

MARY & MARTHA

THE BICKERING SISTERS

re:form

ANCESTORS

PREPARE

KEY PASSAGES

Luke 10:38-42 | Mary Chooses the Better Part

John 11 | Martha and Mary Suffer Loss

John 12:1-8 | Mary Worships Jesus

WHAT'S BEHIND ALL THIS?

A common interpretation of Mary and Martha's story focuses on a simple question: are you a Mary or a Martha? Based on Luke 10:38-42, Martha is depicted as an organized, get-things-done kind of woman—though a bit too busy and distracted. In contrast, Mary exemplifies the lost-in-the-moment dreamer praised by Jesus for choosing the better part.

However, there is more complexity to these ancestors in the faith. Mary's attentiveness to Jesus extended beyond hospitality of the day. Sitting at Jesus' feet in Luke 10:39 was the posture of a disciple who was eager to learn from her rabbi. Anointing Jesus' feet in John 12:3 was an act of deep devotion. Jesus freely gave to Mary in the form of his teaching and freely received Mary's gifts. Intensely aware of his pending death, Mary's presence was both comforting and appreciated.

But don't count Martha out! When she heard Jesus was coming after the death of Lazarus, Martha was the one to go out and meet him while Mary stayed at home. In the conversation between Martha and Jesus in John 11:21-27, Martha professes belief in Jesus' power and his identity as the Son of God. And she goes ahead to tell Mary privately that Jesus would arrive and that he was calling for her.

Mary may be the seated sister who learns at Jesus feet, but Martha is on the move, communicating the message about Jesus' presence. Through the Luke text and these stories in John 11-12, we see a family deeply loved by Jesus. While we can imagine the tensions between Mary and Martha, we know they also experienced significant highs and lows together—the presence of a renowned rabbi teaching in their home, the sadness as they grieve the death of their dearly-loved brother, and the joy of his resurrection from the dead.




CONSIDER THIS

"There were then in that house these two lives, and Himself, the Fountain of life. In Martha was the image of things present, in Mary of things to come. What Martha was doing, that we are now; what Mary was doing, that we hope for. Let us do the first well, that we may have the second fully."

St. Augustine
Sermon CIV on the New Testament

Tear here for easy use!



To encounter these sisters is to discover that in the midst of their conflicts, they were deeply committed followers of Jesus. Their stories and interactions—with one another and with Jesus—revealed who Jesus was and offered a glimpse of God’s kingdom that speaks both in their time and to us today.

WHERE ARE TEENS AT?

- Teens are great at simultaneously reinforcing and challenging social norms. Mary’s boldness in sitting at Jesus’ feet (three times!) defied the status quo and signaled her faith in him. Jesus’ acceptance of Mary (the norm challenger) and rebuke of Martha (the norm reinforcer) would have been unusual and unexpected.
- Teens are part of a competitive world, sometimes most intense when they face off against a brother or sister. Tune into their responses about sibling rivalries as they explore the characters of Mary and Martha. It may provide unique opportunities to talk about how siblings can support each other as they grow in faith together.

ENCOUNTER

Tear here for easy use!

Make sure you've got the obvious stuff for this session—*re:form Ancestors* video (DVD or download), *Anti-Workbooks*, *Bibles*, pens or pencils, paper, tape, etc.

VIDEO

1. SET UP

Have you ever felt “embarathy” for someone? This term, a combination of embarrassment and empathy, describes the awkward moment when you feel embarrassed on behalf of another person. Martha may have felt embarathy for Jesus when Mary broke social conventions and sat at the teacher’s feet, learning alongside men.

Invite a few teens to tell about a time when they felt embarathy. Then pair up and challenge youth to create their own word mash-ups that describe an uncomfortable, awkward, or embarrassing situation. See who comes up with the best new word!

2. WATCH

“Mary & Martha: The Bickering Sisters,” Chapter 9

3. UNPACK

- What surprised you in the video?
- What is one word to describe Mary? Martha?
- Which character do you resonate with most? Why?
- Do you see any connections between their story and your own family relationships?

