

# Mary, Martha, & the Power of Margin

Good to see you guys. If you have a bible, turn with me to Luke 10. To those of you who showed up last Sunday only to find no one here, sorry about that. We tried to post about it online as much as we could, but we took the Sunday off because we were in the mountains for the weekend with around 50 of the members of City Church for our annual Family Vacation. If you're not familiar, once a year, we take as many of the members of City Church as can go out of town for a weekend to hang out and talk about the upcoming year together. Since we believe church is a family, we call that trip *Family Vacation*. Just a weekend in a couple of cabins, eating lots of good food and relaxing together. So I'm sorry if you were confused by why we weren't here, but I'm not sorry at all that I was in the mountains doing all that.

But this week we're hopping back into things, and we're going to jump back into the series we started two weeks ago called *Neighboring*. Which is essentially a series about how every relationship we have matters. Last time, we covered the story most of us know as the story of the "good Samaritan," where Jesus unpack what it looks like to truly "love your neighbor as yourself." And we talked about how the word "neighbor" in the bible actually means a little bit more than just "people who live near us." We said that biblically speaking, a "neighbor" is anyone who God puts in regular proximity to us." If it's a person we come into contact with semi-regularly, they are considered our "neighbor." The bible wants us to see **every single relationship we have, every person God has put us in proximity to, as an opportunity to get to know that person, love and serve that person, and one day get to tell them about who Jesus is.** That in many ways is the purpose we've been given as followers of Jesus on planet earth. That was the point of last week's passage.

But if you're going to do that—if you're going to take the time to build relationships with those God puts you in proximity to, you're going to run into an obstacle or two. You're going to hit some roadblocks to neighboring that may need to be addressed. And one *major* one we see in today's passage. This is actually the story in the gospel of Luke *directly* after the one we looked at last week about neighboring. And in this passage, I think the author shows us one *major barrier* to getting to know those God puts around us. So let's take a look at Luke 10, starting in v. 38:

*[38] Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named **Martha** welcomed him into **her house**. [39] And she had a **sister** called **Mary**, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. [40] But [—and this is a very, very important *but*—] **Martha was distracted with much servicing.***

Now, really quick question that should be easy to answer: biblically speaking, is *servicing* a good thing or a bad thing? *Good*, right? Servicing is a great thing. But here in v. 40 of our passage, it almost seems to say that *Martha's* servicing is a *bad* thing. Or at least that it's a *distracting* thing. I get that from what we just read, but also from what Jesus says explicitly in the rest of the passage. Take a look, picking it up where we just left off, halfway through v. 40:

*And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you **not care** that my sister has left me to **serve alone**? Tell her then to help me." [Martha is so stressed out that she is now bossing Jesus around—just generally speaking, not a great spot to be in.] [41] But the Lord answered her,*

*“Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, [42] but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.”*

So the contrast here is fairly obvious: Martha’s mind and attention are on *many* things, while Mary’s mind and attention are on only *one* thing: but it’s the *right* thing. Now specifically, the *right* thing is Jesus and his teaching. But even bigger picture, it’s that Mary has the time and the energy to focus on the person that was in *proximity* to her—who *happens to be* Jesus. Mary has the awareness and the bandwidth to do that, but Martha doesn’t. And **the reason Martha doesn’t is because she is focused on so many other things**. Many *good* things, maybe even many *great* things. But those *many* things are distracting her from the one thing that matters. Do you see that?

And you know, **as many things as we have in abundance in our culture today, there is one thing that—like Martha—most of us tend to be missing. And that’s a little something called margin**. Most of us simply don’t have a ton of *margin* in our lives. By margin, I mean the bandwidth in our lives for new things, new people, new relationships. Most of us, generally speaking, aren’t wandering around thinking to ourselves, “what could I possibly do with all of this spare time and energy I have on my hands?” That’s just not where most of us are at. If that *is* you, let me know—I’ve got a lot of things I’d love to get off my plate onto yours.

And generally, the reason we *don’t* have *margin*, is because like Martha, we have *so many other* things going on. It’s been said often that we tend to wear busyness like a badge of honor in our society—I think that’s so true. If someone asks us how we are, many of us don’t even get more than a few words out before we use the word *busy*. “Busy, but good.” “Just really, really busy.” We even sometimes volunteer that answer for *other* people: we’ll be asking them to do something and we’ll say “I know you’re really busy, but...” And have you ever noticed what happens when you come across somebody who *isn’t* busy? Like if you say to someone “I’m sure you’re super busy, but...” and they just respond with “no I’m not. I’m not busy at all.” We don’t even know what to do with that. We feel like we’ve found a unicorn: “you’re not busy? Who’s not busy? Are you also a serial killer?” We have a hard time with it because in today’s world, we just *assume that everybody is busy*. We *assume* that none of us have any *margin* to go around.

