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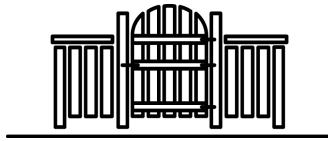
# SETTING BOUNDARIES: HOW TO SAY NO WITHOUT BURNING BRIDGES



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ERIC YEE

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# INTRODUCTION

“It’s amazing, the power of one word,” asserts Shonda Rhimes, the self-proclaimed “titan” responsible for four television shows, seventy hours of programming, and \$350 million per season all around the world.

What is that one word?

“‘Yes’ changed my life. ‘Yes’ changed me.”<sup>1</sup>

But then again, Warren Buffett, the well-known investor and philanthropist whose net worth is around \$150 billion, argues the complete opposite.

“The difference between successful people and really successful people is that really successful people say ‘no’ to almost everything.”<sup>2</sup>

There are some in the Yes camp (think of the message of some popular movies<sup>3</sup>), and there are some in the No camp (think of the counsel of many productivity books).

So which is it?

Given that this life skill guide is titled *Saying No*, you may think we’re aligning with the No camp, but that’s not quite right.

We’re not interested in joining a camp but aligning ourselves with our Creator, the Lord God, in whose image we are made.

So does God want us to say yes or say no?

Well, it depends. Yes or no to whom? To do what? In what situation? At what moment? For what reason?

And given that the subtitle of this life skill guide is *Setting Boundaries Without Burning Bridges*, you may think that boundaries are an unqualified good, but it’s not that simple.

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Yes, Jesus upheld some boundaries, most notably to “withdraw to desolate places and pray” amidst clamoring crowds seeking his attention (Luke 5:15-16; cf. Mark 1:35-39).<sup>4</sup> But he also broke personal boundaries; famously, though Jesus went to a desolate place with his disciples to rest, he ended up teaching, healing, and feeding five thousand men (more if you count women and children!) late into the evening (Matt. 14:13-21; Mark 8:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-13).<sup>5</sup>

So, as Christians, how should we make sense of this?

In short, wisdom is not just about saying yes or saying no. I know we’d like to think it was that simple, but it’s not.

Which do you find yourself leaning toward? Yes or no? Perhaps you know firsthand what it feels like to constantly expect more from yourself. You stay up later and wake up earlier, and yet still feel like there’s not enough time in the day to get done all the things you’ve said yes to. You tell yourself it’s just a season of busyness, but the season never actually ends. Perhaps you’ve already burnt out.

Trust me, I’ve been there. I know what it feels like to have your mind and body finally start to say no to you because you’ve been unwilling to say no to everything else. So, you know you need to start saying no, but how should you think about it? As with most things, we need to start with a goal.

# 1

## WHAT IS THE GOAL OF SAYING NO?

### ***The Wrong Goal***

When we're feeling the negative effects of saying yes more than we should, it's very tempting to conclude that the goal of saying no ought to be self-preservation. We tell ourselves, "I need to set boundaries so that I never experience burnout again." Our lives felt out of control before, so the goal must be to take control of our lives, right?

And if self-preservation is the goal, then it's natural to understand boundaries as it is popularly understood—"Boundaries are personal property lines that set limits on who you are and who you are not, and influence all areas of your life—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. To define a boundary is to establish these limits and protect the areas of your life that matter most." But the problem is that the starting and ending point of all this is me. Boundaries shape who we are, and the goal of saying no is to preserve our well-being. But who defines boundaries for us? The boundaries defined in God's Word are what truly shape our identity. While we may establish personal limits, it is God who ultimately defines our purpose and identity.

A boundaries-centered life becomes a therapeutic excuse to live a self-centered life. And that's not good.

### ***The Right Goal***

In contrast, according to God's Word, the starting and ending point of all things is not me but God. Paul writes, "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen" (Rom. 11:36). So, the glory of God is the goal of all things—including saying no.

We do not get to arbitrarily define boundaries to subjectively define ourselves, but God, our Creator and Redeemer, defines who we are and who we are not, and influences all areas of our lives—physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually. Therefore, saying no or setting boundaries is not

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about taking control of your life, but it is a tool to help you live a God-glorifying life.

Think of an Olympic race. There's a world of difference for the runner who just wants to avoid fainting as opposed to the runner who aims to represent his country well as he runs. The former probably won't run his best out of fear that he might faint; the latter will not only run his best but also in a way that ensures that he finishes and brings honor to the country he represents.

I'm not making this up! During the men's marathon in the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City, John Stephen Akhwari of Tanzania cramped up and fell to the ground as runners jockeyed for position. Consequently, he smashed his shoulder on the pavement and gashed his knee, dislocating that joint. But whereas 18 out of the 75 starters had pulled out of the race, he pressed on. He limped through the remaining miles and entered the stadium over an hour after the winner had crossed the finish line. The crowd gave him a standing ovation. When asked why he didn't give up when he knew he had no chance of winning, he answered, "My country did not send me 5,000 miles to start the race; they sent me 5,000 miles to finish the race."<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, our God did not create and redeem us for us to merely avoid burnout and preserve ourselves, but to finish our "race" and pursue his glory (2 Tim. 4:7-8). Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31).

