

If someone were to ask you what is the most important thing in your life, hopefully most of us would say “God.” But, truth be told, often how we as humans live that out is in such a way that God can take a back seat to so many other things in our lives. The thing of it is though when we have the right order in life, we’ll find the true happiness that we are all looking for.

Laura Stack has had quite a career; a professional speaker, a writer, running her own company, she’s seen much success. But years ago, she got a wake up call that reminded her of what order things should go in.

She recalls that when she married her husband John, her life was so full, she feared she would have far more to do than time to do it. So she created a personal mission statement to define her true priorities and help her determine how to spend her time. She consulted the Bible for some guidelines and selected Matthew 6:33, which spoke to her: “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”

So she wrote:

First the most important thing to me is my relationship with Christ. My success is first measured by how I serve the Lord with my time, talents and treasure. I make decisions based on what Jesus would want me to do, not what I feel like doing. Second, I am a faithful, encouraging, supportive wife, and I will be a loving, caring and nurturing mother, sometimes even sacrificing my own needs to ensure theirs. I work to live, not live to work. Lastly, I take care of myself physically, knowing then I will have the energy and ability to work for the Lord and my family.

She read what she'd written and put it away, feeling good about herself. However, she says, God soon showed her that creating a mission statement and actually living it were two different things.

She was 26 years old when her first child, Meagan, was born. She traveled extensively with a public seminar company, gaining success and recognition in the marketplace. She was determined to be a wife and mother and career woman at the same time. Nothing would slow her down. She could change a diaper with one hand and type a proposal with another: a good proposal. Laura says she wanted to do it all - and succeed. So she arranged for her girlfriend, Angie, to care for Meagan when she was

out of town, speaking, and when Meagan was 3 months old, Laura started traveling again.

She says she couldn't see that her life was insane or that she wasn't following her personal mission statement. She wasn't working to live; she was living to work, striving to meet the world's definition of success, completely forgetting the one she'd written.

But then, she got a wake-up call, quite literally.

One late afternoon on the road, when Meagan was 14 months old, Laura phoned Angie to check in as usual. She stood at a pay phone in a hotel lobby and said "Angie, hows Meagan?"

"Oh Laura we had a wonderful morning. Meagan walked today!"

That news hit her like a thud, and felt like a gut punch. Meagan walked today she thought to herself, and where was I?

Her friend went on enthusiastically, “Yes, I just said, “Come to Angie!” and she walked across the living room into my arms!”

Sobbing in the lobby of a Holiday Inn in Mansfield, Ohio, 400 miles from home, her words echoed in Laura’s ears.

“What am I doing?” she shouted to herself. She wondered how she could have missed one of the most important moments in her daughter’s life. And for what, she thought. She realized she had no one to blame but herself, She had put her career, her fame, and her success ahead of her child. She had invested her time ino things that weren’t even part of the priorities outlined in her mission statement. She was moving so quickly in her career that she hadn’t stopped to weigh the costs.

She thought of the scripture that clearly states there is no success if family is lost. She knew she needed to align her actions with her purpose and make some changes. She vowed to stop worrying about the quantity of work she was producing and focus instead on the quality of time she spent with Meagan. She was still committed to success - but a different kind of success.

And so Laura started saying “no” to activities that didn’t support her purpose, her priorities and her mission statement. She started saying “no” to out of state speaking engagements and worked on building a local training business in Denver. She figured even Jesus said “no” sometimes when seemingly “good” requests for His time did not fit the overall plan for His ministry. In her Bible, she found, “Now when it was day, He departed and went into a deserted place. And the crowd sought Him and came to Him, and tried to keep Him from leaving them; but He said to them, ‘I must preach the Kingdom of God to other cities also, because for this purpose I have been sent’ (Like 4: 42-43).

Laura says God helped her to learn to turn away from the worldly values of fame, greed and power, and discover the true meaning of success.

Six years later, she knelt in her family room and said “Come to Mommy” to her son Johnny, who walked for the first time, across the room into her arms.

Priorities. We all have the ideal like Laura, but life causes us to change them. For some we get busy; for others they go after things they think will make them happy but only make them miserable in the long run; and for others life just kinds of pass them by.

Life is such a gift. And everything has a place; we can enjoy things like our hobbies; we can work hard; we can have pleasures. But what is also needed is an order, namely having our world revolved around God so everything else will fall into place.

Some have looked at the Gospel and thought of Martha as kind of like Laura who was being busy, and Mary as more of the contemplative who is listening to Jesus. Understandably some also have a hard time with the words of Jesus which seem a little harsh. For as one person put it to me, that's all well and fine if he and Mary want to talk, but doesn't someone have to prepare the food? Yes, it's a good point. And I also always point out both Mary and Martha are saints. Rather, the point is we need to have the proper order and priority in our lives for true happiness and peace.

