



# Mindfulness and Choosing the Good Portion: An Exegetical Research Analysis of Luke 10:38-42

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This paper presents an exegetical research analysis to contrast the choices made by Martha and Mary and demonstrates how Mary's choice supports the concept of mindfulness. Specifically, I examined Luke 10:38-42 according to Robbins's (1996) socio-rhetorical analysis. I examined the social and cultural concepts of hospitality, kinship, and honor-shame to answer the research question, how did the social and cultural values influence the decisions made by Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-42? This study also aimed to answer what role did mindfulness play in the decisions made by Martha and Mary? The socio-rhetorical analysis revealed that social and cultural values influenced Martha's actions and decisions. The analysis also revealed that Mary practiced mindfulness by being attentive to the teachings of Jesus Christ. This exegetical research study will help inform Christian leaders of the importance of practicing mindfulness to overcome frustration and anxiety, improve social interactions, and strengthen their relationship with Christ.

Keywords: spirituality, meditation, socio-rhetorical analysis

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## Introduction

The practice of mindfulness has become more popular as people engage in meditation, breathing techniques, journaling, and mindfulness exercise to reduce stress, become centered, and find peace. Many workplaces employ mindfulness practices as recent studies support the relationship between mindfulness and employee wellbeing, improved task performance, and ethical decision-making (Hyland et al., 2015). However, the extant literature revealed a lack of exegetical research supporting mindfulness practices from a biblical perspective. To examine the concept of mindfulness from a biblical perspective, I conducted an exegetical analysis of Luke 10:38-42 using Robbins's (1996) socio-rhetorical criticism. Specifically, I examined the social and cultural concepts of hospitality, kinship, and honor-shame to answer the

research question, how did the social and cultural values influence the decisions made by Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-42? This research also aimed to answer what role did mindfulness play in the decisions made by Martha and Mary?

## Overview of Mindfulness

Beginning in the 1980s, researchers and clinicians primarily used mindfulness practices in behavioral medicine (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011). According to Williams and Kabat-Zinn, there is a growing interest in the research and practice of mindfulness-based applications in education, law, business, and leadership. Mindfulness is not a new phenomenon; scholars have traced the origins of current secular practices to Buddhist psychological and spiritual practices as well as ancient Greek philosophy (Brown et al., 2007; Hyland et al., 2015).

According to Hyland et al. (2015), human perception is “limited by our attention span; fragmented by continuous distractions; distorted by our biases, assumptions, and expectations; and regularly hijacked by our emotional reactivity” (p. 578). The practice of mindfulness promotes awareness of distractions, one’s own emotions, biases, assumptions, and expectations (Hyland et al., 2015). Kabat-Zinn (2003) defined mindfulness as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (p. 145). Aligned with Kabat-Zinn’s operational definition of mindfulness, scholarly research has demonstrated that mindfulness positively impacts mental health, physical health, and improved social interactions (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Brown et al., 2007). Brown et al. found that mindfulness promotes attentiveness and interest in the thoughts of others while also being more aware of one’s “own cognitive, emotional, and verbal responses to the communication” and actions of others (p. 225). Mindfulness also “inhibits reactivity to conflict” and is “related to better communication quality” (Brown et al., 2007, p. 225). Likewise, Hyland et al. posited that mindfulness is “imbued with an attitude of open-minded curiosity and an intention of kindness and compassion” (p. 578).

## Biblical Principles Regarding Mindfulness

According to Buddhist traditions, meditation is essential to achieving a state of mindfulness (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011). Williams and Kabat-Zinn (2011) indicated that “Buddhist meditative practices are concerned with embodied awareness and the cultivation of clarity, emotional balance (equanimity) and compassion” (p. 3). Even though mindfulness is “the heart of Buddhist meditative practices” (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011, p. 3), it is also an essential element in practices of other traditions and teachings such as Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Hyland et al., 2015). For example, the Old Testament contains many references to meditation, especially in the Psalms (Matthews, 1991). The Hebrew root word for meditation is

*siach*, which means “to be occupied with” or “concerned about” (Matthews, 1991, p. 939). The Jewish people would repeatedly recite Scriptures and meditate on “God’s past deeds...[to] produce confidence” (Matthews, 1991, p. 939). For Christians, the act of meditation is a “reverent act of worship...[when] they commune with God and are thereby renewed spiritually” (Matthews, 1991, p. 939).