In everything we do, including saying no (or yes), we ought to ask ourselves whether we are doing this for the glory of God ("Is my desire or goal in this to reflect and celebrate God's character and purposes?").

Nonetheless, even once we're aligned with that right goal, we may still have trouble saying no.

Why is that? That's what we'll address in the next two parts.

### ***Reflection Questions:***

1. Are you someone who leans more towards saying yes or no? What are your reasons or motivations for saying yes or no?
2. If you look back at your decision-making in the past several months, what has been the goal? Did it lean more towards self-preservation or God-glorification?

## 2

# WHY DO YOU HAVE TROUBLE SAYING NO? (HEAD)

### *Distorted Understanding of Faithfulness*

“Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matt. 25:21, 23). Those are the words that we all long to hear from the Lord Jesus one day.

But for me, the problem was that I had a distorted understanding of what it meant to be “faithful.” Becoming a Christian as a university student, I was repeatedly told that “everything rises and falls on leadership,”<sup>7</sup> which was another way of saying that everything rises and falls with me.

Why? Because as a Christian, I’m a leader.

Why? Because every Christian is called to make disciples—or to influence others—and “leadership is influence—nothing more, nothing less.”<sup>8</sup>

And what is my scope of responsibility as a leader? Everything.

I set the example. I go the extra mile. I make sure no balls are dropped.

In that paradigm, saying no (to anything) was unfaithfulness, and saying yes (to everything) was faithful. Such “faithfulness” is chasing after wind, but I kept chasing nonetheless.

I took on more and more and worked harder and harder. I so desired to be found “faithful” that I burnt myself out in the process, unable to function. Looking back, I resonate with the sentiment of American comedian Lily Tomlin, who said: “I always wanted to be somebody, but now I realize I should have been more specific.”



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“I always wanted to be faithful, but now I realize I should have been more specific,” I thought.

Our specific understanding of faithfulness must not be self-derived nor borrowed from the world. Instead, it must come from healthy boundaries defined by God’s Word. The Master alone determines what faithfulness means for his servants—and he has spoken in his Scriptures. When we are ignorant of how the Bible defines boundary meaning, we often end up loading extrabiblical burdens upon ourselves that are impossible to carry. And without setting boundaries, we risk losing sight of what truly matters—our faithfulness to God’s calling, not our attempts to meet every worldly expectation.

### ***Minimum Standards of Faithfulness***

What are the Bible’s minimum standards of faithfulness in different areas of life?<sup>9</sup> This may seem like an odd question to ask, but without being able to answer this question, we can’t properly determine what it means to be faithful. If we are to be faithful, then there must be some standard that we meet; otherwise, we have no basis for knowing whether or not we actually are faithful.

I’m not saying that we should merely aim for the minimum (we may often exceed it), but faithfulness is at least defined by meeting the minimum.

As Christians, three major areas of our lives are family, church, and work.<sup>10</sup>

Regarding family, the minimum standards of faithfulness are probably higher than many of us think. Wives are to “submit to [their] own husbands, as to the Lord,” and husbands are to “love [their] wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her” (Eph. 5:22, 25-26). Children are to “honor [their] father and mother,” and parents are to “bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:1-2, 4).

Regarding church, the minimum standards of faithfulness involve meaningful commitment and connection to the life of a local church. The biblical metaphors for Christians are corporate in nature—sheep among a flock (John 10:14-16), members of a body (1 Cor. 12:27), members in a family (1 Tim. 3:15), stones in a temple (Eph. 2:21), and citizens in the kingdom of God (Phil. 3:20). Additionally, the New Testament has many “one another” commands for Christians, which are routinely summarized in something like a church covenant. In general, we are to love one another (1 Pet. 2:17; Gal. 5:13; 6:10; Eph. 4:32; Rom. 15:1; 12:10, 13, 15-16), encourage one another (1 Thess. 5:11; Heb. 10:24-25), guard one another (Heb. 3:12-13; 12:15-16;

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Matt. 18:15-17; 1 Cor. 5:1-5), and obey our leaders (Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:5)—all of which are to be lived out in the life of a local church.

Of course, if you voluntarily take on particular roles and responsibilities in the church (e.g., elder, deacon, treasurer, clerk, small group leader, children's ministry teacher, etc.), then the minimum standards of faithfulness in this area will grow to match those additional responsibilities. But as a church member, the minimum standards of faithfulness are simply gathering regularly with your church for Lord's Day worship and being in meaningful relationships with others in the church where you're intentionally doing spiritual good to your fellow members.

In relationships, setting boundaries is an essential part of maintaining both emotional and spiritual health. Understanding what is a boundary in a relationship can help define the limits necessary to ensure mutual respect and personal well-being. For example, healthy relationship boundaries allow individuals to protect their time, energy, and emotions while still offering love and service to others. These boundaries aren't about shutting others out but about defining what is healthy and sustainable for both parties involved.

Knowing how to set boundaries in a relationship is especially important when we seek to love others well, without sacrificing our own spiritual health. Establishing clear boundaries helps avoid burnout and ensures that we honor God in all our interactions, recognizing that He has called us to balance service with self-care.