And let’s just be completely honest: **probably, one of the primary reasons we don’t spend much time neighboring—building relationships and getting to know those God puts around us—is because we don’t feel like we have the margin to do it**. We think “I’ve just got too much going on to meet the people God has put me in proximity to.” We tend not to connect with—or sometimes even *notice*—the people God puts around us, because we have so much else going on. We’re *all* Martha in our own right. One of the primary reasons we don’t take the time to neighbor well is because we don’t have the *margin* to neighbor well.

So here’s what I want us to do. I want us to talk about two different types of “margin” we are going to need if we’re going to love and get to know our neighbors. For each, we’ll talk about *why* we’ll need that type of margin, and then at the end we’ll talk a little bit about how practically to *create* those types of margin in our lives.

## Margin With Our Time

In order to take the time to get to know our neighbors, we're going to have to allot some margin into our *schedule*. **If you are always rushing from one thing to the next, one event to the next, one appointment to the next, it's likely that you will entirely miss the people God has put you in proximity to, and how he might have you connect with them.**

In our culture, we tend to *always* be in a hurry. Like Martha, between the dozen other things we have going on, we just don't have the time to slow down, and spend uninterrupted time with those that God puts around us. *Hurry* is one of the biggest obstacles to loving and getting to know other people. I love the way pastor and author John Ortberg puts it:

*Love and hurry and fundamentally incompatible. Love always takes time, and **time is the one thing hurried people don't have.*** [I personally don't like that quote because of how convicting it is to me. But he's got a point right? Many of us struggle to love people because we never slow down enough to do it.]

But just by way of contrast, have you ever noticed how *not* hurried Jesus was during his time on earth? He's very *purposeful*, he's very *driven*, very *motivated*—but never really in a hurry. Think of Jesus letting all the kids of his day come hang out with him. All the disciples, assuming they are put there as Jesus' *bodyguards*, start to *rebuke* the children and the parents of the children for letting all this happen: "hey guys, this is *Jesus*—he doesn't have time for all this." To which Jesus responds by saying "no—let them come and do not hinder them." In another story, Jesus is on the way to heal the centurion's daughter who is sick, and on his way there another woman who is sick reaches out for healing. Jesus stops what he's doing and interacts with her. By the time he's done, the little girl's father says "don't bother Jesus with this anymore, she's already dead." **Sometimes Jesus downright frustrates people with how *not in a hurry* he is.** Everybody is caught up in the hustle and bustle of everything around him, and here Jesus is, just taking his time, with plenty of *margin* to go around.

But here's what's interesting: **at precisely the same time, Jesus is about as *productive* as a person can be.** Think about *how many people* Jesus *healed*. Think of how many people Jesus *fed*. Think of how many people he *spent time with*. Think of how many people Jesus built *relationships* with: we know of the 12 disciples, many scholars say he actually had anywhere from 72-144, and even then, he's always inviting *more* people to come follow him like it's not even a thing. And yet *none* of that keeps him from interacting with all the random people that come up to him in the villages he's passing through.

**So Jesus has *plenty* to do, he gets *plenty* done, and yet somehow still has plenty of margin to build relationships with people he doesn't know yet. Somehow for Jesus, being *productive* doesn't mean being in a *hurry*.** It doesn't mean operating with zero margin in his schedule. And if we are going to be active contributors to the kingdom of God here on earth, we need to develop the ability to be *like Jesus* in this arena. We need to learn how to live *full, productive, and yet unhurried* lives. Or at least a slightly *less hurried* lives.

So that's the first type of margin we'll need—margin with our *time*. But then secondly...

## Margin with Our Relationships

The other thing you'll notice in the life of Jesus is that he has *relational* margin. So he not only operates with flex in his *schedule*, but like we just said, he also is always making space in his *life* for the new person that wants to talk to him or ask him about something or needs something from him. He always has bandwidth for new *relationships*. This one I think is one we could learn a lot from too. I don't think a lot of us operate with much *relational* margin. I think often when we're given the opportunity to build a relationship with somebody new—we aren't quite as eager to do it as Jesus was. **And I think a lot of that is because the other relationships we already have take up all our relational energy. The relationships we already have make us not want or not have time for new relationships.** Now, this happens in different ways for different people.

