

Remember Rule Number Six

Sterling UMC
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Exodus 18:13-27

Is it hard for you to say, “No”? Do you struggle with saying, “Yes” and you say yes and you say yes.” And pretty soon you feel like a doormat because everybody's laying their things on you? And then pretty soon you feel completely overwhelmed. You just can't even see anymore what's ahead of you. And in fact that's really what precipitated this sermon series, the fact that there are so many of us who are so used to saying “Yes” to everything and saying “No” to virtually nothing that we don't do anything well anymore and as a result we are overloaded, overcommitted, overwhelmed, burned out. Even those of you who aren't overburdened or overcommitted live lives like you are. You're always in a hurry, frantically running from here to there. And so this sermon series is about helping us to just slow down a little bit, to find the cures for the out-of-control life.

Last week as we began I referred to one of the books I've been reading, *Addicted to Hurry* by Kirk Byron Jones and from that book we noted that when we are in a constant state of hurry that there are four things that we no longer do very well. We no longer see clearly. We no longer listen carefully. We no longer think deeply. And we no longer savor life fully. When we are always in a hurry, we miss these things. But I'd like to add to that one more. And that is that we no longer serve God and others effectively when we are constantly in a hurry, when we're constantly overcommitted. And so today what we want to do is we want to talk about saying “Yes” sometimes, and saying “No” sometimes. We're going to begin by talking about saying “No,” and giving you permission and helping you think about why you say “Yes” when you should be saying “No.” And then we will talk about why there are times we have to say “Yes.”

Let's talk about saying “No” to begin with. On one of my posts on Facebook this week, I invited people to share with me how they struggle with saying “Yes” to everything. And I do. I feel like I'm constantly saying “Yes” to more than I can possibly do. And so I just asked how you struggle with this too, and I got about 15 comments posted there, people saying, “Yes, this is how I struggle with it.”

And one person said: “I struggle saying no because I feel like I will let people down. I always worry who will step up to the plate if I don't”

Another person said: “I pondered your question as I have trouble saying no when asked. I came up with several scenarios personally. 1. Guilt. I would feel like I'm letting someone down. 2. Sense of purpose. Wanting to have an influence that brings benefit to the cause. 3. Ego, wanting our resumes to have a long list of accomplishments.

One person rightly observed: “The danger of saying yes to everything is denying someone else the opportunity.”

Finally one mom said, “When it has to do with your children and something you think they will not be able to do if you don't help or organize it is hard to say no even if you are busy because you want them to have opportunities you didn't have.”

And so all of these are part of why we say “Yes” many times. I think in my own life I say “Yes” to things, to helping other people, because I think they need me, because I think that I

secretly want to be needed, because I think I might make a difference, because it makes me feel important, because I like being around other people who were doing important things, because someone may notice, someone may affirm me if I do it. It's because maybe I think people will think poorly of me or not like me if I say "No" and maybe I will be left out. And there are a whole host of other reasons for which I have said "Yes" to things which I should've said "No" to.

Now I have up here a box. This box represents my life and you have your own box. Your box has 168 hours a week in it. This box will contain, if it represents my life and your life, 168 hours 52 weeks a year. Once you fill those out you can't get anything else in there. And so this is my life this is sort of what I feel my life looks like.

Now there are just certain things you just have to have. One is sleep. I have to sleep. But I've learned that I can sleep five or six hours a night sometimes less.

I have to eat. But I've learned that I don't have to sit down and have eggs and bacon and pancakes. I don't even have to have time to eat a bowl of cereal. I can run into the Safeway by a cup of Starbucks coffee and a bagel and a container of yogurt and eat at my desk when I get to the office. Then of course I have my family. And I have to care for them. There's my faith. There's my desire to read the Scripture and pray and listen for God's voice. And there is my job and my desire to serve other people. There are things that I need to read just to renew my soul. There are things that I enjoy doing just for fun like reading and playing golf. There is my membership tag to Olympus Gym to which I make a monthly contribution.

