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Just Say No

Luke 4:40–44

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The last several weeks, Pastor Doug has been sharing about the miracles of Jesus, in our text for today, we find Jesus engaged in more miracles:

As the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various kinds of diseases brought them to him; and he laid his hands on each of them and cured them. Demons also came out of many, shouting, 'You are the Son of God!' But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Messiah.

At daybreak he departed and went into a deserted place. And the crowds were looking for him; and when they reached him, they wanted to prevent him from leaving them. But he said to them, 'I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose.' So he continued proclaiming the message in the synagogues of Judea.¹

Do you ever have difficulty saying no? Someone comes to you with a request, a favor to ask, an invitation, or an opportunity, and you're not sure that you can really say yes, or you know that you're already overcommitted, or that you aren't sure that it's the best use of your time or energy or maybe you aren't all that interested, excited, or skilled in it, but you just can't say no?

We may find it difficult to say no because we don't want to disappoint others or because we lack a clear sense of focus or passion for what we should be doing. We may find it difficult to say no because we find ourselves feeling guilty, or maybe because we just have difficulty saying no to certain people.

Some things are much easier to say no to than others. Some things we have to say no to are clearly sinful or evil. Some things that we have to say no to are things that don't interest us or that we know we aren't capable of. But some of the things that we need to say no to are things that may actually seem to be good things. Things that aren't necessarily bad things, but rather good things that serve as distractions or diversions from what we should be doing. How do we learn to say no to the things we should be saying no to? How do we learn that it is ok to say no?

Our text for today tells us that Jesus has been healing people and casting out demons. The next day, Jesus heads off into solitude, and the crowds go looking for him because they want him to stick around. But Jesus says, no, that he can't stay and says

¹ Luke 4:40-44, NRSV

that he must travel elsewhere and proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God – that this is his purpose.

Jesus says no. Now in the gospel of Luke we've already seen Jesus say "no," in the beginning of this same chapter where Jesus is tempted in the desert by Satan. There Jesus says no to the temptations that are put before him. Jesus is in the desert fasting, praying, and being prepared for his mission and ministry, when he encounters Satan who tempts him three times. First Jesus is tempted to pursue his physical needs over his spiritual needs, then Jesus is tempted to pursue power and wealth, and finally he is tempted to test God's protection of him. All three temptations would lead Jesus into sin, and as we might expect, Jesus says no and rejects all three temptations.

And here just a few verses later we find Jesus saying no again. But here he's not being asked to trust in himself, or to test God, or even being offered an easy way to power and reclaiming the world, here Jesus is asked to do something good. He's asked to do help people, to show compassion, to stay in their community, presumably because they wanted to see the healings continue in their community. The news is spreading throughout the region that Jesus is in town and people are calling for their relatives and friends who are in need of healing and telling them to get to town. They want Jesus to set up a healing ministry right there among them, and they make him an offer, pleading that he will come back to town and stay with them.

But Jesus says no, I can't do it. I've got to go. I've got other things I have to do. I've got a greater mission and purpose, I have to go and proclaim the good news in other places. Jesus has a different agenda that he has a clear focus on, and their request doesn't fit in with that agenda, so he says no.

When I was in college, I played Ultimate Frisbee with a group of my friends nearly every afternoon on the quad in the middle of campus. Occasionally, we would be short a person or two to play, and so we would fan out to try to find a few more people to play with us.

I would always go into the library which stood on one end of the quad, and take a walk around the building looking for friends who I might try to convince to come and play with us. I would especially look for those who didn't appear to want to be in the library studying.

When I found someone, I would sit down at the table they were sitting at and ask them to play come out and play Frisbee. Some friends didn't take much convincing and

would say “yes” right away, while others took a little more convincing, so then I would turn on the charm. I would ask what they were working on, and they might say that the project or paper they were working on was due on Monday, to which I would give a response something like, it’s only Thursday; you have all weekend to work on that. It’s a beautiful day outside, we’re only going to be playing Frisbee for a little while; you can work on it tonight! Some friends would then leave the library and come and join us but some who were really dedicated would insist on saying no, I really can’t do it, I have to study. You might say that they were able to say no because they had focus and a sense of purpose in pursuing their education.

