

BIBLICAL CHALLENGES 2007 (01).

December 31 2006.

Introduction.

How quickly another year has passed. Not too long ago the world was worried about the disasters that could take place at the turn of the century. Now, in a few hours we will be beginning the seventh year of this century. Those of us who are growing older and seeing some of our generation die, we are reminded in a very pointed way of the brevity of life. I attended a funeral this past Thursday and as I looked at the program, I realized that the lady who died was only **58**. By God's grace I am **56**. The realization was sobering.

As the years rush by, we are not simply rushing towards death. We are rushing towards the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. And we are rushing towards final judgment. Without God, and without the resolution to life that God gives, what is life? Life will be futility, or as Solomon said five times in Ecclesiastes, "all is vanity and striving after wind." (*Eccl.1:14; 2:11, 17; 4:4; 6:9*). Look very carefully at the world and what you will see is striving after wind. Everyone is on life's merry-go-round striving to live; striving to have a comfortable life and / or gain wealth; striving to stay young with an endless array of products that promises to keep you forever young; striving to stay healthy; striving to keep your place in that merry-go-round and cheat death. But in the end it's all striving after wind. We can't cheat death.

The end of a year is akin to death. It symbolizes death and compels you to think about your life and think about death. The end of a year compels you to evaluate. The compulsion you face may be only temporary. This is why new year resolutions are so quickly forgotten. But even though it is only for a fleeting moment, you are undeniably conscious of the fact that you need to evaluate because final judgment is coming. As a

Christian you cannot avoid the fact that after death comes the judgment. (*Heb.9:27*). You cannot side-step the fact that one of these days you will have to stand before the judgment seat of Christ to be judged and recompensed for the life you lived. (*2Cor.5:10*).

The final judgment will not be simply one of hearing Christ's verdict. *Rom.14:12* says, "each one of us will give an account of himself to God." *Heb.4:13* reaffirms this fact. Commentators tell us that every word in *Rom.14:12* is emphatic. "Each one" is very personal. Final judgment is not only universal. It is also very personal. "Give an account" is an accountant's term that was used for the keeping of financial records. For every day you live, God is keeping records. *Rev.20:12* tells us that one of these days you will stand before God and He will open the books on your life and you will have to give an account to Him for what was recorded in those books.

As I look back at 2006 and evaluate my own life, I see joys and sadness. I see victories and defeats. I see goals accomplished and goals not accomplished. I see time well spent and time wasted. I see encouragements and discouragements. I see the struggles to live to please God and the struggles with sin. I see God's hand of blessings and God's hand of judgment. I am very thankful to God for His patient and continuing work of grace and sanctification in my life. While I have much to thank God for and rejoice in, I also have much to be sad over and even grieve about.

It continues to be my privilege to serve you as your pastor. There is much to rejoice over as I look at your lives individually and this church corporately. Various levels of spiritual growth and maturity have taken place. Your involvement at various levels continues to increase.

I could use the language of the apostle Paul to commend several of you for your growth in and practice of love for the Brethren; for the decrease of selfishness; for your generosity that has begun to overflow in the cause of the gospel; for your concern for missions; for your growth in the knowledge of God's word and prayer; for your efforts in

building fellowship among the Brethren; for your Gaius-like hospitality towards the Brethren who visited us from time to time.

But there is also sadness over some of the unnecessary negative things that came into your lives and adversely impacted you and others close to you. There is sadness over unwise choices and decisions when God's word was clear. There is sadness over unnecessary conflicts and unforgiving hearts in the face of God's gracious actions to resolve His conflicts with us and forgive us. There is sadness over selfishness when God has dealt with us lovingly and with such large-handed selfless generosity.

There is sadness over the failure to believe God, when such belief would have resulted not only in spiritual growth but in also positively impacting others. There is sadness over the failure to trust God, when such trust could have opened the door for greater service and greater glory for our Lord. There is sadness over those, who by their own choices have struggled and stumbled along the Christian path, bringing little glory to the Lord because they have chosen to hide their lights under bushels.

There is sadness over the mindset that fails to put the glory of God first in every aspect and detail of life, however small and / or unimportant. There is sadness for the want of passion and priority for God and the things of God. The lack of true zeal for God is not revealed in the big things, but in the little things, the unimportant things in life. When such little and / or unimportant things relegate God to second and third place, you know there is lacking a true passion and zeal for God.

There is grief that sin entered our midst. The secret presence of one particular sin was a great jolt. I would not say this sin adversely affected us. I would say that it cursed us and we saw the many fruits of that curse. Finally, there is grief, great grief, over those who have fallen away, who have chosen the path of apostasy, who have chosen to walk away from the Light and walk into and embrace the darkness.