And here's the thing, my box is jammed full. I really can hardly get much else in it. I can squeeze in little things here and there, but I'm really almost at the point where I can't squeeze anything else in. In fact the only way that I can really get anything else in this box is if I start taking some things out. It just won't work otherwise. And here's the problem, is that when I'm busy and I'm saying "Yes" to everything, things fall out of the box. The first thing that falls out is exercise and reading just for sheer enjoyment and renewal and nourishing my soul. And then somewhere what falls out is things that bring me pleasure like golf. And then my Scripture reading and devotions. You know I still read it and pray because I'm committed to that but I do it in a hurry.

By the way let me just pause there for something. I don't know if you have this experience, most of the time when I try to do my devotions in a hurry so I try to read fast. You ever try to read Scripture fast? Here's the thing, God speaks slower than the Texan. God speaks slowly. And the problem is that we listen fast. And when we are listening fast we don't hear God. It's not the reading of Scripture, it's hearing God.

I mean we all live here don't we? Sometimes? In some parts of our lives where we can't figure out how to make everything fit in the box. So we've got to figure this out.

This is what I've learned just preparing these sermons something hit me, and I don't know how I could've been so stupid to miss it up to this point, but it's a basic concept. You might even want to write it down. It's so self-evident, and I know you know it, but just to remind yourself of it: every "Yes" to something is a "No" to something else. When your life is full, the only way you can say "Yes" to one thing is to say "No" to something else. The question is what are you saying "No" to, and is that really what you want to say "No" to.

Last week we were talking about thinning out our lives so we would have margin. You see the goal is to get to where your box is not so jammed full that if something comes up that's kind of

an immediate need and you can say "Yes" to it because you got time to spare so long as you don't say "Yes" to it every week. And if you say "Yes" to it every week then something else has to come out of the box so you have the margin, you have the room, the bandwidth to be able to say "Yes." The things that you have to say "Yes" to you have to say "No" to something else.

So make the conscious choices. So many times what I found was that I was saying "No" to my kids or "No" to reading Scripture or "No" to spending time in prayer or saying "No" to something really important because there was something else immediately that was asked of me. Some have called this the tyranny of the urgent.

Now in order to sort of figure this out, one of the things we need to learn is what Benjamin Zander, the conductor of the Boston Philharmonic calls Rule Number 6. When you begin to understand rule number six you begin to find the freedom to say "No" to certain things.

Zander tells the story in his leadership talks about two prime ministers who are sitting in a room, discussing affairs of state. Suddenly a man bursts through the door, screaming and shouting. The prime minister who's hosting the meeting says to the man, "Peter, please remember Rule Number Six." Peter is immediately restored to calm. He apologizes, bows, and walks out. About 20 minutes later, a woman comes flying in. She's beside herself. The prime minister says, "Maria, please remember Rule Number Six." Maria apologizes and walks out.

The visiting prime minister can't contain his curiosity: "My dear colleague, what is this Rule Number Six?" How does this work? And why are these people so calm after you remind them of Rule #6. The other prime minister says, "Let me tell you what Rule #6 is. It's very simple: Don't take yourself so darn seriously." The visitor replies, "That's a nice rule. What, may I ask, are the other five rules?" The prime minister answers, "There aren't any. That's the only one"

I don't know about you but many times I take myself too darn seriously. Like somebody asks me to do something and I think I'm the only person that can do that and so I say "Yes" to it. And somehow I keep saying "Yes" because somehow I think that I can actually save the world and if I don't show up at this thing, it's like nobody else can do it?

One person in the Bible who really struggled with this is none other than Moses himself. He's called by God to lead the children of Israel out slavery in Egypt and he leads them out through the Red Sea and he brings down the law from Mt. Sinai. And he has it in his mind that he is the only person that God can speak through. He's taking himself so darn seriously. So what begins to happen is he's trying to do everything. And as he's trying to do everything, he's doing nothing very well. And so he ends up with people lining up outside his tent waiting to see him because they needed his permission, they needed him to settle something, they needed him to give a judgment on a particular issue of dispute.