Regarding work (our vocations), the minimum standards of faithfulness are probably lower than many of us realize. We are to work diligently (Col. 3:23-24) to support ourselves (2 Thess. 3:10-12), to provide for our family (1 Tim. 5:8), and to give to those in need (Eph. 4:28). It's nice to have a job that maximizes your gifts and talents and that you find meaningful and enjoyable, but those are not biblical requirements for faithfulness.<sup>11</sup> Most people around the world, past and present, have not had such privileges available to them, yet they can still be faithful to work diligently to support themselves, provide for their family, and give to others.

When we are ignorant of how the Bible defines boundary meaning, we often end up loading extrabiblical burdens upon ourselves that are impossible to carry. In this context, setting boundaries can help us manage our time and responsibilities effectively, ensuring that we remain faithful to our duties without neglecting other areas of life.

When we understand these minimum standards of faithfulness, we are better informed to make wise trade-offs. You may feel internal or external pressure to travel more as a family, to serve more in the church, or to work

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nights and weekends, but if it leads you to no longer meet the minimum standards of faithfulness in other areas of life, then you must say no—and you can do so with a clear conscience, knowing that saying no means being faithful.

In many cases, biblical boundaries guide us in making these decisions. Boundaries in the Bible often relate to how we manage our time, our resources, and our relationships, ensuring that we are not overburdened or distracted from our primary commitments.

### ***Principles vs. Forms***

Notice that much of what the Bible prescribes for faithfulness is principles rather than forms. Principles dictate what we are to do, and forms describe how we are to do them. For example, if the principle is to “bring [your children] up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord,” one of the forms may be to have daily family worship. I personally think (and many throughout history have thought) that having regular family worship is a wise practice (or form),<sup>12</sup> but it is not the only way to carry out the principle.

It’s important to have biblical principles and practical forms as distinct in our minds because if we misunderstand certain forms as biblically prescribed when they are not, we’ll begin to think we are unfaithful when we may not be.

For example, does the Bible prescribe us to be in transparent relationships in the church where we’re intentionally doing one another spiritual good (e.g., discipling relationships)? Yes (see all the “one another” commands). But does the Bible require us to be in a weekly small group? No. Can you not be part of a small group and yet meaningfully live out the biblical principle of helping others to follow Jesus? Yes. Does being part of a small group automatically mean that you have such discipling relationships? No.

Keeping principles and forms distinct helps us to be more flexible (and less critical of others and ourselves) in how we carry out biblical principles.

Setting boundaries is a crucial aspect of this flexibility. By maintaining clear boundaries, we can focus on the essential forms prescribed by God, such as participation in the ordinances and the Lord’s Day, without being overwhelmed by other obligations.

With that said, the Bible does prescribe some forms. When it comes to the local church, for example, God does not leave us with only principles, but he gives divinely prescribed forms. He prescribes the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper in order to mark off believers from unbelievers and to make the church visible on earth (1 Cor. 12:13; 10:17; 11:17-

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34; Matt. 16:13-19; 18:15-20; 28:18-20). He prescribes the Lord's Day as being uniquely set apart for gathering as a church for rest and public worship (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:1-2; Rev. 1:10). He prescribes the job description of elders (Acts 6:4; 20:17-35; 1 & 2 Timothy; Titus; 1 Pet. 5:1-4). Therefore, we must know that to ignore, replace, or practice these forms wrongly is to be unfaithful.

### ***Enjoyment as Part of Faithfulness***

For the longest time, I used to feel guilty for doing anything simply for the sake of my own enjoyment ("This isn't a good use of my time; I should be working on something else"). I would feel uneasy about sitting down ("Surely, there is something more productive I could be doing right now"), and I would not permit myself to read fiction ("I should be reading non-fiction books that help me get better at what I do"). I thought that denying myself, taking up my cross, and following Jesus (Matt. 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23) somehow meant that I couldn't do anything for the sake of my own enjoyment. Saying no to other people or productive activities simply to enjoy something was unthinkable for me. If I were to enjoy anything, it had to be intentionally done with someone else or a group of people, for the sake of fellowship. Enjoyment simply wasn't in my definition of faithfulness.

But then, I came across these passages in Ecclesiastes:

There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. (2:24)

I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man. (3:12-13)

Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God. For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart. (5:18-20)

And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful. (8:15)

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I began to realize that much of my “faithfulness” had actually been unfaithfulness. Regarding these verses, one author writes, “Because God commands enjoyment, he will hold us to account for the use we have made of all his gifts, including whether we have enjoyed them as we ought.”<sup>13</sup>

Understanding boundary meaning helped me realize that faithfulness is not just what I do but how I enjoy and give thanks for what God has already done for me and what he continues to give me each day. There is no storing up of enjoyment, but part of faithfulness is simply receiving every small, good thing as a gift from God to be enjoyed in the present—and sometimes, that means setting boundaries and saying no to the next thing in order to fully enjoy the present thing.

Yet, even with a biblical understanding of faithfulness, we may still have trouble saying no because the underlying issue inevitably comes back to the heart, which we’ll look at next.

### ***Reflection Questions:***

1. What does being “faithful” mean to you? In what ways has that been challenged or affirmed by the Bible’s minimum standards of faithfulness in different areas of life?
2. In what areas of your life do you find it easier to be faithful? In what areas of your life do you find it harder to be faithful?
3. Do you feel guilty for having times of recreation and enjoyment? What would enjoyment as part of faithfulness look like for you?