Hoover (2018) posited that the basic tenets of mindfulness are “consistent with Christian values” (p. 249). According to Hoover (2018), Scripture supports prioritizing awareness and finding contentment. In Romans 7:15-25, Apostle Paul communicated his awareness of his inner struggle between his spirit and flesh (Hoover, 2018). Hoover indicated that Paul's "ability to step outside himself long enough to recognize what is happening within himself...is a strong example of meta-awareness" (Hoover, 2018, p. 250). Apostle Paul also acknowledged how he had found contentment through Jesus Christ despite his circumstances (Philippians 4:12; Hoover, 2018). From a mindfulness perspective, Christians can discover contentment and endure their circumstances “with patience and acceptance because of their belief in the transcendence of their soul” (Hoover, 2018, p. 250; Revelation 21:4) and their future in Heaven.

Hoover (2018) found that Scripture supports mindfulness concepts of being nonjudgmental and minimizing distractions that cause stress, anxiety, and frustration (e.g., Matthew 7:1, Matthew 26:52, & Matthew 7:5). Hoover also pointed to Jesus's instruction for Christians to minimize distractions. In Luke 10:38-42, Hoover indicated that Jesus highlighted that Martha's distraction caused her "both anxiety and emotional reactivity" (p. 249). Whereas Mary's mindful focus in the pericope demonstrated her "appreciation for what is most important in the present" (Hoover, 2018, p. 249). The following socio-rhetorical analysis will examine the pericope of Luke 10:38-42 in more detail.

## Socio-Rhetorical Criticism

According to Robbins (1996), socio-rhetorical criticism is an exploration of “textual discourse...as a symbolic act that creates history, society, culture, and ideology as people know it, presuppose it and live concretely in it” (p. 46). The exegetical analysis of Luke 10:38-42 used social and cultural texture analysis to analyze the textual discourse between Jesus Christ and Martha. Social and cultural texture uses “anthropological and sociological theory to explore the social and cultural nature of the voices in the text under investigation” (Robbins, 1996, p. 144). Specifically, I examined the social and cultural concepts of hospitality, kinship, and honor-shame to answer how did the social and cultural values influence the decisions made by Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-42? This study also aimed to answer what role did mindfulness play in the decisions made by Martha and Mary?

## Hospitality

Beginning in the Old Testament, displaying hospitality was a custom and a duty of the Jewish people. Hospitality was an expectation of the Jewish people to entertain guests in their homes and "to provide guests with food, shelter, and protection" (Ngan, 1991, p. 670). According to Ngan, the "Pentateuch contains specific commands for the Israelites to love the strangers as themselves" (p. 670). During Jesus's ministry on earth, His followers and those seeking to commune and learn from Jesus invited Him into their homes (Barreto, 2018). Likewise, Martha demonstrated hospitality by inviting Jesus into her home. Martha further showed hospitality by engaging in *διακονια*, the Greek word used in the pericope which means "serving" (Carter, 1996, p. 269). However, Jesus accepted Mary's action of sitting "at the Lord's feet and [listening] to His teaching" (Luke 10:39), as a "greater form of hospitality" (Robbins, 1996, p. 164) than Martha's preoccupation with "much serving" (Luke 10:40).

## Kinship

According to Malina (1996), in the Mediterranean world, "the centrally located institution maintaining societal existence is kinship" (p. 45). The Greco-Roman and Jewish communities believed that "kinship relations should be characterized by harmony, agreement, and unity" (DeSilva, 2004, p. 139). Jewish communities believed that siblings should mutually support each other to attain shared goals and resources (DeSilva, 2004). As sisters, Mary and Martha were "bound together in a kinship relationship" (Bumpus, 2010, p. 230). Thus, Martha's frustration grew at her interpretation of Mary's lack of support in helping to serve their guests.

For the followers of Jesus Christ, the nature of kinship "provided a potent set of metaphors for binding people who were not related by blood together in a new configuration and cultivating an ethos of support and appropriate ways of relating" (DeSilva, 2004, p. 142). In this "fictive kinship" (DeSilva, 2004, p. 142), Jesus became the head of this extended family. In Luke 8:21, Jesus defined his earthly family as those "who hear the Word of God and do it." In the pericope, even though Martha welcomed Jesus into her home, she approached him as the head of their extended family to intervene and resolve the kinship conflict between her and her sister (Luke 10:40).

## Honor-Shame

In first-century Mediterranean culture, honor and shame were social values foundational to Romans, Greeks, Egyptians, and Jews (DeSilva, 2004). Honor was either ascribed by "birth into a powerful or wealthy family...birth into a particular ethnos" (DeSilva, 2004, p. 125) or embodying virtues of honor such as piety and courage. For the disciples, their association in the inner group of Jesus Christ granted them honor (DeSilva, 2004). Even though for women, "honor was associated primarily

with modesty and chastity" (DeSilva, 2004 p. 125), Martha's and Mary's association with the inner group surrounding Jesus Christ bestowed honor on them.

