

What Do You Seek?

Deep-Dive: The One Thing (Martha and Mary)

A standalone session: any group, any order

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim: The group discovers that Jesus' word to an exhausted, overcommitted hostess is tenderness rather than scolding, that the target is anxiety and not service, and that the one needful thing is not another task but a seat: the portion that shall not be taken away.

Catholic Touchstone: Contemplative prayer is taking time to be alone with Him who we know loves us; and against the mentality that measures everything by productivity, prayer is not a flight from life but the wellspring of it (CCC 2709, 2727).

The Knock in This Encounter (leader only)

The house is Martha's and the welcome is hers: "Martha received him into her house" (Lk 10:38). She opened the door; the study's pattern holds in its gentlest form, an arrival received. What the session then examines is what happens after the door opens: whether the Guest, once inside, gets our presence or only our performance. **Spoiler discipline:** as always, keep the frame leader-only if your group has not finished the core.

What You Need to Know

Protect Martha from the sermon tradition that flattens her, because Luke does. She is the one who receives Jesus; her serving, *diakonia*, is the word the Church uses for ministry; hospitality is praised everywhere in Luke, and in John 11 it is Martha who runs out to meet Jesus and delivers one of the great confessions of His identity. The problem in this scene is not that dinner was being made. Luke's diagnosis is precise: she was "distracted with much serving" (10:40); the Greek suggests being pulled apart, dragged in different directions, and Jesus' own words complete the chart: "anxious and troubled about many things" (10:41). The disease is not the work; it is the state the work has put her in, which every overcommitted person in your room will recognize as their resting condition.

Meanwhile Mary "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching" (10:39). Say plainly what a first-century reader would feel: to sit at a rabbi's feet is the formal posture of a disciple (it is how Paul describes his own formation, at the feet of Gamaliel, Acts 22:3), and the evidence we have suggests it was a posture rarely, if ever, extended to women. Mary has taken the student's seat in a world that did not expect to see her in it, and when Martha's complaint effectively asks Jesus to send her back to the kitchen, He instead ratifies her right to it, permanently: "Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her" (10:42). The scene is, among other things, Jesus defending a woman's place in the seminar room, and seekers should hear that stated without embarrassment.

Hear the tone of the reply. "Martha, Martha": in Scripture the doubled name marks an address of personal weight; often it is how God speaks to people He loves and is about to entrust with something (Abraham, Abraham; Moses, Moses; Samuel, Samuel), and even where it carries warning or grief (Simon, Simon; Jerusalem, Jerusalem) it is the language of a heart engaged, never of mere irritation.

Here it reads as tenderness; the correction that follows is real, but it arrives wrapped in affection. The sentence that follows is a diagnosis delivered with affection, and the famous phrase “one thing is needful” is triage, not a dishwashing exemption: of the many things pulling her apart, only one cannot be rescheduled, because He is sitting in the living room now. “Portion” is loaded Old Testament vocabulary, the word for an inheritance share, and the psalms had already given it its highest use, which the group will find live: the LORD Himself as one's portion. Mary has chosen the inheritance that outlasts the estate.

Do not let the session end as a verdict against action. The Church's synthesis, spoken best by a doctor of the Church who ran convents and wrote mystical theology in the same week, is that Martha and Mary combine: contemplation funds action, and action without the seat at His feet degrades into exactly the anxiety Luke describes. The question the scene leaves a busy person is not “should I do less?” but “what is my serving disconnected from?”

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Psalms 73:25-26. “Whom have I in heaven but you? ... God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.” The live discovery: the psalmist reaches Mary's conclusion centuries early, and “portion,” the inheritance word, lands on God Himself.

Deuteronomy 10:9. The Levites received no land “because the LORD is their portion”: the tribe whose inheritance was God. Mary sits down in their bloodline. Leader background.

Voices of the Church

St. Augustine Sermons 103 and 104, on Luke 10:38-42 (summary)

Augustine refuses to condemn Martha: both sisters chose good things, he insists; but Martha's good work belongs to this passing age, where there are hungry people to feed, while Mary's portion belongs to the age that does not end, where the feast is God Himself. Martha's task will one day be finished; Mary's has no ending, which is why it cannot be taken away. A faithful summary of his preaching in these two sermons.

