

Saying 'No'

Yesterday I had a four-year-old visitor who clearly knew her own mind. She was able very decidedly to express her views, especially when her parents had different ideas. The word 'No' featured prominently and had probably done so since before her first birthday. The ability to say this powerful little word is one of our earliest linguistic achievements. Why then, as we get older, do we find it so hard to say?

Earlier this century, a popular slogan against alcohol said: 'Have courage, my boy, to say No'. A message about marriage was similarly emphatic: 'If in doubt, don't.' In today's moral climate such advice may still be needed but is less likely to be heeded. That the best contraceptive is 'No' may be preached without being practised.

Yet it is often those who already have the highest standards of personal morality who find 'No' such a hard word to say, not (perhaps) so much in sexual matters as in professional and public life. Christian professionals are particularly vulnerable, aware not only of the need to maintain moral behaviour in personal and family life, but wanting to be shining lights in the workplace as well. Add to this the likelihood of the local church pouncing upon us as potential leaders and there are far too many opportunities to say 'Yes' when we should say 'No'. The temptation is not to do wrong but to try to do too much good.

We cannot meet all the needs

'A need does not constitute a call' was another old slogan, this time addressed to Christians considering service overseas. It was sometimes used as a ready excuse by those unwilling to obey a call even when they heard one, yet there is some truth in the adage. None of us can meet all the needs we know of already, let alone those further afield. Even Jesus, told the crowds were out looking for him, said 'Let's go' (Mark 1:37-38).

Significantly for us, this surprising response came after a night of prayer. We may sometimes get ourselves utterly tied up in action (and reading through Mark 1 can leave us a bit breathless) without the balance of seeking the Father's wisdom. There are times to call it a day and move on, even if it sometimes seems like leaving a need unmet. I have often been consoled (and chastened) to find that I am not indispensable and that God has other servants around, as well as a different timetable from mine. Saying 'Yes' when he would have preferred 'No' means this particular activity is not being done with his blessing. It will probably not be done very well either, if it signals my being too stretched already to have taken time to tune in to him first.

In the pressures of modern life, with faxes and e-mails as well as the ever-intrusive telephone, people expect quick responses and all too often get them. Try never to commit yourself to taking on something extra when the request comes by phone.

Take time to think, pray and ring back. Often, that first inner sense of reserve does not go away on reflection and the answer has to be an apologetic 'No'. The Holy Spirit has promised to guide us and this may be by giving a nudge in the right direction, but we must be willing to be nudged.

Pride and pressures

One of the hidden motives that makes us say an inappropriate 'Yes' can be simple unadulterated pride. We feel quite someone to have been asked. We may rationalise our reaction as taking up an opportunity for witness via the lecture room or from the pulpit, when at root we are responding to flattery. There are times when the pride has to be repented of but the job still taken on. There are also times to suggest another name, perhaps someone whose gifts have hitherto been underused but who could be encouraged by this opportunity.

Alternatively, we may fear that our stock amongst our colleagues will fall if we decline. Peer pressure can be enormous, but is not the last word in guidance. Our peers are under pressure themselves. It may take the courage of one person digging in their heels, presenting a better strategy, approaching an authority, refusing to participate in some dubious activity, and so on, to help turn the tide and reduce the pressure. Naturally (or rather, supernaturally) this 'No' must be said graciously and backed with reason. It will then be an informed response, not an emotional outburst, and this itself may act as a shining light.

Our God is gracious. Some duties are inescapable, and our days and diaries do fill up, but he also knows our frame and our inclinations. He gives us wiser Christians, sometimes as colleagues, who can be honest with us and help us talk about and pray through our dilemmas and decisions.

He offers us little spaces where we can listen to his Spirit's prompting - though we have to take up these opportunities. He has also been known to arrange for a meeting to be cancelled, or for patients not to turn up, providing some 'elastic' in the tension of an exhausting day. He may sometimes have to allow us to fall ill or have an enforced rest before his messages can get through.

When we have learned to listen to him we will have greater confidence in 'letting our No be No'. We will also be enabled to say a glad 'Yes' to the tasks he has earmarked just for us to do.

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Three tips for saying 'No'

1. Guard your time - Schedule family, leisure and personal time into your diary. Then you can truthfully say 'Sorry, I already have a commitment then'.
2. Choose your time - Don't say 'yes' in the corridor, when you may be in a rush with your mind elsewhere. Instead: 'Please phone me later so I can concentrate on what's best for both of us'.
3. Take your time - No-one will deny you an opportunity to sift what's really important. 'Please give me a little time to think this over. I'll let you know by Tuesday.'