As you look at your life at the end of **2006** and evaluate it, what does the state of your life reveal to you about yourself? Can your life be summed up in the words of the apostle in **Rom.11:36**, “For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen”? Does **2006** reveal growth in the knowledge of God? Does **2006** reveal growth in the knowledge of God’s word? Does **2006** reveal growth in prayer? Does **2006** reveal growth into spiritual maturity? Does **2006** reveal godly priority in the choices made?

Does **2006** reveal an increasing burden for lost sinners? Does **2006** reveal the kind of faithful increasing overflowing generosity that marked the afflicted Macedonian Christians? (**2Cor.8:1-5**). Does **2006** reveal a longing for the Lord’s return and a growing hunger for heaven? Does **2006** reveal a growing passion for God? Does **2006** reveal a growing willingness to bear the reproaches Christ bore on our behalf?

Or does **2006** reveal a life of decisions, choices, attitudes and actions that waged war on God because they were not brought under the authority and control of His revealed word? Last Lord’s day we saw from **Rom.8:7** that those who refuse to obey God’s word are waging war against God. We saw that when it comes to obedience and disobedience, there is no passivity. Every act of obedience or disobedience is rooted in a deliberate choice, a deliberate act of the will.

The verb “**subject**” in **Rom.8:7** means that if you are in God’s army and He is your King, then you are responsible to actively bring yourself to obey God’s word in every area of your life. You cannot claim to be in God’s army and declare Him to be your King and at the same time wage war against Him. You cannot claim to be a Christian and love God and at the same time wage war against God. If your life’s decisions, choices, attitudes and actions reveal that you are waging war against God by refusing to obey Him, then you are His enemy.

No soldier is allowed to give limited or partial obedience to his captain. No soldier in the Lord’s army is allowed to give limited or partial obedience to the Lord. The absolute

importance and necessity of giving evangelical obedience to the Lord must grip your heart because your eternal destiny hinges on this very point. This is not an obedience of works that saves you. This is an obedience that demonstrates you are indeed saved and that you are now consumed with one great passion – bringing glory to God.

I). Mary's Choice In A Martha's World.

As I have prayerfully considered what the Lord would have me say to you, my mind has been turned again and again to **Lk.10:38-42**. (**read**). This account is preceded by the lawyer's question to Jesus and Jesus' telling of the parable of the good Samaritan. In this parable we have exemplified the obedience required by the second great commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. Now, in this account of Jesus' dealings with Martha and Mary we have exemplified the obedience required by the first great commandment, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind." (*Lk.10:27*).

We shall begin by seeking to open up the details of the passage before us. In His journeys with His disciples, Jesus came to a village. The village is Bethany and it is approximately **1.7** miles outside of Jerusalem. It would seem that Martha met Jesus somewhere in the village and invited Him to her house. Luke says that Martha "**welcomed**" Jesus into her home. The verb means "*to welcome as a guest.*" Martha is portrayed as the hostess and quite possibly she owned the house. Martha had a younger sister, Mary and a brother, Lazarus. Luke does not mention Lazarus.

Having settled Himself in Martha's home, Jesus began to teach. Both Martha and Mary sat down to listen to Jesus teach. We are specifically told that Mary took the initiative and seated herself at Jesus' feet in order to listen to Jesus. What Mary did was quite unusual and culturally inappropriate. Women were not allowed to sit at the feet of a rabbi and be taught by him. As a matter of fact Jewish women were not normally cast in the role of neglecting their domestic duties in order to listen to a rabbi teach.

Mary is pictured, firstly, not only as assuming the role of a disciple but also as preferring the role of a disciple in opposition to the cultural demands that were placed upon her. Mary would quickly discover that to choose to be a faithful disciple of Jesus would bring conflict and suffering in her life. Mary's choice brought her very quickly into conflict with Martha.

Mary is pictured, secondly, as an eager and focused listener. She was very eager to listen to the word of God. She was very focused in her attention as she listened to the word of God. Under normal circumstances a Jewish rabbi would have taken exception Mary's actions. Jesus began by remaining quiet about Mary's actions, but later on, when Martha drew Him into the conflict, He would commend Mary for the choice she made and the actions she took.

Martha is just the opposite. She is not pictured as sitting at the feet of Jesus. She does not assume nor prefer the role of the disciple. She is pictured as giving priority to and embracing the role that culture placed upon her, a role she carried out with great zeal. Martha began by taking a seat and listening to Jesus teach. But the seat she took is in keeping with the cultural priorities she embraced.

Furthermore, Martha is not an eager and focused listener. She is listening, but she has, what she would have judged to be, greater concerns on her mind. She is concerned about her guests and providing hospitality for them. In her honor- shame society, to fail in her hospitality would have been disastrous and a great shame. So her concerns were good and important. The typical Jewish rabbi would have commended Martha for the choices she made and the actions she took and he would have supported her in her conflict with Mary.