St. Teresa of Avila *The Interior Castle* (summary)

The great mystic who also founded and administered seventeen convents gives the Church's balance: Martha and Mary must work together to host the Lord; contemplation that never serves is not yet mature love, and service never fed by His presence runs dry. She would know; she did both at full capacity. A faithful summary of her teaching in the seventh mansion.

St. Gregory the Great *Moralia and homilies* (summary)

Gregory, the monk dragged out of contemplation to run the Church of Rome, wrote with an exile's homesickness about the two lives: the active life is necessity, the contemplative life is desire; the first ends with time, the second begins here and is perfected in eternity. He governed like Martha and ached like Mary, and said so. A faithful summary.

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 2709:** contemplative prayer defined with St. Teresa's words: a close sharing between friends, taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us.

- **CCC 2727:** the modern objection answered: a mentality that measures all by productivity calls prayer useless; the Catechism names the error and its cost.
- **CCC 305:** Jesus asks for filial trust in providence over anxiety about tomorrow: the Sermon on the Mount's medicine for Martha's condition, and ours.

Hosting Your Seeker Friend

This Week's Coaching

Look around your table: somebody there is Martha to the bone, and quite possibly it is the person who cooked what you are eating. Guard them twice. First, do not let the session curdle into a productivity scold; the exhausted do not need one more voice telling them they are doing life wrong. The text's tone is the doubled name, tenderness, and yours should match it. Second, if your seeker friend is the busy one, this session is the study's most direct gift to them: it says their exhaustion is seen, named gently, and met not with a new obligation but with a chair. And say the historical point out loud, because seekers rarely expect it from Christianity: when a woman took the disciple's seat, and the request came to send her back to the kitchen, Jesus said no, permanently.

Standalone Notes

- No dependencies: run before, during, or after the core, or alone.
- Pairs naturally with the rich young man deep-dive: his “one thing you lack” and this scene's “one thing is needful” are the same surgical arithmetic aimed at opposite conditions: possession and busyness.
- The Bethany household returns in John 11-12 (the raising of Lazarus, Martha's confession, Mary's anointing); groups that love these sisters have a natural next read.

Session Goals

1. Rehabilitate Martha: the target is anxiety, not service, and Luke's vocabulary proves it.
2. Say plainly what Mary's seat meant, and that Jesus ratified it permanently.
3. Hear the doubled name as tenderness, and “one thing” as triage rather than a verdict on work.
4. Land the live discovery in Psalm 73: the LORD Himself as portion.
5. Close with the Church's synthesis: Martha and Mary combine.

Time Note

75 minutes of content in a 90-minute evening. If long: cut the Dig Deeper first, then merge Build questions 1 and 2. Never cut the tone question on the doubled name; the whole session's pastoral weight rides on it.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Opening

Leader prays alone, briefly. State the two rules if new faces are present: nobody gets called on; nobody's answer gets graded.

“God, most of us ran here from something and will run from here to something. For one evening, let us actually sit down. Amen.”

Win

The philosopher Dallas Willard, asked by a younger pastor what he needed to do to be spiritually healthy, answered, as his friend John Ortberg has recounted many times: you must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life. Asked what else, he said there is nothing else.

1. “How are you?” “Busy.” When did busy become the default answer, and what is it doing to the people who give it?
2. What is the difference between a full life and a driven one? Have you lived on both sides of that line?

Build

Read Luke 10:38-42 aloud.

1. Start by building the case for Martha: what has she actually done here, and what is she doing while Mary sits? Is any of it bad?
2. Now find Luke's precise diagnosis in verse 40 and Jesus' in verse 41: what exact words describe Martha's problem? Is the problem the serving, or something the serving has produced in her?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Martha's resume in this scene is entirely honorable: she received Him into her house, the door was hers to open and she opened it, and her serving is diakonia, the word the Church would adopt for ministry itself. Nothing on the stove is the problem. The diagnosis is interior and Luke is surgical about it: “distracted,” a word suggesting being dragged apart in different directions, and from Jesus, “anxious and troubled about many things.” The scene's target is a state, not a task list: service that has become disconnected from the Person it serves, until the hostess is fraying in the kitchen of a house God is sitting in.