For some, it takes the form of *best friendships*. Now I'm all for having best friends. I happen to have some myself, in fact. So I'm all for best friends, especially if by "best friends," we mean those who know us really well, and those who regularly push us towards Jesus both by encouragement and when necessary, confrontation. But what happens sometimes is that **we start to operate as if time with our 1-2 best friends is the only time really worth prioritizing.** When we start to *only* hang out with our best friends and not so much prioritize time with *other* people *outside of those friendships*.

Someone told me once that **friendship is a gift to give, not a possession to hoard.** What I think they meant by that is that some of us have a tendency to see our friendships as *possessions*—"I have this friendship, or these two friendships, and that's all I really need." But I think biblically, we should probably be seeing friendship as a *gift to give*—"I have the ability to *offer* friendship to those around me that may not currently have those friendships."<sup>1</sup> So that's one type of relationship that—unchecked—can eat up relational margin: best friendships.

Another one is a *dating relationship*. What *can* happen is that when we're dating, all our time, all our money, all our creativity goes towards impressing and schmoozing on the person we're dating. So we've all seen this play out: one of our friends starts dating somebody new, and they completely disappear off the face of the earth for a while. They spend nearly all their time with that person, and then months later we either see them again because a break-up happened, *or* we get their wedding invitation in the mail. But when we operate that way in regards to our dating relationships, what happens is that *other* relationships with those God has put around us tend to fade off into the background. Because dating consumes all our relational margin.

And yet another relationship that can crowd out relational margin is our relationship with *our spouse and/or our kids*. What can happen is that often, **we feel like we have to spend so much time with our nuclear family—with our household—that we *don't* have time for relationships with other people.** For instance, I'm not sure what it is, but sometimes, when I text some of my married guy friends to see if they want to hang out, they'll text back and be like "I can't tonight. My wife had a really hard day at work and needs to rest." And I always want to be like "oh sorry to hear that. But I wasn't asking her to hang out. Do you wanna hang out?" And honestly, it might even help her *out* if you got out of the house for a bit, and gave her some space to rest for the evening." Or I'll hear of *moms* of small kids who *want* to

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<sup>1</sup> From a biblical perspective, this is much of what is meant by the concept of *hospitality*.

spend time building with and relationally investing *other* ladies, but they feel like to do *any* of that would be shortchanging their kids, and the time their kids need with them. So **it can be that we prioritize our family in a way that prevents building relationships with others outside of that family.**

Now, some of you might be thinking, “wait...but aren’t we *supposed* to prioritize our family? Like, isn’t that a *good* thing to do?” And here’s how I’d answer that question biblically: “yes...*sometimes*.” But not always and *only*. Let me show you why I say that. Take a look with me on the screen at Mark 3, v. 31-35:

*And his mother and his brothers came [that is, Jesus’ biological family members], and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a crowd was sitting around him, and they [a few of the disciples] said to [Jesus], “Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you.” And he answered them, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” [to which I can only imagine the disciples are like “uhh, your family? The ones who are outside asking for you? We just went over this, Jesus.”] And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, “**Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.**”*

So don’t miss this: **Jesus sees his biological family as important. But seeing them as important doesn’t mean they get the trump card in every situation.** They certainly don’t get the trump card here, right? Because here, Jesus says basically, “my biological family can wait—I’m with my *larger* family right now.” So at the very *least*, I think we could say that **Jesus does not always prioritize his family over others. Maybe sometimes he does, but certainly not always.** So again, the answer to “should I prioritize my biological family is ‘yes...*sometimes*.’”

Something I’ll hear people say a lot is that our priority list in life should look something like this: *God, spouse, family, job, church...* and so on. Have you seen or heard of a version of that? Yep, really popular. Now, let me say that I think this can be a helpful *guide*. I think it can be a great framework for helping get some priorities in order that *have been* out of order. But that being said, I do think it’s worth mentioning that you will not find that list anywhere in the Scriptures. And in fact, as we’ve just seen, you will see times where Jesus *violates* that list. So while that framework can be helpful as a *general principle*, we need to be careful not to elevate it over and above things that the Scriptures *do* clearly teach. Make sense?

