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Digital Edition 10/22/2001
By Holiness Data Ministry

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The Sunday School Beacon
December 17, 1995



MARTHA! MARTHA!
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Jodie Claymore bustled around the house like her life depended upon what she was doing. Without stopping to look at her children, who had just gotten home from the mall with their father -- her husband -- she said, "Marcy, set the dining room table. And be careful with the china and the crystal. Do it now! Fold the napkins the way I showed you to fold them.

"Stacie, make sure the front hall closet is empty of everyone's coats and hats and whatever else is in there. Put the heavy brass hangers along the clothes rod as soon as the closet is empty. And cleaned. We'll need fifteen hangers in there.

"Cody, the fireplace needs checked into in the Great Room. Make sure it's clean! Fill the brass box beside the hearth with wood. Dry wood, and properly-cut lengths.

"Stanley, the lights on the potted pines beside the formal door out front don't look right. I want them removed and restrung. . . ."

"Aw, Mom," the boy cried. "This is the third time you made me do it. I almost hate to see Christmas come."

"Me too." It was Stacie.

Jodie stopped in her flight up the curving, thickly-padded and carpeted stairway after another linen cloth for the serving table in the enormous dining room to exclaim, "Obey orders, each of you. And shame on you, Stanley, for talking that way. Christmas is one of the loveliest times of the year. Now hurry, each of you; our guests will be arriving within three hours and I want everything to look beautiful and to run smoothly."

Marcy hurried up the stairs to her bedroom, carrying the gifts she had bought. She would put them inside the clothes closet until she had time to wrap them, she decided.

Jodie hurried by her daughter's door. Then she wheeled around and stood framed in Marcy's doorway, exclaiming, "I thought I ordered you to set the table, young lady! How dare you disobey me!"

"I'm not disobeying you, Mother. Honest, I'm not. It's just that you always make us bring everything up to our respective rooms so there's no 'clutter,' as you call our things, downstairs. I was only obeying you in this, first. I'm going to set the table."

"Indeed you are! And now! Downstairs with you, Marcy, and don't you stop until your work is finished."

"Oh, Mom, why can't we live like we used to?"

Marcy cried meaningfully, as tears ran from her eyes.

"I . . . I . . . well, I dread to see Christmas day come anymore."

"Marcy Claymore, how dare you talk this way! It's a desecration to Jesus."

"Is it, Mother? Really, is it? I love Jesus; but I don't like what we're doing anymore."

"Quiet!" Jodie shouted, without realizing that she was shouting. "You will not talk this way to me, young lady. Do you hear? Now apologize then get to your table setting."

Still crying, Marcy said softly, "Forgive me for saying anything to you, Mother. I . . . only wish. . . ."

"Not another word from you, Marcy! Now, into the dining room with you. . . ."

"Martha, Martha,' thou art cumbered about many things and with much serving. . . ."

Jodie turned and faced her husband. "Don't you start in on me, Andrew," she warned. "Of all days to take your offspring shopping! You knew we had dinner guests coming tonight."

"Who arranged it, Jodie?"

It was like Andrew had slapped her. "Don't you think it fitting that one in your present business status and financial state should celebrate? I did it for you."

"Did you, Jodie? Really and truly, was it for me; or was it to make an impression on a group of worldly-minded people who care absolutely nothing about the poor and those less-fortunate than themselves? Jesus said when we made a feast we were to invite those who could do nothing in return for us; those who were really and truly in need."

"Oh stop it, Andrew. I've had about all that I can take. Isn't it enough that you took my help shopping today. . .?"

"Wait a minute, Jodie. This was the day we promised to take them shopping, you and I. It was promised. A month ago. Check the calendar. Remember?"

"That was before the dinner was scheduled," Jodie insisted:

"Again I ask, who scheduled and planned and arranged the dinner? Certainly not I. Frankly, I feel God is displeased and grieved with all the unnecessary spending and. . . ."

"Unnecessary? How do you expect to feed fifteen adults without some extra spending?" she asked, cutting into his unfinished sentence.

"I'm not referring to the cost of food," Andrew replied. "And you know I have never been tight-fisted with you, moneywise. But Jodie, all the elaborate and expensive trimmings and baubles and. . . ."

"It's Christmas," she cut in sharply.

"Whose birthday do we commemorate on this day?" Andrew asked.

"What a foolish question! And after all, it's only once a year, Andrew."

"Do you realize how many missionaries' monthly salaries we could have paid with all you have spent? And do you realize that we could have sent this same amount to certain countries and have fed many starving children and put clothes on their naked bodies?"

"Don't try to put me on a guilt trip, Andrew," Jodie remarked impatiently as she hurried away.