Have you ever felt that way? And so Moses faces this every single day. And finally his father-in-law Jethro, comes to visit and he sees these people lined up around the tent and he sees Moses in there trying to deal personally with each and every one of them and he says "Moses, (speaking on behalf of God) Moses you are an idiot!" The Bible doesn't actually use that word but let me just share with you how it is expressed in the text. This is in Exodus chapter 18, "When his father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, "What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?" Moses answered him, "Because the people come to me to seek God's will. Whenever they have a dispute, it is brought to me, and I decide between the parties

and inform them of God's decrees and instructions." Moses' father-in-law replied, (And this is probably used the word idiot) "What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone."

Jethro is speaking wisdom to his son-in-law. Now you can imagine when Moses hears this, what does he begin to do? I'm sure he begins to give Jethro all the reasons why he has to be the one to do it? "But you don't understand Jethro? I'm God's man. If I don't do it nobody will. Nobody can do this quite like I can. If I have to train people to do it, it's easier for me just to do it myself." And he's got all of these sorts of reasons that we give. And I can so relate to that as a pastor.

When I first started out in ministry I had a three-point charge and I had to do everything. Now over the years as my churches have grown I've had to learn to give up some of those things I used to do, like preparing the bulletin, unlocking the church, mopping the floor, delivering coffee mugs. And I had it in my mind that I was the only person who could do some of those things. Like you needed a master of divinity degree to deliver a coffee mug? But somehow I believed that. And you know it's so hard to give that up and give it to other people. And maybe at first they didn't do the job quite the same way I would have done it, but you know after a while they got even better at it than I was.

If I was still doing it this person would not have the opportunity to explore their calling and to experience the joy of doing something for the Lord and His church. You get the idea. There are those things that as we continue our lives you just can't keep sticking more stuff in year after year after year without the whole box breaking and the thing comes apart. You have to learn to say "No."

So here's what Jethro told his son-in-law, "Select capable men from all the people (Now back then it was just men, today they would say men and women) —men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied." He's saying, "Moses, don't take yourself so darn seriously. There are other people who can do this.

Here is the question that I had to ask myself, and the question you have to ask in your own life, what are the things that really only I can do? And you'll find it's a lot less than what you think it is. What are the things that I must do, and I must do that well? And what are the things that other people can do? Or the things that we just don't have to do it all? Those are the types of questions that we have to wrestle with.

Now in order to do that you have to sort of figure out what is your purpose in life. What is your mission? What are your true priorities? What are the gifts that I have? What is God calling me to do? And with that in mind I'm able to say "Yes" to the right things and "No" to the right things.

Now what I've taught you so far is that you have to say "No" to some things, and that's important. We have to say "No". You have got to say "No". Would you practice that? I'm going to count to three and then I want you to say "No" OK. Let's just see if you can say it. 123, "NO!" That's good!

So God is giving you permission in our Scripture, Jesus gives you permission because he says "No", I'm telling you as your pastor that you have got to say "No" to more things than you've

been saying "No" to or the box is going to break. But if I leave you there I've done you a great disservice. Because life as God intended it is not about saying "No", it's about saying "No" to some things so you can say "Yes" to the greater things.

So I don't want you to be like the David Spade commercial, you know for Capital One where the people call in and want to know if they can use their reward points to go to Chicago, "No". Can I use it to go to Hawaii? "No"! Can I use them to go to Florida? No! No, No, No, No. That's not life. Sometimes you have to say "Yes".

And to tackle this part of the message I want to remind you of one of Jesus' most famous stories, the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus is talking with a lawyer and the lawyer says to him, "Master what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He's saying "What do I have to say "Yes" to? And what can I say "No" to?" Right? And so Jesus says, "Come on you're a teacher of the law, what does the Scripture say?" And he says, "To love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. And to love your neighbor as yourself." And Jesus said, "Do these things and you shall live." So this is the guiding mission in your life. And almost everything else fits underneath these. The man though comes back with a question. He says, "Well who is my neighbor?" And you understand what he's asking. He wants to know who I have to say "Yes" to, specifically, and who can I say "No" to. He's looking for Jesus' permission here. And that's a legitimate question. So Jesus says well let me just illustrate and help you with a story so you can know every day who you have to say "Yes" to and what you have to say "Yes" to.

