

Saying No Without Guilt

Presented by Mary Lowman

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Day One

Do you have difficulty saying no? Many of us feel obligated to be everything everyone thinks we should be and do everything everyone thinks we should do! For years I thought I was supposed to do whatever anyone asked me to do—period!

I can assure you if you think like that, you'll end up in burnout territory, desperately trying to jump through everyone's hoops, and discovering, as you pick yourself up off the floor, you really are not superwoman, and you have to learn to say no. But how—and when?

I recently came across a small booklet by Alice Fryling entitled "Too Busy? Saying No Without Guilt." The title caught my attention, and the content really spoke to me. I want to share some of her insights, as well as my own, if you struggle with how and when to say no.

The first lesson to learn is it is okay to say "no." Jesus said,

All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one (Matthew 5:37).

There are times to say "yes" and times to say "no," and our challenge is to learn the difference. In fact, Jesus told people "no" on several occasions, disappointing some no doubt, perhaps even angering some, and leaving his disciples wondering why.

For example, in Luke 12, when a man asked him to settle an argument he was having with his brother, Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" Jesus said "no," not because he couldn't do it, but because it wasn't what he was called by God to do.

We begin with knowing what is our responsibility legitimately and what is not. For example, on your job there are times when you necessarily do things that are not within that job description, but if you are continually doing the work of others or getting side-tracked into projects not your own, you may discover you have difficulty doing what is rightfully expected of you. If this is the case, you need to determine the best way to say "no." Your approach and choice of words would be critical, but until you learn to say "no," you'll never bring that job under control.

Day Two

Do you feel as though you are always carrying a load of responsibilities and work that keep you exhausted and frustrated? If that describes you, it could be because you've never learned how to say "no."

I often think about the difference between my lifestyle and that of my grandmother's. She worked physically harder than I do, I'm sure, but her lifestyle was much simpler. Not easier but simpler. She never drove a car, was never a soccer mom, and had no time for much outside of her home except church. While I wouldn't want to go back to that time, there are things I envy about her lifestyle.

Our society has placed a yoke upon us through remote controls, computers, microwave ovens, smart phones, and now AI—to mention a few. As Alice Fryling puts it in her booklet “Too Busy? Saying No Without Guilt”: “Laptops, iPads and cell phones promise an easier life, but in reality they deliver increased stress and pressure. Physicians and psychologists tell us that our bodies are not designed for the constant input of our technological age, for being always ‘on.’ We need ‘down’ times when our adrenaline can subside, when we can muse and dream and be restored. But the God-given rhythms of day and night, work and rest, have been usurped by technological potential.”¹

Jesus said his yoke is easy and his burden is light. Ask yourself: “Whose yoke am I under: My own self-inflicted yoke of busyness, trying to please people, trying to multi-task and meet all my deadlines, or the yoke of Jesus, which is easy?” That doesn’t mean you’re never busy or tired; Jesus was often weary from the pressure of people and preaching and healing. But he knew when to say no and when to get away for rest.

Learning to say “no” appropriately means learning when you must shut down for some time of restoration—a few hours, a day, a week. And yet, if you’re like me, you tend to feel guilty for taking down time when you still have things to do! This is false guilt; we need to recognize it and refuse to be in bondage to it.

Day Three

I’m digging into a topic: how to learn to say “no.” Many of us have a lot of trouble knowing how and when to set boundaries, and we end up trying to be super-people and find ourselves exhausted, discouraged, depressed, and ready to quit!

Ephesians 2:10 says we are *God’s workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God ordained in advance for us to do*. We are here to work; we are created to bring glory to God through completing the good works he has planned for us to do. Laziness or indifference is never acceptable for a disciple of Jesus Christ. But by the same token, we are in human bodies which have limitations and when we start trying to do things that are not on God’s to-do list for us, that’s when we get in trouble.

In a very helpful booklet entitled “Too Busy? Saying No Without Guilt,” Alice Fryling makes some important observations: “Jesus does not intend for us to carry the heavy burden of ill-fitting good works. If we were to join him at the dinner table, where he did much of his teaching during his life on earth, he might remind us that we do not need to do everything, that burnout is not his idea of obedience and that by God’s grace even a little bit goes a long way.”

I like her term “ill-fitting good works.” I find I am often self-deceived into taking on too much because what I’m taking on is good. Someone needs to do it; it is not a trivial pursuit. But is it an “ill-fitting good work,” meaning it doesn’t fit me?

Ms. Fryling goes on to say, “In fact, as we take on Jesus’ yoke, we find that the work we are yoked to do has been custom-made for us.” When you are doing those good work, you may get tired, but you won’t be overwhelmed. Jesus does not call you to do more than he will equip you to do under an easy yoke. When your “doing” gets to the stage of being a burden, no matter how good it may be, then you have to stop and ask, “Where and when should I say ‘no’?”

I would encourage you to think about areas in your life where you have not yet learned to say “no.” Perhaps it is on your job or with your family or friends. If you’ve allowed yourself to come under a heavy yoke, I urge you to begin the process of saying “no” where you need to.

¹ Fryling, A. (2002). Too Busy? Saying No Without Guilt [Review of Too Busy? Saying No Without Guilt]. IVP.

Day Four

Why is it hard for us to say “no”?

In her booklet on saying no without guilt, Alice Fryling points out “We get instant affirmation from saying yes. We get personal stimulation from the idea of meeting a challenge, using our gifts or tapping into our creativity, and we avoid the unpleasantness of having to say no.”

This hits the nail on the head for me. I learned some years ago one reason I was trying to do so much was to hear the accolades and affirmation I received from others. Those comments felt good; I liked them and I wanted more. I wanted the affirmation of people; it fed my ego and made me feel good about myself. But for years I was deceived and didn’t realize what was behind much of my activity—good activity, ministry activity.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians, *am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ* (Galatians 1:10).

You must decide who you are trying to please. If pleasing people is your goal, if you need the affirmation of others to feel good about yourself, you will always be in bondage to those people, whoever they are, and you will never fully succeed. It’s impossible to please people all the time, no matter how hard you try. But the good news is, it is possible to please God. And I’ve discovered that when my priority is to please God, I typically please more people that way than when I try to please people!

Search your heart today if you are plagued by this difficulty of saying “no,” and ask God to reveal to you why it is so hard for you to say “no.” You may discover some unlovely motivations there, but in so doing, you will uncover truth that can set you free!

Day Five

When it’s time to say “no,” how can you say it without offending anyone? I’ve examined the difficulty many of us have with saying “no.” As we close this topic today, I want to talk about the best way to say “no.”

None of us like to disappoint people; we want to be cooperative and helpful. Saying “no” is not easy because we know it is not what the other person wants to hear. But when you know it is the right thing to do, you must be assertive and courageous enough to look them in the eye and in a kind way say “no.”

I think you need to give some explanation, but not too much. When you keep defending your “no” response, it shows a lack of confidence in your decision. Remember, it is not likely your “no” will be happily received, so don’t have unrealistic expectations. But soften the blow as much as possible, empathize where you can, offer alternative suggestions if available, but make your “no” a true and understandable “no,” not a wishy-washy response.

Be sure you’ve prayed about it, that you have your own emotions under control, that your reasons for saying “no” are pure, not selfish. Think in advance of what words you will use—words that make it as palatable as possible. Proverbs 16:21 says *sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness*, so choose your words carefully.

In her booklet on saying no without guilt, Alice Fryling says, “Men and women who are humble enough not to take themselves too seriously are free to say no as well as to say yes.” That’s a good word for us

all. Don't take yourself too seriously and be humble enough to say "no" when you know it's the right thing to do.