Andrew followed and took hold of her arm, saying, "Listen to me, Jodie: you are cumbered about with many things; worldly things. You have made Christmas anything but a sacred time. And as for Marcy 'desecrating Jesus,' as you told her when she said she dreaded to see Christmas day come anymore, I'm afraid it is you who are doing the desecrating. Where, in all of

your elaborate plans and decorations and such, will Christ be magnified and honored and glorified? Yet this is to be His birthday.

"And Jodie, our children have feelings too. Next to God, then you, they fall in line in my heart. I have never seen them so unhappy before. Never. They have been begging me to go back to the house in which they were ever so happy; back to the house in which you were kind and gentle and loving to them; back to the house where you laughed with them, baked with them, played with them and read to them and did things with them. They hardly know you anymore. Neither do I. . . ."

Jodie's face paled. "Andrew!" she cried.

"I must finish, my dear," Andrew continued. "You have become so involved with things, Jodie, and friends who are not spiritual, until you are no longer concerned about those needful and necessary things. This is why you have been begging me to go to Sue's church. But I cannot do it, my dear. I mean to continue going to the little holiness church where we have brought our children up and where they have been taught the way of righteousness and true holiness. If you leave, and begin attending Sue's church, you will go alone, dear. The children and I will continue going where we have always gone. I have a spiritual and a moral obligation to our children. So do you. By God's grace I mean to do everything in my power to help them to choose that better and good thing, like Mary in the Bible."

Jodie brushed a hand across her eyes. Was she hearing Andrew right? Never before had he spoken to her like this -- with such authority and firmness. She felt tears come to her eyes.

"The children have been begging me to move back to our old house, Jodie. I told them I'd take them back tomorrow, the Lord willing. And since it hasn't sold, I've been doing a lot of thinking. Especially so since I had asked the Lord to have the Keneer couple buy it if this was His will, and if not, to stop the sale. The day before the sale was to be finalized, Todd Keneer got word that he was being transferred out of state with his company. It was almost like the Lord was flashing a green light for me."

"Andrew, you can't mean what I think you mean!" Jodie exclaimed, incredulous.

"What are you thinking? I mean, what do you think I mean?" he asked quickly. "you may be right."

"If you're thinking of moving back. . . ." Jodie left her statement unfinished.

"I've been doing a lot of praying, my dear. It's like I feel a very sweet and gentle nudge, encouraging, almost pushing me that way," Andrew admitted.

"I can't believe my ears!" Jodie exclaimed. "I love it here. We've never had a house so beautiful and fine as this one."

Placing his arms around his wife, Andrew said kindly, "Since we're on the subject, dear, I feel I must tell you. . . ."

"Tell me what?" she asked quickly.

"You've grown spiritually cold and indifferent since we moved here, honey. This has caused me great concern. The house and your new friends have gone to your head."

Jodie gasped. "Andrew!" she cried.

"Is it not the truth, Jodie dear?" He asked the pointed question then waited patiently for an answer. When his wife made no reply, he said, "I want my wife to go to Heaven with the children and me. I want my Jodie back more than anything else. She's become a stranger to me. Church attendance and things pertaining to God no longer have top priority in her life. She's become a self-appointed 'entertainer' for elaborate dinner parties and such. She's courting the favor of the rich. The godless."

"But Andrew, you're a successful business man!"

"Not any more successful than when we lived in the house where we started housekeeping and in which our children were born and enjoyed living and growing up. It will be worth the drive back and forth to work again just to see my family happy and growing spiritually. My wife especially."

Jodie's lips felt dry; her mouth too. Color drained from her face. Her lips trembled. "I . . . I'm sorry, Andrew." She was crying.

Andrew's arms tightened around her. Holding her close, he let her cry.

"Oh Andrew, Andrew!" she finally exclaimed between sobs. "I'm sorry. Sorry! I see how true everything is that you told me. I didn't realize how blinded I'd become with worldliness nor how enamored with materialism I am. And it's true, too, that I desire the favor of the elite and the worldly. To the exclusion of the lowly, the holy and the spiritual, even. My heart is so wicked and deceitful. I'm frightened, Andrew. I need help. Badly! I've been so hateful and nasty to the children; so cutting and sharp and unkind. And to you, too, dear Andrew. Forgive me, please, and help me to get back into a right relationship with the Lord. I'll move back. Just pray for me. The dinner is well under way. It will be the last one of its kind, I promise. . . ."

Jodie dropped to her knees and began crying to the Lord for forgiveness.

Hearing the sweet sound of praying, the children, one by one, tiptoed reverently to where father and mother were kneeling and calling upon God. Then, in an ecstasy of holy joy, they added their voices to those of their parents. It was going to be a wonderful Christmas after all. A spiritual Christmas!