And then he tells the story of the Good Samaritan. And you remember the story. A man is beaten up and is lying on the side of the road half dead. And the priest comes along and he sees the man and looks at him and he says, "You know I just have to say "No" to some things". My box is already full. I've just got to say "No" to some things. And it's possible that somebody is waiting to attack me if I stop to help. It could be a trick. Or it could be that he's already dead and I'll become ritually unclean and I can't go to my meeting. If I stop and help it will make me late and I've got some really important things that I got to get done down in Jericho." And so for all of these reasons he says "No."

And then along comes the Levite. Now the Levites were the religious workers. And surely the religious worker is going to stop and help right? But you know he comes along and he sees the man and he says, "You know I just have to say "No" to some things. I just can't say "Yes" to everything. And my life is so overcommitted and overcrowded, that I really just can't stop and help him. I'm running late. I'm busy." For whatever reason he has no margin to stop and he's rationalized to himself that he does need to stop.

And so after this they both walk by and the man is still lying there dying on the side of the road when the Samaritan comes along. And you remember the Samaritans are considered unorthodox, some considered them heretics; they were also considered ritually unclean. They were despised by many of the Jewish people. And he comes along and he sees the man lying on the side of the road and he instantly knows that he has to say "Yes." He knows that something else, that he has to say "No" to in Jericho so they can say "Yes" to this, because this is what really matters. This is what life is all about. It's what it means to love your neighbor as you love yourself. And so he stops and bandages the man's wounds, he places him on his own donkey, and he takes him to the inn in Jericho. He provides for his food and for his shelter and for his care. And Jesus says, "Which of these do you think was the neighbor to the man in need?" And of course the lawyer says, "The Samaritan." Then he says, "Go and do likewise." And it paints a picture for us of the fact that God is demanding that we say "Yes" sometimes.

But the only way we can say "Yes" to those urgent times is we have to say "No" to something else. And the Samaritan got that.

Now let me just ask a question. When the Samaritan stopped to help the man who was in need, how do you think how you think the Samaritan felt when he left the inn? Do you think he felt like, "What a drag!" This is been awful. It set me back by two days. I feel miserable after having helped this guy." Do you think that's how he felt? You know that's not how he felt. You know how he felt, I think? Fully alive. I think he felt like, "I just got to be a part of something God was doing. And I feel energized by it. I feel ready to go out and do more because I just felt God working through me. It was awesome!"

You know it's funny that there are some things that we say "Yes" to that drain us. And that's just life. Some of you have jobs that are like that. And there are other things that we have to do that are just draining. But when we love our neighbors as we love ourselves, when we're engaged in serving our fellow human beings it may not always be easy, but we always walk away from that going, "Wow! I feel like that is what I was made for." We find that something that in our minds was going to be a drain is actually energizing us. That's how it works in the Kingdom of God. It's counterintuitive but when we give ourselves to doing God's work and being his hands and feet and voice, because we made margin by giving up other things, we find life.

When create time to be engaged in ministry with the poor. When we create time to work for justice. When we create time for that by saying no to some other things we find that yes is a greater yes and it recharges us, and renews us, and reminds us who we are and what it means to be authentically human. There are moments when you have to say yes, but you can't say yes in those moments, unless first you've said no.

Story of mission opportunities:

- Amy and Scott Thomas saying "Yes" to serving as LINK representatives.
- The many people going on our summer mission trips. Is it easy? No. It is hard work, but it is extremely gratifying and fulfilling and even energizing.

In order to be able to say "Yes" to those opportunities, you have to say, "No" to others. So I'm begging you, I'm inviting you, I'm challenging you look at your life carefully, figure out what doesn't have to be there in the box, so that when those moments come along your answer can be "yes Lord, here I am send me."

Prayer: I'd like to invite you to say these words quietly, his whisper them under your breath, to whisper them to God as your prayer: oh God I offer myself to you. I say yes to your call. Give me the boldness and courage I need to live for you. Help me be clear about my priorities. And give me the strength to say no so that when you need me I might be free to say yes. In Jesus name. Amen