# 3

## WHY DO YOU HAVE TROUBLE SAYING NO? (HEART)

### ***Defining Idolatry***

Tim Keller defines an idol as “whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, ‘If I have that, then I’ll feel my life has meaning, then I’ll know I have value, then I’ll feel significant and secure.’”<sup>14</sup> For many of us, our idolatry is works-based (our works can get us what we want) or man-based (other people can get us what we want)—or perhaps our idols are a mix of both.

But what does idolatry have to do with saying no?

### ***Works-Based Idolatry***

Difficulty in saying no often comes from the self-image that says, “I’m competent.” We feel the need to repeatedly prove that to ourselves and others by saying yes to opportunities that showcase our competency.

To say no, in some sense, would be contrary to who we understand ourselves to be because we see our meaning, value, and significance in what we do. But if we are in Christ, then we are not what we do, but we are what Christ has done for us.

For me, I didn’t explicitly think in the language of “competency” but “faithfulness.” But this was only a baptized version of works-based righteousness (which can be understood as a stand-in for meaning, value, significance, security, or anything else we hope to gain from our works).

If we’re Christians, then we know that our righteousness is not from ourselves and our own good works. After all, Paul writes, “None is righteous, no, not one” (Rom. 3:10). Instead, our righteousness is in Christ

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and his perfect work on our behalf—that is, “the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” (Rom. 3:22).

We know this. We believe this. And yet, somehow we so often forget this.

Our faithfulness is not dependent on all the things we say yes to and all the things we accomplish.

Rather, when we hear the words, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” from the lips of our Master one day, it will not be because of all our faithful works but because of the perfect work of Jesus Christ accounted to us through faith.

He is faithful, and so we are counted faithful.

When we remember this glorious truth, we don’t need to earn or prove our faithfulness. Instead, we can say no and trust that our faithfulness is already forever secure in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Setting boundaries is essential to this process of saying no. By setting healthy boundaries at work, we can avoid overcommitting ourselves and neglecting the more important aspects of life, including our relationship with Christ. Knowing how to set boundaries at work can be a challenge, but it’s crucial to safeguard our mental and spiritual well-being, ensuring we don’t become overwhelmed or driven by works-based idolatry. Boundaries in work are not just about limiting time but about defining what truly matters and protecting our time for rest, relationships, and reflection.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was one of the greatest pastors and preachers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, in his dying years, when he was no longer able to preach, his friend Iain Murray reported the following about his visit with him:

When I arrived in his room, he had a text. It was a text for me, and a text he had obviously been preaching to himself: ‘And the 70 returned again with joy, saying, “Even the devils are subject unto us through Thy name.” In this (said our Lord) rejoice not, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven.’ The lesson of the text, he said, is that if we are living upon what we do, if our happiness is based upon our preaching or our service for Christ, there is something deeply wrong with it. ‘Not in this,’ says our Lord, ‘but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.’ The ultimate test of a preacher is what he feels like when he cannot preach. It is a real snare for the preacher to live upon preaching. People say to me now, ‘It must be very sad for you not to be able

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to preach.' 'Not at all,' he would reply, 'I was not living upon preaching. I can and do rejoice.'<sup>15</sup>

In order to say no, we must know that we are not living upon the things we say yes to. It doesn't matter how gifted or how fruitful our activity has been; we rest and rejoice in Christ and his perfect work on our behalf—not in our works.

### ***Man-Based Idolatry***

Another reason we may have trouble saying no is because of the fear of man—or the desire to be loved, accepted, wanted, or needed by others.

If we say no to people, we fear consequences that people can inflict on us. They could withhold their love and acceptance from us—or hurt us in worse ways. If we say yes to people, we hope for the benefits that people can give us. They could affirm their love and acceptance of us—or help us in more ways.

Of course, the problem with all this is that we “see people as ‘bigger’ (that is, more powerful and significant) than God.”<sup>16</sup> But Scripture repeatedly warns us of this kind of thinking.

The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is safe. (Prov. 29:25)

Do not put your trust in princes, in human beings, who cannot save. When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day, their plans come to nothing. Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God. He is the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them—he remains faithful forever. (Ps. 146:3-6 NIV)

Stop trusting in mere humans, who have but a breath in their nostrils. Why hold them in esteem? (Isa. 2:22 NIV)

Thus says the LORD: “Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD. He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.” (Jer. 17:5-8)



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To be clear, the need for others is built into creation (Gen. 2:18), but the distortion of that need is a consequence of the fall (Gen. 3:16). The issue is one of motive and purpose. God designed us to need loving relationships with others to glorify him (John 13:35),<sup>17</sup> but in our sin, our motive in relating to others has become inward-focused and for the purpose of feeding our own desire to feel good about or advance ourselves (Jas. 4:1-3). Or to put it another way: “Regarding other people, our problem is that we *need* them for ourselves more than we *love* them for the glory of God. God sets us the task of *needing* them less and *loving* them more.”<sup>18</sup>

In order to displace the fear of man and rightly relate to people for God’s glory, God must become “bigger” in our eyes. People shrink to proper proportions, and our desire to glorify God increases as we behold the glory of the Lord in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3:18; 4:6).

