

³⁸As they went on their way, Jesus came into a village, and a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. ³⁹She had a sister named Mary, who was sitting at the Lord's feet and was listening to his word. ⁴⁰But Martha was distracted with all her serving. She came over and said, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her to help me."

⁴¹The Lord answered and told her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, ⁴²but one thing is needed. In fact, Mary has chosen that better part, which will not be taken away from her."

The narrative of Mary and Martha is all about misplaced priorities. Jesus comes to visit these women at their home with his disciples, and while he's there, he begins teaching. Of course, with Jesus and his entourage at their house, there's work to be done. The last-minute cleaning. Making a meal worthy of this great teacher. This is the work Martha tasks herself with. But while she's sweeping out one room with a roast in the oven in the next room, she's finally had it. Here she is, Mrs. Hospitality. But where is her sister? She's sitting at Jesus' feet listening to him. So, Martha acts. She goes to Jesus and tells him, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her to help me." Jesus responds, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but one thing is needed. In fact, Mary has chosen that better part, which will not be taken away from her."

This account of Mary and Martha makes me think about a podcast I listened to a while back by a few WELS pastors who serve as college professors. And on the podcast, they made and defended this thesis: "In our culture, we often get things out of order. We worship our work, work at our play, and play at our worship." I want to spend some time this morning talking about that, because I think it's a similar problem that Martha is dealing with.

For many people, work is everything. They put in crazy hours to climb the corporate ladder or rack up overtime. They boast about their busyness, wearing it as a badge of honor and believing they are more righteous and important when they have to skip some other event "because work needs me." They sacrifice their health for productivity. They scorn retirement because their identity is so tied to their job that if they ever stop, they believe their life will lose its purpose.

This is not to say that hard work is bad or that people should not find some level of fulfillment in it, but if your job – whether it's at a factory, an office building, a farm, or at home caring for your kids – becomes your all-in-all in life, as it does for many people, those misplaced priorities are going to leave you empty. Remember, people don't like you because of

what you do for work. And your kids will never grow up to tell you that they wish they'd seen you less and had more toys and money.

Let work be work, a beautiful gift from God where you can serve your neighbor in what you do and take care of your family through the wages. Let it be something for you to pour your heart into and get lost in while you're doing it. But don't get so lost in it that when the end-of-day horn sounds, you cannot move on to what God has placed before you next.

Rest and relaxation are also good. There's a reason God rests on the seventh day of creation then instructs his Old Testament people to refrain from work on the Sabbath. It is a good thing to find avenues of rest in life. But in our culture, we can be tempted to work at rest. What family isn't tempted to overschedule kids' activities, putting miles on the car that would make a truck driver blush, from one practice to the next game to the next performance? Look at hobbies. It's not enough to play golf. You have to track your score and lower your handicap. You have to buy the best clubs so you can hit it farther and straighter. Or even consider social media. You don't just share your vacation photos so family and friends can keep up with what's going on. You carefully curate and edit them, making sure that everything is just so. You want more followers on Instagram. You need more eyes on your TikTok. Play can't just be fun. It can't just be rest. You have to be the best at play. You have to be the most fit. You have to get your kids that college soccer scholarship. You have to be the best!

Sure, keep score in your bowling league. But have fun. That's what play is there for. Let the kids be involved in all their activities, but do it because they enjoy it and not because you're trying to raise a professional athlete or a Yale law student. Connect with people on social media, because you like sharing your life with people and not because you have to have every last like. Play is good. Don't make it into work. There's already enough work to do as it is.

This last one might be the most important. It is easy to make worship into play, to see it as something that is supposed to entertain us. It's easy to see worship as a performance, a concert of sorts. It's then no wonder when people show up only when it's convenient or when they feel like their "tank needs filling." It's no wonder when they seek out the church with the best coffee or the best jungle-gym for the kids. It's no surprise that they stand before the throne of God and say, "Here I am, Lord. Entertain me."

It's easy to look at worship in a passive sense. If we let our work and duties give us meaning in life, then church is just something we do for fun. And if it's not fun – say the pastor gives a sermon about a sin we're guilty of, making us feel so convicted and called out – then we feel completely justified with tuning out. Doesn't the pastor work for the congregation? Isn't the producer supposed to give the consumer what they want or expect the consumer to turn elsewhere?

Worship is serious. It is meant to lift people's hearts and minds to think about the things that truly matter, like sin, forgiveness, and godly living in thanks, or God's hand the past, the present, and eternity. While you might hear a joke here or there, what we do here is no joke, because God's law which kills sinners is no joke and his gospel which breathes life back into them isn't either. And being serious about our relationship with God here doesn't mean we never crack a smile or share in the joys of life. We can't help but be overjoyed about the good news about our Savior from sin and our new status before God as holy in his sight.

Worship is not passive. It is not entertainment. And that means it involves you. There's a reason we don't just have a soloist up here every Sunday to sing the songs for us. It's because worship is not entertainment. It's interactive. There's a reason we stand and sit throughout the service. It keeps God's people engaged, and it shows deep reverence for our Lord, like when we stand for the Gospel reading each Sunday, to honor the fact that Jesus is speaking to us from his word. There's a reason we don't treat the sacraments, the waters of baptism and the body and blood of Jesus, as merely symbols or add-ons. God tells us in his word that in the water and in the bread and wine, which is also his body and blood, he comes to us personally to deliver us this message of salvation.

You can enjoy worship. It is good and fun to be here with the family of believers every Sunday. But if we treat our worship as play, something that has value when we feel like it, it becomes out of place. It loses its sacredness and becomes like everything else in life: superficial and disposable.

Now, Jesus was clearly not telling Martha that cleaning and cooking are inherently bad actions. They certainly are not. If nothing was cleaned, we'd be sick all the time. If cooking was a crime, people would be staring left and right. What Jesus is criticizing Martha for is that all these things are not in their proper place in her life.

Martha was worshipping her work. She thought she could get closer to Jesus by cleaning her house and cooking her meal. And while the fastest way to a man's heart may be through his stomach for imperfect men, it wasn't for the perfect Savior. He would be thankful and find joy at a meal later, but now was time to worship. Now was time for his hearers to settle their hands from work and connect with the God who created and would soon redeem them. Martha was doing a completely right thing at the completely wrong time. That was her issue.

You will not find rightness with God in work, because work ends. Nor will you find fulfilment by setting all kinds of goals in your play. That thing that was meant to give you rest will provide anything but rest. Finally, if worship becomes play, it will become nothing but noise and empty ritual.

Have you misplaced your priorities? Yeah, I have too. Too often we put the wrong things into the wrong categories. There is time for work and for play and for worship. These are all

gifts of God. But when we get them mixed up, and we get them mixed up a bunch, life itself becomes disordered. But Christ kept all things in their right place for us, and his perfect sacrifice on the cross paid for all those times we get out of order. Thanks be to him, because he frees us from all our disorder and allows us to live lives of good balance, where all things are where they need to be. Amen.