Now for some of my friends it was very difficult to turn down the invitation to play Frisbee, (because I was very persistent) and because they really didn’t want to be in the library studying – they really would rather play Frisbee, or at least they were looking for a distraction or an excuse to get them out of studying. Others were able to say no, even if they would have rather been playing Frisbee because they were determined not to be distracted from their studies. They had a sense of purpose to being in the library and they weren’t going to be diverted away from their focus on their studies.

Now as trivial as a college Frisbee game is, if it was difficult for my Frisbee playing friends to say no to me, imagine how difficult it must have been for Jesus to say no, and leave town, knowing that the townspeople were going to be disappointed, knowing that maybe that would mean that there were some who hadn’t made it into town yet who were in need of healing.

How difficult must it have been for Jesus to decline their invitation and walk away? How hard was it for Jesus to listen to their pleas to stay, knowing that they would be disappointed when he declined? How hard was it for Jesus to hear people not really understand why he was saying no, and maybe even question whether he really cared about them?

Repeatedly in the gospels we read about Jesus compassion, and Jesus must have felt compassion for the people who wanted him to stay, for those who still needed to be healed. But Jesus keeps his focus on his larger purpose, to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God, and there are still many other people in other places that still need to hear, so while healing people is important to Jesus, he does not allow it to divert his focus from his purpose. Jesus is able to say no because he has a clear sense of his mission and purpose and is focused solely on it.

If Jesus hadn't said no, Jesus may well have been a blessing to the town, and he may have healed everyone who needed to be healed in the area, but he wouldn't have fulfilled the mission and purpose that he was sent for – to proclaim the kingdom of God.

When we don't say no to distractions and diversions, we can lose our focus on what God is calling us to do and who God is calling us to be. The passage we read earlier from Hebrews 12 calls Christians to be like runners in a race. Running requires focus; runners have to focus on the race at hand. They need to be aware of the surface that they are running on, the obstacles that might derail them. They need to focus on breathing correctly, having the right posture, and taking proper strides. They carry as little weight as possible, seeking to ensure that even their clothes and shoes are as light as they can be. Distractions and deviations from their pursuit of the race are going to affect their performance in it.

The author of Hebrews says: *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.*

Like a runner, the author of Hebrews reminds us to cast sin and all the other things that might weigh us down or distract us from the race. To be the kinds of people God wants us to be, and to do the things that he has called us each personally to do we have to say no not just to sin, but also to the things that in and of themselves may be good things, may even seem to be moral things that might distract or divert us from who we are called to be and what we are called to do.

When we don't say no to things that we should say no to, and we become distracted and diverted, we can become hurried, pressed for time, and overwhelmed. We have probably all felt this way at one time or another in our lives. All the things we have to do, all the things we have said yes to, pile up and we find ourselves always rushing to the next thing, feeling as though we have no time for anything. In these times we may find it difficult to focus on or enjoy what we are doing or appreciate the people around us. We may even have a difficult time hearing or experiencing God.

In his book, The Life You've Always Wanted, pastor and author John Ortberg writes about the spiritual effects of hurrying:

“Not long after moving to Chicago, I called a wise friend to ask for some spiritual direction. I described the pace at which things tend to move in my current setting. I told him about the rhythms of our family life and about the present condition of my heart, as best I could discern it. What did I need to do, I asked him, to be spiritually healthy? Long pause.

“You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life,” he said at last. Another long pause. “Okay, I’ve written that one down,” I told him, a little impatiently. “That’s a good one. Now what else is there?” I had many things to do, and this was a long-distance conversation, so I was anxious to cram as many units of spiritual wisdom into the least amount of time possible.

Another long pause.

“There is nothing else,” he said.

He is the wisest spiritual mentor I have known. And while he doesn’t know every detail about every grain of sin in my life, he knows quite a bit. And from an immense quiver of spiritual sagacity, he drew only one arrow. “There is nothing else,” he said, “You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life.”