In this context, boundary setting becomes essential. Understanding boundary meaning allows us to relate to others in a way that doesn’t place them in a position of undue power or significance over us. Instead, we set healthy boundaries in our relationships—not to push people away, but to ensure that our first priority is glorifying God, not seeking affirmation from others.

Personally, I’ve been in my fair share of situations where I’ve had to say no, and it was not always received well. I’ve said no to people wanting to join our church because they did not give a credible profession of faith (e.g., denying the exclusivity of Christ for salvation, denying one God in three persons, not understanding Christ’s work on the cross as penal substitutionary atonement). I’ve said no to officiating weddings between a believer and an unbeliever (1 Cor. 7:39). I’ve said no (in a sense) to believers living in blatant sin.

Setting boundaries in these situations wasn’t always easy, but it was necessary. Often, boundary meaning became clearer as I understood that saying no was not an act of rejection, but rather a way to remain faithful to God’s calling and His truth. I recognized that setting these boundaries helped me preserve my faithfulness to the Lord rather than succumbing to the fear of man.

And in those moments when the fear of man begins to creep up inside of me, I often think of the worst-case scenario ahead of time (“They’ll yell at me, they’ll tell me how horrible of a person I am, they’ll slander me, they’ll fire me, they’ll leave me”), but then I think to myself, “But if I have Christ, I’ll be ok.” And then, I follow through on what I believe to be most God-glorifying—whether saying no or some other course of action.

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The reality is that the Lord can and ought to do far worse to us than what we fear from man (Matt. 10:28). Yet, rather than treating us as we deserve for our sins, for those of us in Christ, he forgives our sins, covers our shame, adopts us as children, pledges us an inheritance, and gives us himself to be our treasure.

When we know that we stand as sinners before a holy God, we ought to be filled with terror and dread. But when we know that Christ has made us sons and daughters before our heavenly Father, we ought to be filled with awe, reverence, devotion, trust, and worship.<sup>19</sup>

In my prayers, I often remind myself of this wonder: “God, though I am a wretched sinner, thank you for making me your beloved son.”

Think often about this juxtaposition in the gospel and see how the fear of man (or any other fear) begins to fade in the background of your fellowship with Christ: “What have I to dread, what have I to fear, leaning on the everlasting arms? I have blessed peace with my Lord so near, leaning on the everlasting arms.”<sup>20</sup>

### ***Reflection Questions:***

1. How do you struggle with work-based idolatry? What do you think your works can gain you? How does the gospel of Jesus Christ reorient how you see your works?
2. How do you struggle with man-based idolatry? What do you think other people can give you? How does the gospel of Jesus Christ reorient how you see other people?

# 4

## HOW DO YOU SAY NO?

Now that we've dealt with both the head and the heart, we're ready to start saying no. But how do you go about setting boundaries without burning bridges?

Here are a few suggestions for what to consider before, during, and after saying no.

### ***Before Saying No***

1. Plan what you'll say yes to first.

Remember, saying no is a tool to help you live a God-glorifying life—and your life is lived in what you say yes to. Therefore, before saying no, take stock of what you ought to say yes to, and plan those things into your schedule first.

The number one priority you should say yes to each day is communing with the Lord in his Word and in prayer. This is the most pronounced boundary setting that Jesus set up during his earthly ministry (Luke 5:15-16), even setting aside extended time for it at significant points in his life (Luke 4:1-13; 22:39-46).

Early on in my life as a Christian, I made a resolve that I would not eat until I spent time with the Lord each morning. I can't say I've kept that flawlessly, but over the years, it has ingrained in me a necessary truth: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4).

Other than that, there will be much variation in our schedules from person to person, but keep in mind the Bible's minimum standards of faithfulness in different areas of life.

Note also that principles are lived out in specific forms, so you need to give thought to *how* you're going to live out biblical principles and plan those

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specific forms into your schedule (e.g., daily family worship around the dinner table, where you'll read the Bible, sing a song, and pray together).

### **2. Know your limits.**

If you have trouble saying no, you probably have trouble accepting your finiteness. We know that we are not omnipresent, omniscient, or omnicompetent, but we have trouble really coming to terms with that. The reality is that we cannot say yes to everything and still be faithful in all areas. Something has to give.

It took me eleven years to finish seminary—and that's not something I say with any pride (though praise God, I finished!). I started seminary and became a pastor in the same year. I got married and was sent out to plant another church in the next year (I definitely would not recommend that to anyone). I started having kids and went through all kinds of issues in the church in the following years. I quickly realized that either my family, our church, or my seminary would have to take a hit, so I thought it was best to take the slow track for seminary.

You can't do it all, so you must choose wisely.

### **3. Pray for wisdom.**

There are often more opportunities presented to us than we can say yes to and still be faithful in all areas of life, so we need to ask God for wisdom. "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him" (James 1:5).

We should also heed the many warnings in Scripture against trusting in our own wisdom, opposed to seeking God's wisdom (Prov. 3:5-7; 14:12; 16:25; Isa. 30:1-2; 31:1).

As you pray for wisdom, know that God's primary way of providing it is in his Word, so we should regularly be immersed in the Bible (e.g., private reading, public teaching, group discussion, one-to-one discipling), asking him for help to understand verses, paragraphs, and books in their proper context and to apply them rightly in our lives.