The parable of the good Samaritan showed us the importance of hospitality and emphasized the moral concerns in hospitality over the cultural. In the cultural setting, the Samaritan and the injured Jew were long-standing and deep-seated enemies. But the

more important concern here is that this injured enemy was in great danger of losing his life and needed help urgently. The Samaritan chose the moral over the cultural.

In this encounter with Martha and Mary, Jesus did not play down the importance of hospitality. In this encounter Martha's emphasis on the cultural importance of hospitality is set in contrast to the importance of Mary's moral discipleship choice. The importance of feeding one's guests with physical food is set in contrast to the greater importance of feeding one's soul with the bread or word of God.

Vs.40 tells us "Martha was distracted with all her preparations." The Greek verb translated "**distracted**" paints for us an interesting picture. The first idea in the verb is that Martha was allowing her mind to wander. Martha was listening to Jesus but found listening difficult because her mind was on her guests and the preparations she needed to make to take care of them. So here is Martha. Jesus is teaching but her mind has drifted away. She is counting heads. She is mentally checking her cupboards and making sure she has enough grocery supplies to prepare a bountiful meal for her guests.

The second idea in the verb "**distracted**" is to pull away. Martha's mind began to become so burdened with all the meal preparations she was facing, that burden finally stopped her from listening to Jesus and pulled her away from her seat and into the kitchen. Once in the kitchen, Martha went out of control, running from one direction to the next, trying her best to get all her preparations done. But in a short time she became overwhelmed and frustrated. To make matters worse, the one who should be helping her was sitting down listening to Jesus.

Finally, out of sheer frustration, she turned on her honored guest, the Lord Jesus. Let us use a little sanctified paraphrasing to get the picture. *"Lord, You are doing Your work. You are teaching. I am here in the kitchen doing my work. I am working myself to death trying to get a decent meal prepared for You and all the other guests in my home. And where is Mary? She is supposed to be here helping me. But*

guess what? She is sitting there listening to You and both of you seem totally oblivious to the reality of her domestic responsibilities.”

Take note now of her question : “Lord, do You not care...?” **Firstly**, the question reveals that Martha is quite irritated with Jesus and His failure to do what any rabbi would have done, and that is, ask Mary to take a seat that would have made her more readily available for her domestic duties. This irritation with Jesus would manifest itself again in ***Jn.11***, when Lazarus died. Martha would greet Jesus with these words, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.” (*vs.21*). **Secondly**, the question reveals that in Martha’s view Mary is a deserter who is either insensitive to the cultural concerns that were pressing upon them, or lazy, or irresponsible or just plain uncaring, or all four of them.

Thirdly, Martha’s question anticipated a “**yes**” answer from Jesus and the expectation that Jesus would send Mary packing into the kitchen. So Martha requested what she thought was the obvious, “Then tell her to help me.” The verb “**help**” means to take up and bear your share of the burden. Tell her to take up and bear her share of this burden. **Lastly**, Martha’s question and request showed how “**me-centered**” she was. Martha said, “Lord, do You not care that the sister of me has left me...? Then tell her to help me.”

The answer the Lord gave to Martha was totally unexpected. Jesus began with, “**Martha, Martha.**” Jesus’ repetition is both tender and emotional. He does care. But He cares more for Martha’s soul than for Martha’s cooking. “**Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things.**” Martha, Martha, calm down; just calm down.

And then Jesus dropped a bombshell on Martha. “You are worried and bothered about so many things, but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her.” The “**good part**” is idiomatic and can be comparative, “**the better part**”, or superlative, “**the best part.**” Lord, you

mean there are more important things than this great and pressing responsibility of hospitality that must be extended to guests in one's house. Lord, you mean there are more important things than the dishonor and shame that must be endured for failing to give the best possible hospitality to one's guests.

There are several lessons to learn here about hospitality. I would point out just one. *Matt.25:41-46* shows us that hospitality is very important and a moral issue with judgment day consequences. But hospitality is an important moral issue that is too often dressed upon in a lot of cultural clothes. And more than often the cultural clothes become more important than the moral concerns in the practice of hospitality. You do not necessarily need the cultural clothing to fulfill the moral demands of hospitality. Martha did not need to prepare an elaborate meal for Jesus and His disciples in order to fulfill the moral demands of hospitality. A simple meal would have been quite in order. Sometimes, as Jesus said, all that is needed is a cup of cold water. (*Matt.10:42; Mk.9:41*).