3. Verse 39: to sit at a teacher's feet was the formal posture of a disciple, and it was a seat the ancient world rarely, if ever, offered women. What is Mary doing, and what does Jesus do when Martha's complaint would send her back to the kitchen?
4. Listen to the tone of “Martha, Martha.” Where else does Scripture double a name like that, and what does the doubling usually mean?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Mary has taken the student's chair in a setting where women were rarely given it, and Martha's request, “tell her then to help me,” would restore the expected order. Jesus declines, and more than declines: “it shall not be taken away from her” ratifies the seat permanently. And the doubled name signals personal weight, not offhand annoyance: often it is the Bible's address of affection and commissioning (Abraham, Abraham; Moses, Moses; Samuel, Samuel), though it can also carry warning or lament (Simon, Simon; Jerusalem, Jerusalem). Jesus is correcting Martha, but the address tells her the correction comes from love. Jesus is not scolding an exhausted woman in front of her guests. He is doing what almost nobody does for the anxious: naming the anxiety tenderly, from inside a love she can hear.

5. "Mary has chosen the good portion." Portion is inheritance language in the Old Testament, and the psalms gave the word its boldest use. Let's find it.

Live discovery: *have the group find Psalm 73:25-26 and read it aloud.*

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

"Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides you... God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever." The psalmist reached Mary's conclusion centuries early: the inheritance-word lands on God Himself. That is what Mary has chosen at His feet: not a break from the work but the estate that outlasts every estate, and Jesus' promise attaches precisely there: everything else in that house, the meal, the dishes, eventually the house, will be taken away by time. The portion will not.

Where the Skeptic Is Strongest (steelman)

Full strength, because every practical person in the room is thinking it: "Contemplation is a luxury for people without responsibilities. Somebody had to cook that dinner, and it was not Mary. A guest who accepts the meal and then critiques the cook has things exactly backwards; the world runs on Marthas." Grant the truth in it: the world does run on Marthas, Scripture honors work from its first page, and Jesus rebukes the serving nowhere: the target word is "anxious," not "busy." Then press what the objection misses. First, the arithmetic: "one thing is needful" is triage among competing goods at a specific moment: the Word of God was in the living room for one evening; the dishes were negotiable, and treating everything as equally urgent is precisely the disease. Second, the objection's own economics fail: service disconnected from its source does not stay generous; it curdles into resentment, audibly, in verse 40: "Lord, do you not care?" The complaint is the proof. The Church's verdict was never Mary instead of Martha; it is the one Teresa of Avila gave while running seventeen convents: Martha and Mary must combine, because action without the seat runs dry, and the seat, without ever replacing the work, is what keeps the work from devouring the worker.

Dig Deeper (optional)

Luke's placement is quiet genius: this scene sits immediately after the parable of the Good Samaritan. Back to back, Luke gives us a story where the religious men fail by not acting, and a story where the acting hostess is gently corrected toward sitting. Neither story cancels the other; together they close both escape routes: you cannot love God as a substitute for serving your neighbor, and you cannot serve your way out of sitting with God. The Gospel keeps both doors locked from the outside.

Send

3. Be honest about your default: are you Martha or Mary by temperament, and what does the opposite posture cost you?
4. "Anxious and troubled about many things." If Jesus named your many things tonight, doubled name and all, what would be on the list, and which one is actually the one thing?

Live It This Week

1. Once this week, sit down for ten minutes with nothing productive: no phone, no list, no multitasked podcast. If you pray, pray; if you do not yet, just sit. Notice how hard the chair is to stay in.
2. Catch yourself once answering "busy" and replace it with a true sentence about how you actually are.

3. If you are the Martha of your household, ask the Mary in your life what they see from the seat. If you are the Mary, do the dishes once, unasked.

Closing

Leader alone, briefly: “Lord, you know each of our many things by name, and you have never once shamed a tired person. Give us the seat, and the nerve to take it. Amen.”

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

“Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her.” Luke 10:41-42

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

Every Passage in This Session

Primary Text

- Luke 10:38-42, the welcome, the seat, the complaint, the doubled name, the portion

Live Discovery Text

- Psalm 73:25-26, God as the heart's strength and portion for ever

Supporting Texts

- Deuteronomy 10:9, the LORD as the Levites' portion (leader background)
- Luke 10:25-37, the Good Samaritan: Luke's deliberate pairing (Dig Deeper)
- John 11:20-27, Martha's confession (Standalone Notes)

Catechism

- CCC 2709, 2727, 305

Memory Verse

- Luke 10:41-42