



The Fine Art of Saying No

The two-letter word that can save your ministry, even your life.

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Perhaps the greatest life management skill is knowing when to say yes and when to say no. All kinds of opportunities and decisions confront us. We can't say yes to all of them. Neither do we want to be ungracious, saying no simply for our own convenience.

For many of us, saying no doesn't come naturally. Why?

- We want to appear busy. We complain about busyness, but in our fast-track world, we assume we're supposed to have two things to do for every minute we have. One helpful piece of advice I got was "Opportunity is not a mandate." God doesn't expect me to take every opportunity. If I know who I am, what my gifts are, and what my calling is, I can determine which needs I can say yes to and which needs I must leave for others.
- We want to be liked. Some people do things they shouldn't because they think saying no will make someone stop liking them. As a businessman, I decided I would rather be respected than liked. If people find out they can threaten you with "I won't like you," you lose their respect and much of your time.
- We want to earn God's favor. People sometimes assume God is impressed by our activity. Sometimes preachers unintentionally foster this by saying "God has no hands but yours," which undermines the concept of salvation by grace.

Our best efforts don't come from frantic activity but from concentrated attention. Just as Christ went off to pray and Paul spent time in the desert, I make no apologies for scheduling time when

I am unavailable. I go off by myself with nothing but two or three things I need to think about. I can't do my best without occasionally saying no to telephones and interruptions.

How to decide yea or nay

Here's a checklist I use to decide whether to say yes or no to a request.

1. Is this consistent with my priorities? For many years, every January 1, I would identify goals for the year. Each morning I ask, "What's the most important thing for me to accomplish today?"
2. Is this within my area of competence? Because I'm in business, people assume I know marketing, accounting, or research. I don't. If something is outside my area of expertise, I'm quick to say, "I'm sorry, others can help you better than I."
3. Is this something the person should do himself? Some people ask you to do their work for them. When God has given them a task, why should I change God's plan?
4. What do trusted friends say? When in doubt, find someone to talk with freely. A colleague had some decisions to make and came to our house to visit. Later he said, "That time really turned me around." Like a racehorse, he needed to get off the track, have a friend walk with him, and cool down.

How to say no gracefully

Here are a few principles for declining a request.

- Make sure your motive is to say no to the proposition, not to the person. It's possible to encourage the person while denying the request. Once in a group, I offered a suggestion, but a sharp colleague saw a weakness in it. His reply was tattooed on my soul: "Fred, that's not one of your better ideas." He managed to encourage me while saying no to my idea. At times, I'll say it this way: "Would you give me permission to say no?"
- Respond in terms of the best interests of the person asking. Once when I was asked to speak somewhere, I said, "You want a good talk, don't you?" Of course. "If I don't do well, I'd embarrass both of us. I'm afraid I wouldn't have sufficient time to prepare that week."
- Defer creatively. Humor often helps. I might say, "I'd like to do that, but I will have been out six nights that week. Would you be willing to call my wife and explain this to her?" Or, "You know, I could make a donation, but that would mean I'd be late with my rent. Would you mind calling my landlord and explain to him that I was behind in my charitable giving and to please wait on the rent?"

In short, saying no is one way we develop maturity. Saying no, with grace, is a skill worth developing.