

COMPETENCE AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MEASUREMENT IN THE STORY OF MARY AND MARTHA

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The issue of competence is one that plagues Christians; and the knotty problem of what is proper for a Christian to measure and assess troubles us too.

First of all, when we think about the psychology of measurement, we know that the Bible teaches that not all measuring is wrong. Jesus said that we should judge, but do so with a right judgement.

We know of other examples of measuring, such as counting the cost of discipleship. Jesus said that before a man builds a tower or goes to war, he must make sure that he has the resources to finish or to win. Jesus assessed His own situation: He knew that being equal with God wasn't robbery, but made the decision to take a lesser station and become a servant in order to die for us (Philippians 2:6-8). He even told us that love has a measurable quality, and the greatest love is that of when a person is willing to lay down his life for a friend (15:13)

But many times when we evaluate our own experiences, we measure as "good" that which is pleasant or makes us immediately happy or comfortable, and as "bad" which is painful.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In His great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen Him, you love Him; and even though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Here Peter teaches us not only how to evaluate our own experience as whatever helps our faith grow is good; but he also teaches the relative value of that faith—it's worth more than gold (or by extension, any thing on this earth that we would regard of lasting value.) It must be noted that suffering for its own sake is not alone redemptive. That aside, this passage teaches that suffering for a Christian can and should be beneficial because it contributes to our faith if we weather it as a Christian. It also teaches us that we should regard our own personal histories not as preferable or non preferable; but as either committed to God or committed to a worldly or rational way of assessing it.

The short book of 1 Peter mentions suffering 26 times; and “grace” 11 times. It shouldn’t surprise us that the whole book is summed up in 5:10:

And the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will Himself restore you and make you strong, firm, and steadfast. To Him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

When we define the concept of competence, we think of it as being the ability to do something—anything from decorating to calculus; but it is inherently always involved with limits and measuring. In fact, we use all kinds of things as clocks to measure even time: our mortgage is a way of measuring how many months left to pay; the tread on our tires tells us how long we have to drive before they have to be replaced.

The lessons of the Old Testament are that God always calls us to measure things differently than it is our nature to do, and that we must always operate beyond the levels of our own natural competence. The walls of Jericho did not fall because of the competence of the war skills of the Israelites. Gideon did not choose his troops on the basis of his own competence in evaluating soldiers. Moses couldn’t convince Pharaoh on the basis of his own speaking skills. David didn’t kill Goliath because he was a great warrior. Abraham and Sarah didn’t produce a child at the age of 100 because they were so good or practiced at producing children. The children of Israel inherited wells they didn’t dig, vineyards they didn’t plant, houses they didn’t build not because they were great soldiers or accomplished farmers or competent at anything but picking up manna off the desert floor. They were given those things simply because it pleased God to show His power by giving such rich gifts to the puniest of nations.

Competence is also an issue in 2 Corinthians. In 1:8-11, Paul describes a situation where he felt “great pressure far beyond our ability to endure.” He was in over his head, above his level of competence. He despaired of even living and felt that he was condemned to die—“we felt the sentence of death in our hearts”. But God taught him an important lesson through this feeling of inadequacy, of not being competent to endure the situation or triumph in it.

But this happened so that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On Him we have set our hope that He will continue to deliver us. . .” –2 Corinthians 9-10.

He reasoned that God is a God who can even raise the dead, so a deadly peril that threatens us, or a feeling of imminent death in our hearts, are all under His control and teach us to look only to Him for help.

God calls us to reason in such a non-natural manner. And He wants us to act non-naturally too. He tells us not to pray like the pagans do (Mt. 6:5-13) and not to worry like the pagans do (Mt 6:25-32.) In fact, Jesus calls us to do all kinds of non-natural things, to live beyond the levels of our own competence as He enables us to do what He

commands. What He commands us to do, He will surely give us the power and the competence to do.

In 2 Corinthians 2:16 Paul has told about the responsibility of being the aroma of Christ to the perishing, and he asks, “Who is equal to such a task?” Who, he asks is competent to do such a thing?

