

GOOD AND BEAUTIFUL GOD SERMON SERIES DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR SMALL GROUPS

24 & 25 JULY 2021

BEHOLDING GOD'S GOODNESS AND BEAUTY

Scripture: Luke 10:38-42, Luke 12:22-34

The recommended time allocation for your group meeting is:

If you meet weekly :

- Worship through song (10 mins)
- Discussion - 1 session worth of core questions (40 mins)
- Discussion - 1 session worth of additional questions (30 mins)
- Sharing, Prayer, Fellowship (30 mins)

If you meet fortnightly :

- Worship through song (10 mins)
- Discussion - 2 sessions' worth of core questions (60 mins)
- Optional - additional questions (10 mins)
- Sharing, Prayer, Fellowship (30 mins)

Core Questions for Discussion

(If your group meets fortnightly, combine Core Questions of two sessions and choose one Further Question from either session.)

1) Read Luke 10:38-42 together. This is a familiar story, so read it slowly and carefully. Then answer the following questions.

1a) Did Jesus criticise Martha for showing him hospitality? What action or attitude of Martha's did Jesus in fact highlight?

- Jesus did not criticise the fact that Martha showed him hospitality. In fact, showing hospitality and welcome to visitors is an important part of the Kingdom (Luke 10:4-12, 7:44-46).
- Rather, Jesus pointed out that Martha was worried and troubled (v.41). She was concerned about many things as opposed to being focused on the one good thing (vv.41-42).

1b) Is this story teaching that prayer and contemplation are always better than action and service?

- Luke places this incident right after the parable of the Good Samaritan.
 - The final phrase which ends that parable is: "And Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise'" (10:37). Jesus clearly commands the importance of action to care for

and serve others, not to simply pass them by as did the priest and the Levite (10:31-32).

- Therefore, this story of Mary and Martha cannot be interpreted as teaching that prayer and contemplation are always better than action and service.

Mary vs. Martha?

“Coming on the heels of the parable of the good Samaritan, in which “doing” is emphasized (10:25, 28, 37), the story of Mary and Martha balances the perspective by focusing on the importance of “hearing.” Hearing and doing are integral to the life of discipleship (8:21), like two sides of the same coin.

Readers of this story often elevate Mary and denigrate Martha. The story has been further extrapolated to pit justification by faith against justification by works, contemplative spirituality against action-oriented spirituality, life in eternity against life in this world, and even Christianity against Judaism or Protestantism against Catholicism.

The point is not to choose one at the expense of the other, not to only be Mary and never be Martha, but to recognize that there is a place and time to be both in the authentic expression of one’s faith.”

- Diane G. Chen, *Luke: A New Covenant Commentary*, p.156.

Hearing and Doing in Luke

All the way back in the beginning of the Bible, we meet a speaking God, a God who is active and powerful by His words and His deeds. This God also calls His people to listen to Him, and to obey His words.

In multiple places in Luke’s gospel, the importance of both listening and doing is highlighted. For example:

- Luke 6:27 ““But I say to you who are listening: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you”
- Luke 6:46-49 the difference between the two builders - will you hear my words and do them?
- Luke 8:15: the seed that fell on good soil are those who “after hearing the word, cling to it with an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with steadfast endurance.”
- Luke 8:21: Who does Jesus treat as His mother and brothers? “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.”
- Luke 9:35 “This is my Son, my chosen one. Listen to Him”
- Luke 10:26-28 Jesus tells the expert in the law that while the latter heard and understood the commandment correctly, he also needs to go and do it.
- Luke 11:28 “But he replied, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!”

1c) What does this story tell us about the correct attitudes we ought to adopt towards service to God?

- Jesus highlighted the fact that, while Martha welcomed him and showed him hospitality, she did so with an attitude of anxiety and worry. **The issue was not Martha's acts of welcome and of service, but the attitude in which she undertook those acts**
- Martha was right to be eager to show hospitality. But in her eagerness, she focused only on the details of the needful tasks, and lost sight of the main point of hospitality in the first place – **to give attention to and savour the presence of the guest.**
- "Luke shows that to love God, one must listen to Jesus' words. Hearing is the precondition for doing, and action is the proof of the hearing. [...] This episode does not teach that sitting down and listening is superior to scurrying about. The previous parable of the Samaritan who shows compassion teaches to "go and do likewise" (10:37). But one is to go and do what Jesus teaches, which requires sitting down and listening to him." (David E. Garland, *Luke*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, p. 455).
- Martha was correct to practice hospitality. What she did was right. However, she did so in a wrong attitude of anxiety, worry, and distractedness.
 - In her worry about the many good things she wanted to do, she failed to truly notice the one good thing before her – Jesus Himself.
 - In her focus on her project and her plans, she failed to truly behold the Person, the good and beautiful God.
- The correct attitude then, is to not to be so anxious and distracted in completing the tasks of service that we fail to pay attention to Jesus Himself.

