only one thing is needed."** The implication is that Mary's choice to sit at Jesus' feet is in fact that **"one thing."** I take this to mean it is life’s highest priority. Jesus' timeless teaching here is that there is one priority that will make all of life more balanced leaving us whole - i.e., **spending quality time each day communing with the Master.** This means going head to head with the **“time is money”** mindset so prevalent in our culture, which ends up making us **“feel busier”** than perhaps we really are. **What do I mean?** Ever since a clock was first used to define “a work day” in the 18th century, time has been understood in relation to money. Once hours are financially quantified, people worry more about wasting, saving or using their hours profitably. When economies grow and incomes rise, everyone’s time becomes more valuable. And the more

valuable something becomes, the scarcer it seems. Individualistic cultures like ours, which emphasize achievement, help cultivate this time-is-money mindset. This creates an urgency to make every moment count in order to be productive, which militates against spending unhurried time communing with Jesus, the one thing needed.

What does it mean to spend time with Jesus? It certainly points to a strong devotional life, but it doesn't mean you must become a Bible scholar. It simply means being still long enough each day in the presence of the Lord to let Him minister to you - even if it's only a thought for the day and a brief prayer. Today's text teaches that we need to **allow Jesus to do something in us as a higher priority than doing something for others**. Only then do we go forth in service with a full cup. Only then do we have something to give beyond just ourselves. Serving out of the energy of the self burns us out. It can destroy us.

A great preacher of our day, **Haddon Robinson**, says that trying to love your neighbor in your own strength is like trying to dip the Atlantic ocean with a teaspoon. You dip, and dip, and dip. When the day is over you have a puddle at your feet, but the Atlantic is still there. If you give yourself first to neighbor love, it will destroy your spirit. It will make you anxious. You'll discover you can't stay with it. Only neighbor love growing out of a love for Jesus Christ in response to His love for us, has staying power. Before you become involved in service for others, allow Jesus to serve you. And friends, that's precisely what He wants to do. He didn't bring you to Himself to make you a slave. By grace, He brought you to Himself by going to the cross and rising again to set you free and make you His friend for eternity.

The story is told of a mother and son who lived in a large American city during the World War II era. They had a unique and special relationship, spending many an evening together, reading and listening to music. But eventually, the young man met and married a young woman. It was wartime and housing was very difficult to find so the mother offered to make an apartment for herself in the second story of their house, leaving the first floor to her son and his bride. **"The only thing I ask," the mother said, "is that you spend a little time with me once in a while. I know I'm going to miss our evenings together."** The young man promised to do so. For a while, life continued as he had promised, but eventually he became busy. Days, and then weeks went by with hardly an acknowledgement of her presence.

But on her birthday, the son bought his mother a lovely dress and went upstairs to deliver it. She opened the package, looked at the dress, and sincerely thanked him for the gesture.

The son said, **"Mother, you don't like it."**

She said, **"Yes, I do. It's my color. Thank you."**

He said, **"I still have the sales slip, I'll take it back."**

She responded, **"No, it's a lovely dress."**

He said, **"Mother, you don't fool me, something's wrong. What is it?"**

The woman turned and opened her closet and said, **"Son, I have enough dresses here to last me the rest of my life. What I really want is to spend time with you."**

In like manner, Jesus Christ, the Kings of Kings and Lord of Lords, desires fellowship with us. He wants us more than our service to Him. In today's text, Mary chose what Jesus called **"the good part,"** because the fellowship of His friends, more than a good meal is what He wanted more than anything. And you know what? He feels the same way toward us.

He invites us to bask in His presence as our antidote to anxiety, and enjoy the peace and freedom of living under His grace. A-men.