

THE STEWARDSHIP OF SAYING, “NO”

Mark 1:35-39

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where He prayed. Simon Peter and his companions went to look for Jesus, and when they found Him, they exclaimed: “Everyone is looking for You!” Jesus replied, “Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.” So He traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.

Mark 1:35-9

Most of us are taught from a young age to say no to things that are overtly dangerous or problematic—whether it be playing catch in a busy street or giving personal information to a stranger. But what we’re not often taught is when to say no to neutral or even good things. Maybe you’re a parent with a full-time job, and you struggle knowing whether to respond to an important email or head home to your family. Maybe you’re a remote employee who feels pressure to be online beyond the typical nine-to-five workday. Maybe it’s simply that you’re a woman who’s been taught that saying yes equates to being nice, agreeable, and helpful. Between societal pressures, cultural norms, social expectations, and the development of 24-hour connectivity, it’s no surprise that we find ourselves going along with more than we should.

We need to understand what is ours to do and what isn’t. God gave us boundaries that limit our days to 24 hours and our week to six days of work with a Sabbath rest. God also made our bodies with limits—the rhythms of regular sleep and frequent nourishment affect our capacity in real ways. We need to honor our human limitations by taking cues from the natural boundaries of time and body.

That is what we see Jesus, the human, doing in Mark’s Gospel. Jesus had gone to Simon Peter’s house and healed his mother-in-law from illness. We know from archaeology that Peter’s house lay right in the middle of the town of Capernaum. Word spread quickly about the miracle. And all kinds of sick people were brought to Jesus. Yes, Jesus could heal them, but he didn’t do it by the power He had as God, but by the special power given to Him by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah. He didn’t just snap His fingers and heal them. It took prayer and trust in His Father. It was exhausting mentally, physically, and spiritually. That is why even before the sun came up, Jesus went away from the house, which along the Sea of Galilee meant a climb up from the edge of the lake, to a quiet place to pray with His Father. He wasn’t just doing that to set us an example. He needed it. He needed to say, “No,” to all the healing He was doing to get recharged being alone with His Father.

Saying “no,” Greg McKeown, author of *New York Times* bestseller Essentialism, writes, “Only once you give yourself permission to stop trying to do it all, to stop saying yes to everyone, can you make your highest contribution towards the things that really matter.” Jesus models this throughout the Gospels when He makes choices about when He prays versus when He teaches; when He requires solitude versus when He meets the crowds; whom He chooses to heal versus whom He does not.

So why wouldn't we say "no," to things we can't handle? Because that means accepting the fact that we can't do it, that it is beyond us. When we do something, we are in the driver's seat, we think we are in control. When we say "no," to good or neutral things, then we are missing the chance to get something done, to mark off another positive thing on our list.

We can find ourselves doing that in our relationship to other people. If I do something for someone, that person owes me. But if I let that person do something for me, I owe that person. We can feel that puts us in a position under that person, when we'd rather be on top. But even in our sincere efforts to not want to be a burden to others, we slam the door on their attempts to give to us.

But Jesus has come to free us from trying to be on top, to trying to be in control. He did that by saying "no" to all the things He could have done, like stop His enemies from killing Him and instead saying "yes" to the goal His father had—to save people from sin by His death on the cross. We are freed from having to do things to get right with God, to "score enough good points" to compensate for our failures, so we can say "yes" to what really matters—loving others as he loves us.

Lysa TerKeurst quotes Louie Giglio in her book The Best Yes: "Whenever you say yes to something, there is less of you for something else. Make sure your yes is worth the less." That is what happens in marriage. But we realize that is worth it because marriage becomes greater than just the husband and wife. How much more it is with our relationship with God. When we say "Yes" to God, then there is less for many other things. But we are connected to the one who is limitless in His love, the love we need to be able to share it with others.

That includes allowing others to give to us. Writer Kate Bowler crafted this poem after a cancer diagnosis:

Bless you as you ask for the help you so readily give. / May you be met with the same love that you've always poured out. / May you find ways to give still / that fit the shape of today's available spoons. / Not more, not less. / Just what's right for now.

Once we decide to set boundaries to steward our lives well, understand the beauty of saying no, and reframe our stories, we're in a strong position to put what we've learned into practice. What does this look like on a daily basis? James 5:12 shows us that when we speak our yes and our no, it is enough. We don't need to make elaborate promises or multiple excuses. Our answers are rooted in our integrity and, as such, stand on their own. When we commit to an answer and follow through, this is a sign of spiritual maturity. Communicating our "no" clearly is also a kindness to both ourselves and the other party involved. And it's important to remember we're responsible for what we say, but not how the information is received.

The whole point of saying "no" is to be able to say "yes" to what really matters. St. Paul tells us how God did that for us in 2 Corinthians:

But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not “Yes” and “No.” For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us—by me and Silas and Timothy—was not “Yes” and “No,” but in Him it has always been “Yes.” For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ. And so through Him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God.

God’s big “yes” be our guide as we determine what is “yes” and “no.”