

Saying No

I was in a Doctor of Ministry seminar led by Dr. Don Hammer and we were divided into teams charged



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with strategically planting a new church. We had a budget, city plans for development and demographics. Our agenda was to buy property, put together a ministry plan, and project a timeline for our goal. Every step required multiple choices, obstacles and evaluations. Discernment was critical as we returned again and again to our goal before voting yes or no on strategy and expenditures. Many of the choices we all face involve choosing between right and wrong, but the toughest decisions may be between good and good. In today's study passages, Jesus says "no" because of God's ultimate priority.

Mark tells about a wonderful time in Capernaum when the whole town crowded around Jesus, marveling as he healed the sick and cast out demons. Emphasizing who Jesus really is, Mark explains Jesus "would not permit the demons to speak because they knew his identity" (v. 34). I remember the days in our land when some flamboyant spiritual healers attracted throngs of people and amassed a lot of money and publicity. Jesus is very different. Jesus cared deeply about people; he had the power to heal and even raise the dead, but he did not seek publicity or to raise money. The crowds followed him and often sought miracles with no real interest in changing their values or leaving their old way of life to seek God. Zaccheus of Jericho shows a very different reaction to Jesus (Luke 19:1-10).

As he does in similar situations, Mark points to something beyond the excitement of the moment to Jesus' intimate relationship with the Father. At dawn Jesus quietly slips away from his sleeping disciples to pray (v. 35). When they awaken they go looking for Jesus because they were anticipating another day of

miracles and large crowds: "Everyone is searching for you" (v. 37). But Jesus calmly tells his disciples it is time to move on because he is already on the road to the cross. Jesus says, "(I must go to other towns) so that I may proclaim the message there also: for that is what I came out to do" (v. 38). Jesus' priority, his ultimate mission, is to clearly offer God's love to the world.

Jesus' teaching and miracles are designed to show God's grace to a lost and struggling world. As we watch him embody the love and grace of God, we understand his priority. The disciples are caught up in the wonder of those miracles, but Jesus sees and understands what God is doing for us all. Jesus says no to staying in Capernaum because he will allow nothing to stand between him and the cross.

The second example, from Luke 12:13-15, offers a very different example of saying no. Jesus is once again surrounded by a crowd when someone asks Jesus to intervene and instruct his brother to share the family inheritance. Obviously people have seen Jesus' compassion, wisdom and honesty. Jesus is a wise teacher, so why not ask him to resolve this division between brothers? Should this request be seen as a compliment? There were Jewish experts on the laws of inheritance and the importance of family relationships.

Jesus immediately recognizes the core of this family dispute as self-interest and firmly responds: "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" (v. 14). Jesus goes on to warn about greed, "for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (v. 15). Jesus then follows with the parable of the rich fool whose harvest was so great he was unsure what to do. He finally decided to build new barns to secure his wealth, only to die that very night without getting to enjoy the wealth! (vv. 16-21). How much better it is to share your wealth with others in this world and look forward to God's blessings in heaven. Sadly, the man seeking Jesus help

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in claiming an inheritance was in the presence of God's Son with the grace of God open before him, yet he wanted to argue about money and property. Jesus said no again because God's love is his purpose.

When you face challenges and opportunities it is critical to remember that God's grace should shape our values and priorities. There are many good things in life, but nothing compares to God's gift of Jesus Christ. What are your priorities? What will your time and resources allow you to do without harming yourself or those you love? Will a choice impact your health, complicate someone else's life, or damage your faith testimony?

God should be at the center of your life, shaping your character, influencing your relationships, guiding your decisions. God is to be your focus. When faced with a serious decision it can be helpful to seek the advice of family or trusted friends, but God loves you beyond anyone else and his word is a solid resource for living.

You cannot say yes to everything. Everyone has a physical and emotional limit. God does not expect you to do it all. God loves you already, so step back from any idea of earning spiritual points. Guilt is not a healthy motivator. Decisions should be based on a sense of God's leading, the encouragement of the Bible, an assessment of your motivation and abilities, time constraints, health, and impact on your family. You can say no as a part of serving God.

Jesus often slipped away from the crowds and his disciples to be alone with God. The Holy Spirit is our companion and there are times when we just need to be in a truly quiet place to hear him. The Christian life is not about spectacular events and healings or legal arguments over property rights or money. The Christian life is about sharing God's love and growing in your understanding of his grace. You can say no. You can say yes. Jesus shows you the way.