2. Read Luke 12:22-34.

2a) There is a verb which appears four times in this passage. This verb also plays an important role in the Mary and Martha narrative. What verb is this?

- The verb is "worry / be anxious". It appears in vv.22, 25, 26, and 29.
- This verb also appears in 10:41 – "Martha Martha, you are *worried / anxious* and troubled about many things".

2b) In this passage, Jesus gives two groups of commands to counteract worry. What are they?

- The first group of instructions is: "Consider" (vv.24, 27). Jesus commands us to ponder about, to reflect on, to contemplate the birds of the air and the flowers of the field.
 - In observing these creatures, we recognise the gracious provision of the Creator, and his good and generous gifts.

- As we observe God’s sovereign rule over nature, we also recognise that there are things in life which are outside of our control, so it is absolutely useless and a waste of energy to worry about them (vv.25-26).
- But... do we in fact take time to observe, to consider, to reflect? Or are we too anxious doing many good things, as a certain Martha once was?
- The second group of commands is to “Seek the Kingdom” (v.31), and to sell one’s possessions and give to the needy (v.33).
 - Instead of focusing our energies on our own worries, Jesus commands us to redirect our attention toward His Kingdom, assured that our King and Father not only knows what we need, but also that, being the King, He is more than able to provide.
 - When we direct our attention away from our own anxieties and worries, we are then able to look around, to see that there are others in need. And if our Father is pleased to give us so generously (v.32), should we not as His children be likewise generous to others in need? If the Lord provides even for the birds, can we then tolerate human injustice and lack of generosity to persons in need? Should we not be eager to show welcome and hospitality to those in need?

“For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” But where are our treasures?

“The quest for economic security prevents one from becoming a disciple who will follow Jesus all the way to the cross. Therefore, Jesus commands his disciples not to become so worried by concerns for daily sustenance or material prosperity that it causes them to be too distracted to function as disciples. Anxiety leads to nervousness, a want of courage, loss of confidence, misgivings, despondency, hankering for security at all costs, and even panic. None of these emotions characterizes a faithful disciple.

Jesus is not discouraging forethought but nervous anxiety. Sowing, reaping, and gathering and toiling and spinning – can be done with anxiety or with faith.”

- David E. Garland, *Luke*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, p.522.

“The ethos of frugality was instilled in me early in my upbringing, as my grandparents moved from China to Hong Kong, and my generation subsequently emigrated to the United States. From a young age I knew the drill. Be practical in your spending. Save for the rainy day. Do not live beyond your means. Pay off your credit card balance every month. Plan for retirement. Leave something for the next generation.

While these reminders have served me well, it is easy to rely on the balance on my bank account as my sole gauge of security. If I did not have a single penny to my name, I would

have no choice but to trust God for my next meal, but what do trust and obedience mean when I am not living in dire straits?

Many of us reading this probably land somewhere between the extremes in socio-economic terms. While money may be tight, we can find a meal, a change of clothes, or a roof over our heads. Neither are we—or so it seems to us—culpable like the rich fool in Jesus' parable (Lk 12:13-21), since we acknowledge that all we have belongs to God and are willing to share at least some of our surplus. That said, we hesitate to sell everything to give to the poor, lest we find ourselves in abject poverty as a result of our radical discipleship!

What soliloquy goes on in our minds? "Renunciation of wealth is a special calling, and mine is not that drastic." "If I invest in the wealth I have, I will have more for charitable giving down the road. I will wait until I have more to give more." "Giving till it hurts is not for everybody, especially when others depend on my income and resources." "Is tithing ten percent good enough, and if so, is that pre-tax or after-tax?"

The pragmatic planner in me continues to struggle with the extent to which I am living out Jesus' injunctions based on my attitude toward money and its use. I suspect I am not alone. Perhaps the place to begin is not in our heads—the number crunching, the weighing of pros and cons—but in our hearts, which only God can change, soften, and challenge. May God reframe where we derive our sense of security, from the fleeting possessions that we have to the One who owns all and is generous beyond measure. As Jesus comforted the peasants around him, so he comforts us, "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

- Diane G. Chen, *Luke: A New Covenant Commentary*, pp.184–185.