So real practically, let me give you an example of what it looks like to live in this tension really well: there’s a couple in my LifeGroup with two kids: a three year old and a one year old. Our LifeGroup meets every Wednesday, from about 6:15 until about 8:30 at night. So for them to be there at LifeGroup, it means their kids get to bed a solid hour to hour and half past their bedtimes, especially once you factor in the drive home. So them being at LifeGroup each week means their kids’ schedules get thrown off a little on Wednesday nights. And because I also have kids, I know that likely means that *these parents’* schedules the *next morning* probably get thrown off a little too. But to them, it’s important to have the relationships they get to build in and through LifeGroup. So they make it a *priority* to be there. ~~So every week, they bring their kids’ pajamas with them to LifeGroup, and when it’s over, they change their kids into their pajamas for the drive home, so that the kids can fall asleep on the way home, and they can just carry them in, straight to bed.~~ But practically, **that’s an example of a time when they prioritize their spiritual family over their nuclear family. They’re okay with life getting just a little bit worse for their biological family in that way, so that they could prioritize relationships outside of their**

**biological family.** And at times, life in the kingdom is going to require things like that. ~~Now, if that same family was keeping their kids up until 2:00am every night of the week just so they could hang out with people, we'd probably say "yeah that feels like you've got some priorities out of order."~~ But keeping them up later than they'd prefer a couple nights a week? I think that's well within the framework of sacrifices that can be made for the kingdom.

So my point is simply that this one requires some *nuance*. Because when we have a spouse and/or a family, *some* of our time and attention should go towards being with and building relationships with and caring for the people in our household. We should never make a habit of *neglecting* our biological family. ~~If you get married or have kids and none of your lifestyle or calendar changes at all, there's probably an issue.~~ But at the same time, **if having a biological family means you can't participate in building relationships with others outside of your family**, means you can't participate in neighboring—getting to know God puts in proximity to you, **we've gotten something out-of-order somewhere along the line.**

Now zoom out for a second with me. Here's *why this matters*. **A biological family can be one of the easiest reasons for not participating in neighboring, or it can be a season of life that you leverage for neighboring.** For instance, I can't tell you how many *more* conversations I've struck up with *total strangers* at the grocery store, or at the playground, *because I have my kid with me*. Or at *Chick-Fil-A*, of all places, but everybody there is already a Christian, so that one doesn't count. But my point is that those conversations are opportunities for *neighboring*. They're opportunities to *get to know others that God has put me in proximity to*. They're opportunities to hear those people's stories, and maybe one day get to share with them about Jesus. But if all I'm concerned about is my biological family—if all I'm concerned with is clocking out each day, going home and shutting and locking the doors of my house and spending time with my family each night—I can totally miss *all* of that. Do you see that? And that's why we want to create relational margin.

So in summary, we want to be the type of people that create both margin with our *time* and margin with our *relationships* to neighbor: to get to know those whom God puts around us. So let's talk for a bit, real practically, about how to create these types of margin. I think we could sum it up with one phrase...

## Setting Boundaries

**One thing we're going to have to do if we're going to have margin in our life is to set some boundaries with where our time will and won't go.** For some people, that looks like setting some boundaries on *how many* nights a week you put things on the calendar. Maybe for some of you, your tendency is to put something on the books nearly every single night of the week, which means you *always* feel like you have too much going on to neighbor. So for you, it might look like setting a limit on how many nights a week you will plan to go do something or be somewhere, *so that* you have some margin to build relationships with people God puts in your life.

But for others of you, maybe *your tendency* is the exact opposite. Maybe for you, your tendency is to not make any commitments to be anywhere because putting anything on the calendar feels like an *obligation*. And you are allergic to obligations. So for you, maybe your tendency is to have *nothing* on the calendar nearly every night, and putting *anything* on the calendar feels burdensome. Some of us have a tendency to think we're super busy when we have 1-2 things a week planned. That's not busy. So **some**

**of you, instead of setting a limit on how many nights you'll *hang out* with people, you need to set a limit on how many nights you'll just sit at home and do nothing.** Some of us need to go "you know what? Five nights a week where I sit at home and watch Netflix is plenty of downtime." "Five nights a week where I don't see anybody but my spouse or my household is plenty of undivided relational time with them." **Some of us need to set boundaries not to keep us from doing too *much*, but to keep us from doing too *little*.** Does that make sense?

So some of us need to set boundaries one way, and others need to set boundaries in another. But either way, as a follower of Jesus, you're going to want to get good at keeping and managing your schedule. You've got to run your schedule instead of letting your schedule *run you*.