Imagine for a moment that someone gave you this prescription, with the warning that your life depends on it. Consider the possibility that your life does depend on it. Hurry is the great enemy of the spiritual life in our day. Hurry can destroy our souls. Hurry can keep us from living well. As Carl Jung wrote, “Hurry is not of the devil; hurry is the devil.” Again and again, as we pursue spiritual life, we must do battle with hurry. For many of us the great danger is not that we will renounce our faith. It is that we will become so distracted and rushed and preoccupied that we will settle for a mediocre version of it. We will just skim our lives instead of actually living them.”²

When we don’t say no to the things we should, we can fall into the trap of being hurried. Hurry can prevent us from spending the time with God in prayer and reflecting on the scriptures that we should. Hurry can keep us from hearing God speaking because we are too busy rushing from place to place. Hurry tends to make us less present because we’re always focused on the next thing or the thing after that instead of being fully focused on the tasks or the people who are before us. Hurry can prevent us from fully experiencing and appreciating the blessings of God in each moment of our

² John Ortberg, The Life You've Always Wanted, p 76-77.

lives. Hurry makes us stressed and less focused on being the kinds of people that God wants us to be and less focused on doing the things that God wants us to do. As Ortberg reminds us, hurry is a spiritual enemy that can destroy us.

Ortberg continues “. . . Jesus was quite aware of this kind of problem in his day. As we can see, he repeatedly withdrew from crowds and activities. He taught his followers to do likewise. When the disciples returned, their adrenaline pumping, from a busy time of ministry, Jesus told them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” Mark explains that “many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.” That could be a motto for some people today. Some people imagine this to be a good thing that perhaps God will reward one day: “What a life you had! You were too busy to eat. Well done!

But Mark did not mean this statement as a commendation. Jesus urged his disciples to take time out . . . We must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from our lives. This does not mean we will never be busy. Jesus often had much to do, but he never did it in a way that severed the life-giving connection between him and his Father. He never did it in a way that interfered with his ability to give love when love was called for. He observed a regular practice of withdrawing from activity for the sake of solitude and prayer. Jesus was often busy, but never hurried. Hurry is not just a disordered schedule. Hurry is a disordered heart.”³

As we learn how to say no to the things that would distract or divert our attention from Jesus, we begin to get our heart into order. As we slow down, we can become more aware of what is going on around us, more aware of what God is saying to us, and more aware of his blessings to us. By slowing down, we can become more focused on following Jesus, and more focused on the purpose and mission God has given us.

We can see why saying no is important to staying away from sin, for keeping us focused on the purposes that God has called us to. All this leads to the question, if saying no is so important, what am I supposed to say no to? Or perhaps another way of putting it is, what am I supposed to say yes to? In saying no to the invitation to stay in the town, Jesus says yes to the mission and purpose that God has given him. So how do we know what our mission/purpose is? All Christians are called to become like Jesus and to live our lives as a reflection of him.

In addition, God gives each Christian unique personalities, gifts, talents, abilities, and passions to be used in ministry, and it is up to each of us to seek to discover how

³ John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, p 76-77.

God has uniquely shaped us and to seek the Spirit's guidance in discovering our own personal purpose or mission for the call to follow Jesus is a call into ministry for each one of us regardless of our age, maturity or life situation. And while our personal purpose and mission that God gives us may shift and change in different phases of our life as we grow up and mature and as our life situation changes, we are each called to live in mission for Christ.

As we learn to say no to the things that would distract and divert us from the mission and purpose God calls us to, we are learning to say yes to Jesus, and yes to the mission and purpose that God has set before us. The question for us then is this: What do you need to learn to say no to that you might more fully say yes to Jesus? What are thing tasks, pursuits, habits and opportunities that are before us that may be diverting our focus and distracting our full attention from becoming the people God wants us to be and doing the things that God wants us to do?

The answers may be different for each of us, and we may find it difficult to say no to some of the things we need to say no to. In the midst of those decisions may we remember who and what we are saying yes to, and may the love for and the desire to pursue Jesus fill our hearts and our lives.

As you go from this place today, may you go and live in the freedom to say no to the things in your life that distract and divert you from your mission. May your focus on the mission that God has given you be clear. May you live an unhurried life, and may you say yes to Jesus as you seek to become like him and serve in mission and ministry for him.