3. What are you worried or anxious about? Has worry or anxiety crept into your service for God?

- **Do you need to take time to slow down to just "consider", to be attentive to how God is at work around you? (See Q5 for the spiritual workout).**
- **Do you need to redirect your attention away from the many good plans and projects, to truly pay attention to the one good Person?**

Encourage each member to share, not in the abstract, but out of their own personal experiences. Ask your group members:

- Do you take time to pay attention to God through reading the Bible daily? Is listening to God through His Word one of many good things and plans within a busy day, or is it a priority?
- Do you take time to pray daily? Or do you simply plunge into all the good tasks and projects that lie before you? And when you pray, do you simply present a list of requests to God? Or do you also pause to listen for what His Spirit might be saying?
- What practical steps can you take to make space in your diary, to be attentive to God?

Further Questions for Discussion

(Optional question for discussion if time permits. Do allocate adequate time for prayer and fellowship.)

4. What does it mean to “seek his kingdom” (12:31)? To help with this question, read the sidebox below.

- Notice, first of all, that while disciples are commanded to seek or pursue the kingdom (v.31), the kingdom is also a gift from the Father (v.32).
- See the sidebox for a detailed listing of the ways in the kingdom of God is described in the Gospels.
- From the sidebox details, it is clear that to “seek the kingdom” is not simply to “believe in Jesus, and thereby ensure one’s place in heaven”.
- Rather, to seek the kingdom is:
 - to willingly align ourselves to, and to intentionally participate in, the rule and reign of King Jesus.
 - to prioritise the values of the King, not our own interests – and thereby to live and act in accordance with the King’s values.
 - to trust in the generous provision of a powerful and gracious Ruler.
 - to submit and surrender to the call and the commands of a good and faithful Master.
 - not to build the kingdom, but simply to join in what God is already doing, as He works to extend His good and gracious authority over hearts and minds and souls.
- Seeking the kingdom is not based on our own human efforts, but is a grateful response to God’s gift, for He first brought us into His kingdom (v.32, cf. Col 1:13).

Excerpts from the entry for “Kingdom of God/Heaven”, in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 2nd Edition, pp.468–481 (emphasis added).

The term *basileia* (“kingdom, reign, rule, domain”) is used 126 times in the four NT Gospels (Matthew 55x; Mark 20x; Luke 46x [plus Acts 8x]; John 5x). The vast majority of these have to do with the kingdom of God/heaven, though reference can also be made to the world’s or the devil’s kingdom(s) (Mt 4:8; 12:25–26; 24:7; Mk 3:24; 13:8; Lk 4:5; 11:17–18; 21:10) or to Herod’s kingdom (Mk 6:23). The Gospels assume a basic equivalence among related expressions—for example, the kingdom, kingdom of God, kingdom of heaven, kingdom of the Father, kingdom of Jesus, and kingdom of the Son of Man.

Statistically, what happens most frequently with respect to God’s kingdom is that it is entered (Mt 5:20; 7:21; 8:11; 19:23, 24; 21:31; 25:34; Mk 9:47; 10:23, 24, 25; Lk 18:17, 24, 25; Jn 3:5; cf. Mt 11:12; Luke 16:16 [forcibly entered]), with the result that people can be in (Mt 5:19; 11:11; 13:43; 18:1, 4; 20:21; 26:29; Mk 14:25; Lk 7:28; 13:28, 29; 14:15; 22:16; 22:30), not far from (Mk 12:34), or out of the kingdom (Mt 23:13).

The second most pervasive usage identifies the kingdom as a message that can be proclaimed (Mt 4:23; 9:35; 10:7; 13:19; 24:14; Lk 4:43; 8:1; 9:2, 11, 60; 10:9, 11). The

kingdom also appears as an object that can be desired (Mt 6:33; Lk 12:31) or anticipated (Mk 15:43; Lk 23:51).

The kingdom is a possession (Mt 5:3, 10; 19:14; Mk 10:14; Lk 6:20; 18:16) or gift (Lk 12:32) that one can receive (Mk 10:15; Lk 18:17); it can be granted (Lk 22:29) or inherited (Matt 8:12; 25:34); or it can be taken from someone (Mt 21:43).

One can become a disciple for the kingdom (Mt 13:52), receive the keys to the kingdom (Mt 16:19) or suffer on account of the kingdom (Mt 19:12; Lk 18:29).

The kingdom is mysterious (Mt 13:11; Mk 4:11; Lk 8:10), so it must be explained in parabolic terms; for example, it grows (Mt 13:24, 31; Mk 4:26, 30; Lk 13:18), permeates (Mt 13:33; Lk 13:20), can be found and purchased (Mt 13:44, 45); it involves sifting (Mt 13:47), the settling of accounts (Mt 18:23; 20:1), preparation (Mt 22:2; 23:1; cf. Lk 9:62).