He answers his own question in 3:5:

Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit, for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

The apostle Peter was uniquely qualified to give believers advice about gaining competence through suffering. Competence has two elements: ability and worth. Peter had tried to test his own abilities by walking on water, and had to be helped by Jesus. He knew about worth issues –he was the one who’d denied Jesus three times and abandoned Him at the cross. Maybe Peter’s failures at the ability and worth aspects of competence are why he relied so much on grace.

Many people in the world teach that if you make the right choices in life, that will lead to pleasurable outcomes. In school they tell our children that if they stay away from drugs they won’t get arrested for possession, or if they abstain from sex they won’t get pregnant or have venereal diseases. While it’s true that you shouldn’t do drugs or have sex outside of marriage, you can’t guarantee you won’t have these results. Tell the woman with AIDS who was faithful to her cheating husband who gave her the disease; or the girl who was raped, or the child who was slipped drugs in a soft drink. While right behavior can help you avoid certain consequences, it doesn’t guarantee it and can’t be depended on to guarantee it.

As 1 Peter teaches us, a Christian should expect to suffer. Trying to avoid unpleasant circumstances and feeling God has let us down when they come is not what the Bible teaches. One of the greatest Christians of all time, Paul, was sent a message to be delivered to him right after his baptism when Ananias was told, “I will show him how much he must suffer for My sake.” Again, we must assess or measure the acceptability of a circumstance not by how much we like it at the time, but by the standards Peter set out in 1 Peter chapter 1: whatever builds our faith is good, no matter how it makes us feel; and whatever brings glory to God is good, no matter how we like it or not.

We have also been told another lie by the world: that the role of human imagination is to be glorified, and that we are to “dream big dreams.” In fact, several years ago a minister used to go around to congregations telling them, “Whatever the mind of man can conceive, the will of man can achieve.” He glorified human creativity and imagination. However, when we read the words that in the King James Version of the Bible are translated as “imagination” : *dianoia* (Luke 1:51), *dialogismos*(Romans 1:21), *logismos*

(2 Corinthians 10:5) , *meletao* (Acts 4:25)—we find that these have connection with the Hebrew word that has at its root the idea of something that is “twisted.”

Only once in the New Testament do we find the idea of imagination being positive—and that is in Ephesians 3:20.

Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power which is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen.

Here we see that our imagination is just a frontier beyond which God through His power that is at work within us, can act.

New Age teaching is that we should use our imaginations as a net that we throw into the waters of the future, hoping to snag and drag in what we want. That has been brought into religious thinking with the “name it and claim it” philosophy.

But the Bible teaches something very different. When Jesus says that He will meet all our needs, that means that He has provided for them before we ever even stumble upon the realization that we lack something. It doesn’t just mean that tomorrow He will give me what I need; it also implies that since He meets all our needs, I must have today what I truly need. Thus I can assess my needs in terms of what I now have.

Competence and Measurement in Mary and Martha’s Lives

We first meet Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38-42.

- 1) Martha is, according to the Greek, “distracted about much serving.” She has made the assessment that what she is undergoing is too much and not fair. She has made this assessment based on how it makes her feel and it has distracted her.
- 2) She believes that the job has not been equally or fairly distributed. She accuses Mary of “leaving her alone to serve.”
- 3) She didn’t go to Mary alone but tried to involve Jesus (as did Mary the mother of Jesus at the marriage at Cana) in a situation that really didn’t involve him.
- 4) She was “anxious” in a pagan way, just as Jesus used the word in Matthew 6:25.
- 5) She was mentally divided. James 1:8 describes a double-minded man as being “two-souled.” Martha was similarly divided and was worried about “many things.”
- 6) Jesus showed that there was a finite situation here, and that Mary had chosen the “best part.” The word “part” or *meris* in Greek refers to an allotment like the share of an inheritance in Colossians 1:12. The pie had been divided, and Mary had chosen the best part.
- 7) Jesus wanted Martha to know that her competence to serve –the physical ability and the talent to do the tasks she was doing—wouldn’t last forever. Our elderly sisters in the church understand this –if you live long enough, you do not have the physical ability to serve by cooking and doing other things. But Jesus wants us to know that

the best part of serving Him—sitting at His feet, quietly listening to Him –will not ever be taken away, and is the very best part of service.