According to Robbins (1996), "when a person outside a community is invited to dine or lodge in someone's house...the host gains honor by the quality of his guests" (p. 164). Earlier in Luke 10, Jesus teaches his appointed followers to give honor whenever they enter someone's home by saying to the host, "Peace be to this house" (Luke 10:5). Thus, as the hostess, Martha achieved honor by welcoming Jesus into her home (Luke 10:38).

The narrator of the pericope indicated that Mary positioned herself "at the Lord's feet" (Luke 10:39). Robbins indicated that "social meanings associated with different parts of the body highlight implications of honor and shame" (p. 163). According to Robbins, the "head is a primary symbol of honor" (p. 164), whereas the feet are a symbol of shame. However, when Jesus admonishes Martha and instead praises Mary for her choice to listen to his teaching, the honor and shame are reversed. Although Martha gained honor as the hostess and Mary was seated in a position of shame, Mary's choice of "the good portion" (Luke 10:42) now positions her to be the one to gain honor.

## Results

The examination of this pericope utilizing social and cultural texture revealed that the social and cultural concepts of hospitality, kinship, and honor-shame significantly influenced the actions and decisions of Mary and Martha. Following the teachings of Jesus and Jewish customs regarding hospitality, Martha eagerly welcomed Jesus in her house as a guest. By being the hostess, Martha achieved honor. The concept of kinship also played a role in the actions and decisions of Martha, who felt that her sister, Mary, should have assisted her in serving their guests. However, Mary remained positioned at the feet of Jesus to listen to his teachings.

Mary's posture was one of worship and attentiveness as she listened to Jesus's teaching. Thus, Mary's display of mindfulness was her attentiveness to what was most important – the "good portion" (Luke 10:42). On the other hand, Martha was distracted, anxious, and troubled. Martha's distraction with trying to fulfill social and cultural norms of hospitality instead of mindfully processing what was happening at the moment demonstrated a lack of mindfulness.

## Discussion

As evident in this pericope, Martha's lack of mindfulness contributed to her "reactivity to conflict...[and] cognitive judgments" (Brown et al., 2007 p. 225) towards Mary. Even though the reader of Luke 10:38-42 sees Martha as a hurried hostess trying to show hospitality, Jesus's presence and admonition of Martha is consistent with the guidance of a counselor reminding Martha to be mindful and embrace the "good portion" (Luke

10: 42) just as Mary was doing. Even though Mary did not engage in discourse in this pericope, Mary's mindfulness was evident in her "receptive attentiveness...[and] willingness to take interest" (Brown et al., 2007, p. 225) in the teachings of Jesus. Therefore, the analysis of this pericope supports the research regarding the connection between mindfulness and social interactions from a biblical perspective.

Like Martha, many Christian leaders are busy with church, work, and home responsibilities. However, Christian leaders must intentionally dedicate time to sit "at the Lord's feet" (Luke 10:39) like Mary to develop as disciples. According to DeSilva (2004), "spending time in God's presence...is the place where lives are reordered, hearts healed, balance attained and stability found" (p. 347). Barreto (2018) posited that "healing and restoration clarifies identity in the midst of practices of hospitality" (p. 179). The act of meditation and being attentive to God's word is a way of inviting the Lord into one's heart and mind. Thus, the practice of mindfulness for Christians is essential in our spiritual development and our relationship with Christ as we take time to commune with him (Matthews, 1991).

## Conclusion

The purpose of this exegetical research analysis was to gain insight into the practice of mindfulness from a biblical perspective. This analysis revealed that even though social and cultural values impact what we do daily, mindfulness and attentiveness to what is most important can help us cope with the anxiety or frustration of our daily tasks and improve our social interactions with others. Practicing mindfulness as a Christian involves intentionally setting aside time to pray, meditate on Scripture, and commune with Christ.

This research study was limited in its scope by concentrating on one pericope that addressed the concept of mindfulness. The socio-rhetorical methodology employed to examine the pericope also limited the scope of the research. Future research could explore other pericopes, such as the writing of Apostle Paul in Romans 7:15-25, which also illuminates the concepts of mindfulness. Also, future research could be conducted using the same pericope but employing a different type of socio-rhetorical criticism.

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## About the Author

Angela Nicholas is a third-year Ph.D. student at Regent University, where she is studying organizational leadership. She has more than 21 years of human resources leadership and consulting experience. Her research interests include human resources development, cultural intelligence, spiritual leadership, and workplace spirituality.

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