WHAT ABOUT THE BIBLE?

Bethany, the name of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus’s town, meant “house of misery.” It was probably a residence for people who were sick, poor, and outcasts. Because of its location on the outskirts of Jerusalem, Bethany was a place many people traveled through on the way to and from the temple.

Look at a Bible map and locate Jerusalem and Bethany. Encourage youth to imagine what this “house of misery” might have looked, sounded, smelled, felt, and tasted like. Once you’ve set the scene, skim through John 11–13 as a group to see what Jesus was doing before and after he responded to the sisters and raised Lazarus from the dead.

QUESTIONS FOR CONVERSATION

- What neighborhood or city from today might compare to Bethany? Describe what that place is like. Who lives there?
- How did Mary, Martha, and Lazarus’s family seem pretty normal? How was their family important to Jesus’ ministry?
- Do you know any ordinary people who have been part of extraordinary events? What happened?

GET THIS STUFF

Bible map (including the city of Bethany).

BACK IT UP

“The entire evening was unraveling. Martha felt ill. She knew this couldn’t continue. She had to do something; somehow she had to save Jesus from her sister.”

re:form Ancestors DVD

CONSIDER THIS

“Martha, dear Martha, you’re fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing. One thing only is essential, and Mary has chosen it—it’s the main course, and won’t be taken from her.”

Luke 10:41-42 from *The Message* (Navpress, 2002)

ENGAGE

Choose 1, 2, or all 3 activities for your Engage time together.

1. DO I KNOW YOU?

Where's this going? Teens' observations of one another with and without distractions help them develop deeper awareness of who others really are.

Mary chose to spend more time with Jesus, sitting at his feet, listening to him, and learning from him. Martha was distracted by many things and did not show this kind of attentiveness. Through these sisters' actions, we can become aware of how distractions can get in the way of really knowing who someone is.

Ask kids to pair up and sit back-to-back with a partner they don't know well. In the space provided in the Anti-Workbook, have youth write or draw a description of their partner. Then, with pairs facing one another, set a timer for 90 seconds. Pairs should focus on the other person—looking at one another and asking questions to get to know them better. After the timer goes off, have youth to sit back-to-back again and record their observations. If you want to emphasize the difference between attentiveness and distractions, play music or other background noise while youth record their first descriptions.

QUESTIONS FOR CONVERSATION

- Compare your two sets of observations. How is your initial description different than what you recorded after spending some face-to-face time with your partner?
- Look up John 11:17-44 and John 12:1-8. How well does Mary seem to know Jesus? How would you describe her ability to be in the moment?
- How do Mary's interactions with Jesus in these verses compare to Martha, Lazarus, Judas, or the disciples?
- What kind of distractions prevent you from really knowing another person? What are some ways you can connect more deeply with someone else?

2. FRIENDLY COMPETITION?

Where's this going? Through egg races, youth consider the nature of rivalry and its impact on our relationships.

The bickering sisters embody sibling rivalry throughout the video. Ultimately their relationship was strengthened because of Jesus' presence, but sometimes siblings and friends can suffer from constant competition. Encourage some friendly rivalry with a game that encourages speed and balance.

CONSIDER THIS

"A sister can be seen as someone who is ourselves and very much not ourselves—a special kind of double.

Toni Morrison, award-winning American author

GET THIS STUFF

Eggs. Bowls. Spoons. Table. Cleaning supplies. Newspapers or drop cloths (optional).

Lay down newspapers or a drop cloth if playing this game indoors. Mark off a starting line and set several bowls on a table at the other end of the racecourse. Give each teen a spoon and a raw egg. On your signal, youth balance the egg on the end of their spoon and race to a bowl, where they crack the egg and use the shell halves to separate the yolk from the egg white. First to successfully complete the challenge wins.