The kingdom also appears sometimes as the subject of verbs; thus, the kingdom comes, draws near, has come upon people, is among people and appears (Mt 3:2; 4:17; 6:10; 10:7; 12:28; 16:28; Mk 1:15; 9:1; 11:10; Lk 10:9–11; 11:2, 20; 17:20; 19:11; 21:31; 22:18; 23:42).

From this initial syntactical foray, we observe immediately that **the kingdom of God**, a central concern of the Gospels, **does not depend for its existence on human activity; humans do not create, build, construct, extend or render present the kingdom.** The kingdom originates with God, it draws its character from God, and it precedes any human response to it, even though **its presence invites (or demands) human response.**

[Entering the kingdom is best understood as] entering a sphere—that is, entering a field of influence, activity and/or operation—in this case, then, **experiencing, identifying with, participating in, coming under the influence of, and joining the community formed in relation to God's kingdom.**

[...] Jesus' message of the kingdom is tethered to the call to repent, and thus to **align oneself with God's rule, to engage in the practices of the kingdom,** and to serve as recruits who through word and deed **participate in the mission** of making evident what is otherwise unclear or hidden from view—God's royal rule—and in this way unmasking those powers that compete with God's rule.

5. Suggested Spiritual Workout: Slowing Down

(For each session in this sermon series, a spiritual workout will be suggested for you to exercise on your own or together as a group. We encourage you to try this spiritual exercise, then share at your next small group meeting how it has impacted you.)

*(The following is excerpted from *The Good and Beautiful God*, by James Bryan Smith)*

This is your assignment: slow down, savor, rest and contemplate. Slowing down the pace of our lives means eliminating hurry and limiting the demands and activities in our lives. Then we are more likely to take delight in our lives and make room for God.

In ages past, Christians engaged in ascetic practices (lengthy fasts and self-flagellation) to discipline themselves in order to grow closer to God. We need something altogether different in our modern culture. Paul Evdokimov aptly writes:

Today the combat is not the same. We no longer need added pain. Hair shirts, chains and flagellation would risk uselessly breaking us. Today mortification would be liberation from every kind of addiction —speed, noise, alcohol, and all kinds of stimulants. Asceticism would be necessary rest, the discipline of regular periods of calm and silence, when one could regain the ability to stop for prayer and contemplation, even in the heart of all of the noise of the world.

I think he's right about our current way of life. We are driven by speed and stimulants, and thus the most needed discipline for us is to slow down, to calm down, and to make time for rest and contemplation.

How to Practice Slowing Down

- Think about the activities of the upcoming day. Instead of waiting until the last minute to go to your next activity, try leaving ten minutes early. Walk more slowly. Drive more slowly. When you arrive at your destination a bit earlier than usual, use the extra time to notice people and things around you. Breathe.
- Intentionally get in the slowest lane while driving, and the longest checkout line when shopping. Good luck with this one!
- Plan a meal with a friend or group of friends. Cook slowly. Enjoy the act and smells of cooking. Linger over your meal, spending an hour or two eating slowly, conversing and enjoying the blessing of food.
- Set aside an hour today to be a sloth (animals that move very slowly, sometimes taking ten minutes to climb a few feet). Move slowly. Take up to five minutes just to walk from the living room to the kitchen. Take a step and stop. Notice things. Breathe deeply. Be present to the present moment. Do everything at a deliberately slower speed.
- Make a whole day a "slow day." Get up a little earlier so you can have time to linger over breakfast. If you are at work, do your work with a slower, more rhythmic pace (assuming your profession allows this; if you need to act quickly, do so without "hurrying"). Cut out TV and all forms of media for the day. Take time to watch a sunset, take a leisurely walk,

watch kids play in the park. Sometime later in the evening, sketch out your thoughts about what living a slowed-down life would look like.

When you change speeds your internal system will be thrown off of its usual pace and feelings of frustration will develop. For example, when you force yourself to drive in the slow lane, you'll begin to feel your stomach churn a bit, and maybe you'll grind your teeth. Your body will be saying, "C'mon, hurry up, step on it, let's go," as it has been trained to do. You will need to die to that inward need. Don't worry—you can do this. It has not killed anyone so far.

Prayer Suggestions

6. Would you consider praying for the following:

- We saw that Jesus did not criticise Martha for her acts of service and hospitality, but for her misdirected attitude beneath these acts. Have you been serving with a similarly misdirected attitude? Pray for yourself and for one another, that we will not lose sight of the main point – attentively savouring the presence of our good and beautiful God.
- What are you worried about? These past 9 weeks, we have learnt about our good, generous, and gracious King. Would you take a step of faith to lay your worries before Him? Pray for one another, that we might slow down to pay attention to how God is already working in our lives, that we might prioritise the values of the King, trust in His generous provision, and submit to His call and commands.