The first reading sets us up for this, hitting the point home: God comes first. Abraham meets three figures, often seen as the “Old Testament Trinity” and made famous in an icon painting. Note what happens when they come to the entrance of his tent - he runs to greet them. They take priority. And he’ll be the one to wait on him, not any of his attendants. The point is that when God knocks, we need to open the door, let Him in, and listen. And this is because God loves us so much. Note when we get to the Gospel, Jesus says “Martha, Martha,” her name twice in a way you’d talk to a good friend. He tells her not to be anxious and worry about so many things, for Mary has chosen the better thing, Jesus. The one thing necessary is focusing on God, because do this, and everything else will fall into place. Mary sometimes gets the label as someone who’s not working; but there’s nothing to indicate that she’s lazy. Instead she puts her entire attention on Jesus, choosing the better thing. And this is not contemplation as opposed to action, because Jesus does both in His life and ministry. Rather, its an active listening to she can then be prepared to continue her own mission. So how do we choose the better part in our lives and hear God’s voice and discern what to do?

As a starting point, making time for God. Sometimes like Laura we are busy. We have a million things going on, and it can be so hard to make time for God. Trying to find some time that works for you, maybe at the very start or end of the day, where you can pray or meditate or just let God speak to you is a great way to make sure you have those moments like Mary where you are letting go, letting God who and better prepare you for the day ahead or help you learn about what went right and wrong over the day, and helps you discern where to go next.

Second, our conscience. Our conscience is where we encounter God; where we learn right from wrong; our inner Jiminy Cricket. But a conscience takes formation. We form it through prayer, and through thinking about what the Church teaches us in matter of faith and morals. This is why that first part, time with God and silence and meditation is so important - we need to think things through. Is this really the right thing for me, for my kids, for my family? Is this really making me happy long term? Do I need to say something and have a talk with someone who I'm worried about? Is it time to make a change in my life? We can get so busy in the moment, we don't think about the future.

Third, listening to our bodies. “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things.” Many of us have anxiety, and it’s understandable; we worry about other people, the world, our families, our health, the future, our jobs. But sometimes worry can take over, and our bodies might be telling us you are overextended, you are stressed and doing too much, or this is out of your control. God does not take away all our problems, but where does Jesus go so often before big moments? To pray; into the desert before He begins His mission, and to the garden to be strengthened before He completes it. If we find ourselves stressed out or anxiety ridden, it may mean we need to work more time in for God. And again, this does not mean necessarily speaking all the time. Mary is not saying anything, just listening. When I travel, as I’ve said before it’s often a spiritual experience too - I see God in the peacefulness of a church and looking at the stained glass, or in the serenity of a mountain sunrise or watching a bird in the middle of the woods hop from branch to branch. These things recharge me, but I also hear God’s voice and encounter Him here. So make sure if you find your body is saying I need rest or to find time away, to listen to it.

Fourth, listening to other people, for God comes to us with many prophets, and sends us people in our lives we are meant to be connected to. It’s

often easier to talk than to listen. But when we encounter people, in particular in our families and in our circles of friends, they might have important things to say to us out of loving concern. Or maybe God has told us listen carefully to this person and what they are not saying, and we might find that by listening we might learn that they are like Martha anxious about many things and having a hard time talking about them, and we can help them through something in their life.

Lastly, going on the mission. Again, Mary is by no means lazy. She starts with listening to Jesus. Laura got back to centering her life around Jesus too. But then there is the work ahead. I'm sure she got up and helped Martha after being with Jesus. Laura kept a successful career going but also stayed busy as a mom and had the right priority, but also needed to be Martha too. The mission will at times be quite tough and sometimes when we listen, we might say "God I really don't want to do that!" and at times as Paul notes in the second reading, saying yes to what God tells us entails suffering. But through this so much good can result by hearing God's voice and plans for us, and with Him, carrying them out.

I often find myself sometimes ruminating and thinking about the “what ifs,” but the fact is yesterday is gone, and tomorrow is not yet written. I know that in whatever follows there will be ups and downs, and also things out of my control. But with me through it all is God, who gives me the one thing necessary to get through life - His presence, journeying with me step by step. As the Father says in Luke 9:35 at His Transfiguration: “this is my chosen Son, listen to Him.” Sometimes we have a hard time doing that, but when we open our minds, hearts and souls and realize Jesus is in our midst and journeys with us, what a truly happy and full life we can lead.