QUESTIONS FOR CONVERSATION

- What did you find most difficult about the race? What could have made it easier? Who or what was your toughest competition?
- Name some of your rivals. How do you compete? Why?
- Look at Luke 10:38-42. Where do you see sibling rivalry between Mary and Martha?
- Is rivalry ever healthy? Why or why not?

3. THE BETTER PART

Where's this going? Through breaking social norms and witnessing outsiders' reactions, youth consider social conventions and why Jesus said Mary chose the better part.

Today we do not blink an eye when a woman eagerly learns from a male teacher (and vice versa). Help youth understand that during biblical times, such an arrangement was unexpected, inappropriate. Martha expends considerable effort to protect Jesus from the embarrassment brought on by eager Mary learning at his feet. But Jesus defies these social expectations and norms, welcoming Mary's presence and affirming her focus.

Get the juices flowing by drafting a list of social norms on a white board or chart paper such as whispering in a library, facing forward in an elevator, and not staring at people. Then create a list of taboo activities that could be embarrassing or frowned upon (for example, singing in public, skipping down the hallway at school, or paying for something using only pennies).

Form teams and challenge them to pick a social convention to break. A few teens should break the norm while others document the experience.

QUESTIONS FOR CONVERSATION

- Share what your group did. How did other people react? Were you embarrassed? Why or why not?
- Would Jesus break any social norms on our list? Which ones? Why?
- Do you do any unconventional things? Who totally "gets" you despite (or because of) these things?
- Do you think Martha's perspective changed over time? (See John 11-12.)

BACK IT UP

"Like in any relationship, [Mary and Martha] of ten found themselves at odds... Needless to say, their differences caused a great deal of tension."

re:form Ancestors DVD

GET THIS STUFF

White board or chart paper.
Markers. Cameras.
Notebooks.

HERE'S A TIP

Remind teens that there's a difference between pushing boundaries and doing something hurtful or even unlawful in this activity.

CAPTURE IT

Post video or photo records of the social norm experiments to the re:form Gallery

RESPOND

REGROUP

Mary and Martha hosted Jesus in their home six days before the Passover, only a week before Jesus would die. They both responded to Jesus in ways that were consistent with who they were as individuals and in the context of their sibling relationship. When they gave a dinner for him, Martha's hands were a flurry of hospitality as she served food. Mary sat at his feet and anointed them with perfume.

Light a candle, dim the lights, and ask a teen to read John 12:1-11 to the group. Open up the jar of scented oil or lotion when verse 3 is read.

SHARE

Close the session with an opportunity for youth to share what they have learned about the character and how that connects with their life. Identify aspects of their work and recall points of discussion that can serve to recap the session for youth.

QUESTIONS FOR CONVERSATION

- What do you think the lives of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were like after the resurrection of Lazarus? What was different? What was the same?
- Have your perceptions about Mary or Martha changed?
- Share a time when you did something extraordinary for another person. What happened?
- What is the "better part" you might choose in the day or week ahead?

SEND

Gather in a circle around the candle with the bottle of scented oil or lotion. Take the hand of the person next to you and dab a small amount on the back of his or her hand. Pass the bottle to that teen and ask them to anoint the hand of the next person. Continue around the circle and then sit in silence for prayer and an undistracted moment with Jesus.

As you leave, encourage youth to continue this ritual each night for the next week. Invite them to make the "better part" part of their everyday lives.

GET THIS STUFF

Scented oil or lotion. Candle. Matches. (Be careful with fire!)

BACK IT UP

"Martha was shocked. Not only was Jesus undisturbed by Mary's presence... he was inviting her to join them as well."

re:form Ancestors DVD

HERE'S A TIP

Provide an icon of Jesus, a cross, or some other focal point to add a Christ-centering object to the sending.

CAPTURE IT

Use a camera, camcorder, scanner, web cam, or audio recorder to capture group conversation and individual pieces of work. Upload them to the re:form Gallery or ask teens to do so.