We meet Mary and Martha again at the death of their beloved brother Lazarus in John chapter 11.

- 1) Here we see that Jesus begins by assessing the situation of Lazarus' health and subsequent death in a way that even his close disciples couldn't understand. He said that the dead Lazarus was "sleeping" because He knew that he would awaken, even though his condition of death was very real.
- 2) Jesus saw no reason to hurry –not because the situation wasn't serious, but He knew that His glory and glory for His Father would be increased by His waiting.
- 3) By the time Jesus does arrive, Martha has begun to put limits on Jesus' ability or competence to deal with the situation. "If you'd been here, Lazarus wouldn't have died," she says. In other words, geography had limited Him, according to Martha.
- 4) When Jesus tells her that her brother will rise again, she assumes that Jesus' competence is limited by future time as well; for though she believes that her brother will rise again, she doesn't believe it can happen before the resurrection in the last day. She tries to voice her faith in the fact that though He hadn't saved Lazarus before, she knew He had complete access to the power of God.
- 5) Jesus then gave Martha a chance any believer would treasure—the opportunity to express faith in Him as the Son of God. He has just told her that the resurrection isn't just a future event—He Himself is all the power and non-natural miraculous ability that that implies.
- 6) Martha goes to call her sister Mary who also operates on the assumption that Jesus' power had been limited by His geographical distance from her dying brother. Jesus, deeply moved, goes to the tomb of Lazarus where His heart breaks with grief over the power that death has over the minds of believers. Those who watch Him there, though, are also measuring His abilities. Some of the Jews are willing to concede that He was able to heal blind people, but why, they ask, was He not able to keep this man Lazarus from dying?
- 7) When Jesus commands that the stone sealing the tomb be taken away, even Martha who believes He is the Son of God, limits His abilities. She doesn't want the smell of a decomposing body to come out. Jesus rebukes her and tells her not to focus on the situation as it is, but to focus on the glory of God.
- 8) Then Jesus pauses and prays not just for communication with God. He prays so that the people who are observing will make no mistake about the relationship that Jesus has to the Father before He performs the miracle of restoring life to Lazarus, and restoring him to the loving and welcoming arms of his mourning sisters.
- 9) Even a miracle as colossal as restoring life to a man who's been dead for four days doesn't produce faith in all the witnesses of the event. Some put their faith in Him while others plotted His death.

John 12:1-8

The last time we see Mary and Martha, things have really changed. A dinner which is given in the honor of Jesus is remarkable for many reasons.

- 1) The danger of being associated with Jesus is very real; yet His friends Lazarus, Martha and Mary ignore the danger and give Jesus a feast to show their appreciation for Him.
- 2) Martha is serving Jesus, but doing it gladly and without complaining. She has learned how to serve as is necessary but without resenting what others do.
- 3) Mary shows no limits—no frugality in the extravagance of showing love to Jesus. She takes a fabulously expensive jar of unguent perfume and poured it on His feet.
- 4) Judas immediately begins measuring the monetary value of the gift, instead of seeing its real meaning. His motives were not to help the poor whose cause he said he was advocating but he was acting from only selfish motives.
- 5) Jesus took Mary's gift and then "value added" to it. Not only did the gift have immediate meaning, He said, it was actually an anointing of His body for His burial. It meant even more than she thought it did.
- 6) Since this occurred just six days before the Passover, it is entirely possible, in fact likely from what Jesus said, that He never washed that perfume off before He died. Though He washed the feet of His disciples at the last supper, no one washed His.
- 7) When Jesus went to the cross, He probably hung there naked. We in our paintings and statues portray Him with a loincloth for modesty, but He probably was exposed there naked before His mother and the other women, the soldiers, and those who would have mocked and despised His circumcision. He wore only the blood from His own wounds, the dried sweat of the exertion of carrying the cross, the encrusted spittle of the soldiers, and the perfume of Mary—the symbol of her love and appreciation-- who had anointed Him.
- 8) Just as we would long to be clothed with a symbol of love, Jesus has fulfilled that longing for us: "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." Galatians 3:27. He has become our covering and shield, not only living within us but enclosing, clothing, protecting and covering us daily.