What was of greater importance was Martha taking the time to feed her soul on the bread or word of God! Jesus was saying to Martha and to all of us that the practice of hospitality must never pre-empt or take you away from the worship of God and listening to His word with eagerness and focused intensity. How many Christian women today are like Martha? How often they reject the better choice of worship and meeting with God and make the good but lesser choice to stay at home and cook elaborate meals for unexpected or invited guests?

What is **the primary lesson** for us in this encounter Jesus had with Martha and Mary? The lesson can be expressed in several ways. It is a lesson that relates to your priorities as a Christian. It is a lesson that deals with the choices you make, choices that are usually rooted in your priorities. When you face the choice between something that is good and something that is better or best, to choose the good is to make the wrong choice. This was Martha's problem. She chose that which was culturally and morally good over that

which is spiritually and morally better. Her choice was good, but it was not the better or best choice.

There is no doubting the fact that Martha recognized Jesus as Lord. When she addressed Him as Lord she was not being merely courteous and respectful. Turn to *Jn.11:21-27*. (**read**). “I have believed” is perfect tense. Martha’s faith in who Jesus is was permanently abiding. But there was a problem. Jesus was her Lord but He was not being given the true Lordship priority in her life.

The first proof of this fact is that Martha was not a careful and focused listener to Jesus’ message. As we saw already, when she listened, she allowed the legitimate cares of this life to press upon her mind and distract her. And so, hearing, she did not hear. Jesus warned in *Lk.18:8*, “take care how you listen.” And He made it very clear that listening must lead to obedience. In *Lk.11:28* Jesus said, “blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it.” (cf. *Lk.8:21; Jas.1:22*).

In *Jn.11*, when Jesus was ready to raise Lazarus, He asked that the stone be removed. Lazarus was buried in a cave and a stone was used to close the cave. Martha quickly objected. And Jesus said to her, “Did I not say to you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?” (*vs.40*). In other words, “*Martha, weren’t you paying attention when I was speaking to you?*”

The second aspect to Martha’s problem is that when she did listen, she did not take the time to think deeply about what she heard. She did not take the time to think deeply about her faith in Christ as her Lord and the implications of such faith in Christ as her Lord. If she did, she would have had a better understanding about life, choices and the priority that must be given to spiritual realities. She would have come to understand how to think through her choices in a Biblical manner, how to separate the good choices from the better choices and how to give priority to the better choices while not neglecting the good choices.

This is the lesson Jesus sought to teach the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees in *Matt.23:23*. Jesus said to them, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law : justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these things you should have done without neglecting the others.”

The point is simple : give priority to the better choices – justice, mercy and faithfulness. But at the same time do not neglect the good choice of tithing. I want you to note this fact : you are not being told to neglect the good choices. You are being told that you must give priority to the better choices and then find ways to fulfill the good choices.

Here is the question we must face : Are you a Martha or a Mary? Are you an eager and focused listener to God’s word or are you a distracted listener and missing out on what God wants you to hear? Do you take the time to think deeply about God’s word, about your faith in Christ as your Lord and the implications of such faith in Christ as your Lord? Are you making the good choices or the better choices? Are you making the better choices and, at the same time, finding ways to carry out and not neglect the good choices?

Martha-type Christians inevitably fail to believe, that is, they fail to live the life of faith because they fail to work out the implications of their faith in Christ and the message He brought to us from His Father. As a result, Martha-type Christians fail to make the better choices and fail to see the glory of God. And then they become frustrated and irritated with God.

Let me put some of you in a spot now : what choice have you made concerning the church’s thanksgiving dinner? Is your choice a Martha’s choice or a Mary’s choice?

Mary’s choice was the path of obedience and the glory of God. Mary’s choice was the path of growth in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But when you make Mary’s choice, you will be brought into conflict with the Christian Marthas. The

Christian Marthas will want to charge you with pretending to be super-spiritual and holier-than-thou. You will be told that you are not realistic and practical. Your Mary-choice will even cause the Christian Marthas to be irritated with the Lord. It is a very sad reality that even Christians can become irritated with the Lord when other Christians pursue and make choices that are pleasing and glorifying to the Lord.

The path of discipleship to Christ is the path of conflict with the world. When you make Mary's choice, you will be brought into conflict with the world. But more specifically, you will be brought into conflict with unsaved relatives and friends and co-workers. Your Mary-choice will cause the unsaved to be angry with you and hate your Lord.

Today, how many Christians will make the good choice to keep the peace and spend these remaining hours of **2006** with unsaved family members and loved ones as opposed to making the better choice of being with the family of God in the house of God? The better choice is the choice of conflict and we prefer peace with the world before the peace of God.

Was **2006** a year of Martha's choices or Mary's choices? What will **2007** be like? My final question is this : how safe is it for your soul to choose to be a Martha-type Christian and make Martha-type choices?