Also, as you pray for wisdom, you shouldn't wait for a specific feeling or impression indicating what you should do, but you must do the hard work of evaluating your motives. We ought not to be deceived; as those who still have a sinful nature, sin taints our motivation in everything we do.

Pray with the psalmist: "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!" (Ps. 139:23-24).

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Repent of any sinful desires and ask the Lord to purify your motives. If your honest desire is to glorify God in this decision (and there's nothing wrong or foolish about it, as far as you can tell from God's Word), then you're free to decide.<sup>21</sup>

### 4. Seek Godly Counsel.

I'm glad that you're already seeking counsel by reading this life skill guide, but I'd also encourage you to seek counsel from other godly brothers and sisters who know you personally.

Though unintentional, we can sometimes seek counsel from an "expert" who doesn't know us well and share a version of our situation that already "tips the scales" (so to speak) towards certain counsel that we want to hear.

Though this can still happen with those who know us well, with more of a 360-degree view of our lives and of those around us, they will be more positioned to see where we may be exaggerating details, omitting important information, or trying to convince ourselves of something. They can better detect patterns in our thinking and living, so it's harder to dismiss any disagreeable counsel they give by thinking to ourselves, "Well, they don't really know me."

We can also be prone to seek counsel from those who know us well but who don't know their Bible well or who don't have a track record of wise living. Bear in mind that not all counsel is godly counsel (1 Kgs 12:1-20).

Especially if there are major decisions to be made (e.g., whether to date/marry someone, whether to move jobs/cities/churches, which schooling option to choose for your children, how to steward your finances, how to resolve interpersonal conflict, etc.), it would be wise to seek godly counsel from those who know both you and their Bible well (Prov. 11:14; 15:22; 24:6; Exod. 18:13-27).

### ***When Saying No***

#### 1. Affirm what you can affirm.

Just because you're saying no doesn't mean you need to be curt about it. Instead, you should try to be as courteous as you can.

Even when saying no, there is much you can still affirm.

- You can affirm the person or relationship ("Thanks for thinking of me").
- You can affirm the opportunity ("This sounds like a great opportunity").

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- You can affirm your desire to do it (“I’d love to be able to do it, but ...”).
- You can affirm future possibilities (“Sorry, I can’t meet this month, but I’m available next month”).

Setting boundaries is a key part of preserving balance in our relationships and commitments. Marriage boundaries are especially important, as they help protect both partners’ needs, ensuring that neither the relationship nor individual responsibilities are neglected. By setting boundaries in marriage, we create space for emotional and spiritual growth, allowing both partners to thrive in their roles and avoid unnecessary strain.

Boundary setting is essential not only in marriage but also in all relationships. It allows us to prioritize what’s most important—our relationship with God and each other—without feeling overburdened by external pressures.

Of course, if you don’t think it’s a great opportunity, don’t have a desire to do it, or aren’t interested in future opportunities, don’t affirm those things. Flattery is a sin, after all. Rather, only affirm what you can honestly affirm.

### **2. Be Clear with Your No.**

When I first moved overseas, there were times I would get upset by the disconnect between some people’s responses and their actions. For example, if I invited someone over to hang out at my apartment, he might say yes, but it was really a 50/50 chance that he’d actually show up. And if someone said maybe, it was almost certainly a no in reality. I quickly realized that yes meant maybe, maybe meant no, and no was simply never said. It may have been cultural differences, saving face, or simply lying, but it never felt good being on the receiving end.

As a follower of Christ, you should strive to be clear with your yes and with your no (Matt. 5:37; Jas. 5:12). At the same time, you can be clear with your no without necessarily saying the word “no” (“Thanks for thinking of me, but sorry, I won’t be available then,” or “This sounds like a great opportunity, but unfortunately, I won’t be able to due to other commitments”).

If you feel pressure in the moment, you don’t have to respond right away (“Let me get back to you”). And after you’ve had time to consider the opportunity and have decided to say no, follow up with an email or message kindly declining the opportunity.

If you’re in a situation where you’re saying no to your manager at work, setting boundaries is key. You can set the boundaries by having them think about the trade-off that needs to be made, so that your yes

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involves a no to something else (“Yes, I can prioritize that. What should I deprioritize in order to get that done?”). If needed, you could also share more details on what you’re currently working on and suggest what can be deprioritized (“Sure, I can prioritize project A. I’m working on project B and project C right now. Should I deprioritize project C in order to get project A done then?”). Of course, this is only a plausible scenario if your manager already knows you to be an organized, diligent, and reliable worker. If that’s who you are and your current workplace won’t accept your no, and especially if that’s causing you to not meet the Bible’s minimum standards of faithfulness in other areas of life, you may want to consider other job opportunities.

If you’re in a situation where a person won’t seem to accept your clear no, you can still be firm and kind (“Sorry, in order to honor my other commitments, I’ll need to decline”).

### 3. Help Where You Can Help.

This is still saying no to what was asked but offering a yes to something less “costly.”

I’ve benefited immeasurably from those who simply sent me resources or connected me with others, so even if I need to say no, I try to help in whatever way I can.