Real practically, here's how Ana and I try to accomplish that. Each week, on Sunday evenings, we sit down and we look at our calendar for the upcoming week. And when we do that, we're paying careful attention to a few things: 1) where are we getting time with *each other*, 2) where are we getting time to *rest* as a family, and 3) where are we planning time to spend with others? We want to pay careful attention to all of those things. We don't want all of our time to go towards *only* hanging out with each other, we don't want all of our time to be *just* us hanging out as a family, and we don't want all of our time to go towards hanging out with other people. So each week, we get out the calendar and we try to make sure *all* of those things are happening to some extent.

And bigger picture, we try to get into a fairly predictable rhythm on a weekly basis. So usually, Monday nights Ana works late and we take it easy—we rest. Tuesday nights, we'll either hang out with people from our LifeGroup, people from City Church, or people God puts in our life. Wednesday night is our LifeGroup night. Thursday night is date night with each other. Friday night is another night with church family or neighbors. And Saturday night is generally a night in. And then Sunday night we look over our schedule. So we have this predictable rhythm set up to where, ideally, when we stick to it, we're not stretching ourselves too thin, but we're also not just being hermits and doing nothing every night. The goal is that we are creating margin in our lives, but also not letting our lives be eaten up by laziness.

So if you struggle to have margin in your life, I'd strongly suggest doing something like that, regardless of what season of life you're in. It's a way to run your schedule and not have your schedule *happen to you*. It's a way to ensure that your *calendar* reflects the *relationships* that you want to prioritize. And by doing that, what you're doing is you are budgeting time into your schedule to build relationships with your neighbors. That's one really practical way to create margin in our lives for neighboring.

Now, before we're done, I just want to talk for a bit about why this is worth it. We've talked very practically—now I want to go big picture with it for a minute or two. Because most of us don't super *like* disrupting the status quo in our lives and schedules. For most of us, every part of us is going to resist making adjustments and priority shifts like this. So I want to talk briefly about *why* we should fight for this. And I want to do that by reading Matthew 6, v. 33:

*But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

So that right there is wildly popular verse. It's on coffee cups, Christian t-shirts, cross-stitching—there's probably hundreds of inspirational posters with that verse plastered on them. And for good reason: that's a beautiful summation of how we should live as followers of Jesus.

But what's interesting to me is the *context* of that verse. In context, do you know what Jesus is actually talking about when he says that? He's talking about *anxiety*. He's talking about "being anxious and worried about many things"—he's talking about some of the very things that Martha was battling in Luke 10. And his solution to being "anxious and worried about many things"? Is to "seek first the kingdom of God." That to Jesus is the answer: putting the kingdom of God *first* in my family, in my marriage, in my parenting, in my job, in my career, in my friendships, in my calendar, in my relationships—in everything. **Every decision in my life gets run through this question: *does this further the kingdom of God?***

Friends, **Jesus and his kingdom are worth *everything***. They're worth anything we have to give up, anything we have to lose, worth anything we have to sacrifice for. He and his kingdom are worth *everything*. So suffice it to say, that if today we need to re-prioritize how we *view* some of our relationships, if we need to re-examine how we allocate some of our time, if we need to re-focus how much of a priority we give certain relationships in our lives, *every bit of that is worth it* for the kingdom. It's worth it to see God's kingdom come here on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus went to the cross to show us—among other things—that his kingdom is worth whatever sacrifice it takes. So following his lead, let's take up our crosses—which certainly includes our time and our schedules and our relationships, and imitate him in that sacrifice.

And according to Jesus himself, *when we do that*, "all *these things* will be given to you as well." All the things that we are anxious about not having, all the things we are anxious about missing out on, all the people we are nervous about disappointing—all of those things will take care of themselves. It is not our job to participate in every possible experience we could experience. It is not our job to be at every party and social gathering we could possibly be at. It is not our job to have our kids in every possible extra-curricular they could be involved in. None of that is our job.

But it *is* our job to seek first the kingdom. It is our job to leverage whatever season of life, whatever neighborhood we're in, whatever relationships we're given to see the kingdom of God come on earth as it is in heaven. So let's set our eyes on *that*. Let's set our schedules on *that*. Let's invest our relational energy in *that*. Let's create the margin to neighbor well. And let's trust that all these things—the things we *need*—will be given to us as well. Amen?

Let's pray.