For example, someone outside of my church (not a pastor) sent me a one-off sermon they preached and asked if I could listen to it and provide feedback, and here was my response over message:

Thanks for thinking of me, and I appreciate that you value my feedback. As much as I would love to do so, I apologize that I won’t be able to give feedback as I have a full plate right now. Here are my notes from a Preaching course I took from Bryan Chapell that might be helpful for you: [\[link to my notes\]](#)

As another example, someone asked me to preach at a conference I was planning to attend, and here was my response over email:

Thanks for inviting me to speak at [conference name] in October; I’m honored. As much as I would love to do so, I’m still recovering from burnout, and it will be an especially full season for me. I’m sorry that I won’t be able to speak, but may I suggest [another person]? I think he also fits the bill of what you’re looking for. No worries if you have someone else in mind, but he just came to mind as a potential alternative. I appreciate your understanding

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and look forward to seeing you at [conference name]. Thanks again for your thoughtful invitation.

You should never think that you are the sole person who can help. Oftentimes, people just want help and aren't as concerned that it comes directly from you.

### **4. Express Thanks.**

We can sometimes forget that it's not always easy for someone to ask for help. Perhaps they had to fight their anxiety, insecurity, or pride to approach you. In any case, the fact that, of all people, they chose to ask you for help is a form of honoring you. They think you can help them; otherwise, they wouldn't have asked you.

Even if you say no, be appreciative of the person, the relationship, and the opportunity—and do your best to express thanks.

This isn't just a perfunctory or polite thanks, but consider why it might be the Lord's will for us to give thanks in all circumstances (1 Thess. 5:18).

### ***After Saying No***

#### **1. Trust God's Sovereignty and Goodness.**

After saying no, it's easy to have FOMO (fear of missing out). "What if that was an opportunity I should have taken? What if I should have met with that person?" There are endless what-ifs we could distress ourselves about. But if you trust that God is sovereign and good, none of those what-ifs are relevant.

You cannot ruin your life while you are in the hands of your sovereign and good Father. All your days were ordained for you and written in his book before one of them came to be (Ps. 139:16). He created you in Christ Jesus for good works, which he prepared in advance for you to do (Eph. 2:10).

God's sovereignty and goodness are twin truths that free you from analysis paralysis before a decision and from FOMO and regret after a decision.

#### **2. Give Yourself Fully to What You Have Said Yes To.**

We say no so that we can say yes to something else.

But every child knows the frustration of trying to play with a parent distracted by protracted work that he said would just be a minute. And every worker knows the debilitation of trying to focus on one main task but constantly checking email, messages, or other tasks that suddenly come to mind.



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God's Word says, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters" (Col. 3:23 NIV). This doesn't just apply to the workplace, but "whatever you do"—whatever you have said yes to—give yourself fully to it.

Ultimately, it's not about pleasing our children, profiting our employer, or preserving ourselves, but we say no and give ourselves fully to what we have said yes to in order to glorify the Lord.

Knowing how to build boundaries is essential for living a balanced life. Establishing boundaries helps us prioritize our time and commitments, ensuring that we stay true to what matters most. By setting boundaries in our personal and professional lives, we can prevent burnout and protect the things we value, such as our relationship with God and our families.

### ***Reflection Questions:***

1. Before saying no, do you struggle to plan what you'll say yes to first, know your limits, pray for wisdom, or seek godly counsel? Why and what steps can you take?
2. When saying no, do you struggle to affirm what you can affirm, be clear with your no, help where you can help, or express thanks? Why and what steps can you take?
3. After saying no, do you struggle to trust God's sovereignty and goodness, or give yourself fully to what you have said yes to? Why and what steps can you take?



## CONCLUSION

Henrietta “Hetty” Green (1835-1916) has the “honor” of being known as the “greatest miser” in the Guinness Book of World Records.

She was the richest woman in the world in her day, with a net worth of \$100 million (or \$2 billion today), but she wore one old black dress and undergarments that she changed only after they had been worn out. She ate mostly pies that cost fifteen cents, and once spent a whole night looking around her house for a lost stamp worth two cents. She managed her business from the vault of a bank in New York, surrounded by suitcases full of her papers, to avoid paying rent for an office. Due to her delays in finding a free medical clinic, her son had to have his leg amputated after contracting gangrene. In her old age, she suffered from a bad hernia, but she refused to have an operation because it cost \$150.<sup>22</sup>

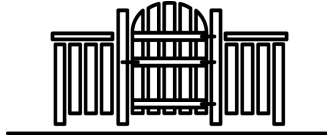
In respect to spending, Hetty Green was the queen of saying no, but not many would want to follow in her footsteps.

Life is not as simple as just saying no (or yes) more. Rather, as we seek to align ourselves with what God has revealed to us in his Word, we need wisdom to know what God wants us to say yes to and what he wants us to say no to.

As those who particularly struggle to say no, we need to have a biblical understanding of minimum standards of faithfulness in all areas of life; address the works-based and man-based idolatry of our hearts with the gospel of Jesus Christ; and know what to do before, during, and after saying no.

And amidst every opportunity and every decision, never forget that the goal is not to take control of our lives but to live our lives to the glory of God.

That’s truly a life worth living.



## END NOTES

1. Shonda Rhimes, *My Year of Saying Yes to Everything*, TED Talk, TED2016, February 2016, [https://www.ted.com/talks/shonda\\_rhimes\\_my\\_year\\_of\\_saying\\_yes\\_to\\_everything](https://www.ted.com/talks/shonda_rhimes_my_year_of_saying_yes_to_everything); see also Shonda Rhimes, *Year of Yes: How to Dance It Out, Stand in the Sun and Be Your Own Person* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).
2. See Laura Beck, “Warren Buffett’s Key to Success: ‘Say No to Almost Everything,’” March 7, 2024, <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/warren-buffett-key-success-no-161048764.html>.
3. E.g., *Yes Man*, directed by Peyton Reed (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2008), film; and *Yes Day*, directed by Miguel Arteta (Netflix, 2021), film.
4. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (ESV)* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001).
5. Edward T. Welch (“Boundaries in Relationships,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 22, no. 3 [Spring 2004]: 18-19) compellingly asserts: “Separation is an essential feature of the fallen order; union is an essential feature of the gospel. Jesus breaks one boundary after another so we can live without the claustrophobic walls that comprise our solitary prison cells. He broke the wall between creature and Creator by becoming like us. He called disciples to stay with Him. He invited people to come near. Those with faith knew that He invited us even to touch Him (Luke 7:25-38, 8:43-48). He violated the cultural boundaries of the day by moving toward women, the poor, the oppressed, the diseased, those who died, and the demonized. He invites us to live *in* Him, as a branch in the vine (John 15). He assures us of His ongoing presence by the Spirit (John 16). And, as He approached His death, He prayed that we—the church—would be united with both Himself and each other in such a way that this unifying love would be God’s testimony of Himself to the world [John 17:20-23].... Whereas going out into the world was a curse on the Old Testament Jew, it was a command to the New Testament Christian (Matt. 28:19). God’s people are sent-out ones—salt and light to the world (Matt. 5:13)—and leaven that permeates the entire loaf (Luke 13:20). Boundaries, once intended to protect people from neighboring idolatry,

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have been torn down. Now, rather than protecting ourselves, we invite neighbors and strangers to know the One who breaks barriers.”

6. See “Marathon man Akhwari demonstrates superhuman spirit,” October 19, 1968, <https://www.olympics.com/en/news/marathon-man-akhwari-demonstrates-superhuman-spirit>; and “‘I never thought of stopping’: marathon man Akhwari on his epic effort at the ‘68 Games,” October 20, 2020, <https://www.olympics.com/ioc/news/i-never-thought-of-stopping-marathon-man-akhwari-on-his-epic-effort-at-the-68-games>.
7. John Maxwell, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 267.
8. *Ibid.*, 16.
9. I first encountered this idea of minimum standards of faithfulness from Sebastian Traeger and Greg Gilbert, *The Gospel at Work* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018).
10. Two other areas of life that could be considered are personal and social. Tim Challies (*Do More Better* [Minneapolis, MN: Cruciform Press, 2015], 29, Kindle) elaborates: “You will need to think about all of life and create broad categories, asking the question: Before God, what am I responsible for? ... You definitely have personal responsibilities—you need to care for your body and soul, and you need to clothe and feed yourself. You almost definitely have family responsibilities as well, whether they relate to a spouse and children, or parents and siblings, or all of the above. As a Christian you know that God has placed you in a local church community and charged you with all those New Testament ‘one another’ commands, so you will also need a church area of responsibility. You have social responsibilities to be a committed friend and an evangelistic neighbor. You may be a student with school responsibilities, or a vice president with work responsibilities.”
11. In terms of choosing a job, Traeger and Gilbert helpfully provide two categories of questions for “must-haves” (Does this job glorify God? Does this job permit me to live a godly life? Does this job provide for my needs and allow me to be a blessing to others?) and “nice-to-haves” (Does this job benefit society in some way? Does this job take advantage of my gifts and talents? Is this job something I want to do?).
12. See Donald Whitney, *Family Worship* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).
13. Bobby Jamieson, *Everything Is Never Enough* (New York: WaterBrook, 2025), 144.
14. Tim Keller, *Counterfeit Gods* (New York: Penguin, 2009), xx.
15. Iain Murray, quoted in Jeremy Marshall, “Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones on Preparing for Death — by Rev Iain Murray,” *Banner of Truth*, July 17, 2020, <https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2020/dr-martyn-lloyd-jones-on-preparing-for-death-by-rev-iain-murray>.

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16. Edward Welch, *When People Are Big and God is Small*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2023), 25.
17. Welch explains: “The fact that God created Adam *and* Eve indicates that the image of God in man could not be complete in any one undivine person. Imaging God cannot be done alone; it is done in partnership. God’s glory is too immense to be clearly reflected in any one creature. The image of God is corporate in that we all share in it. God has created an interdependent people who need each other if we are to reflect him most brilliantly” (*When People are Big and God is Small*, 144).
18. *Ibid.*, 20.
19. *Ibid.*, 81.
20. Elisha A. Hoffman, *Leaning on the Everlasting Arms*, 1887.
21. See Kevin DeYoung, *Just Do Something*, (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2009).
22. See Donald McFarlan, ed., *The Guinness Book of World Records 1991* (New York: Bantam, 1991), 336; and “It is all in the mind,” *Nation*, June 26, 2008, updated June 21, 2000, <https://nation.africa/kenya/life-and-style/weekend/it-is-all-in-the-mind-550578>.



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