

Practicing Our Faith sermon series
#1 – Practicing Yes and No
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When I was in high school, I had a friend who played the drums. I never really thought that was a big deal. How hard could it be to hit something with a stick? Any time a song came on the radio that I liked, I would tap on the steering wheel to the rhythm. Drumming was easy! I told my friend that, so he invited me to sit behind his drum kit and play a beat. I sat down, grabbed the sticks, and then pounded on the drums like I was playing Whack-A-Mole. Why didn't it sound like the songs I heard on the radio? My friend then sat down and kicked out an awesome beat. "How did you get so good?" I asked. He smiled and said, "Practice."

Isn't that how we get good at anything? No one is born a great three-point shooter or opera singer. I don't know many two-year-olds who can build a deck or paint a still-life. The only way we get good at doing anything is to practice and practice and practice until we learn the skills necessary to thrive at a particular activity. We know this is true in so many aspects of life, but when it comes to having faith, we think you either have it or you don't. Maybe faith is something we have to practice, as well.

At the beginning of the year, we preached a sermon series called, "Becoming," in which we looked at the ways we are growing in our faith, moving from previously held beliefs to new understandings of what it means to be a person of faith in today's world. Starting this morning, we're going to be talking more practically about how we can put this evolving faith into action, how we can practice what it means to be a follower of Christ for the purpose of growing in our faithfulness and service to Christ and God's kingdom.

Practicing our faith is important for several reasons. First, our faith is not meant to be static. The implication in the title "Follower of Christ" is that we are on the move. No one is going to do that for us; in fact, you could argue that the busyness of our world and the distractions of our culture work against us trying to practice our faith. Who has time to read the Bible? In our noise-filled world, it seems like there's no such thing as a "quiet" place to pray. So we have to be intentional about making time to practice what it means to be faithful. We can't pause life to work on these things. I know that's tough. It's like working on a car's engine while it's still running. But the only other option is not to grow stronger in our faith, and where does that leave us?

Another more pressing reason we need to be practicing our faith is that this world desperately needs more faithful people who are putting their compassion into action. The shooting in Florida is a sobering example of that, but so are all the polarizing conversations that have happened in the wake of that tragedy. We're not going to solve this problem by shouting at and demonizing each other, but that seems to be the main way it's being addressed. Instead of taking that approach, we Christians may be better served in finding ways to make our faith a more prevalent and influential part of our lives. Author Richard Rohr writes, "The best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better." We need to be practicing.

The last reason why practicing our faith is important is because it can have a transformative effect on who we are as human beings. If we take our faith seriously, working to improve the ways we live it out can have a ripple effect on us and those around us. Barbara Bass calls this "rehearsing a way of life." In other words, what you practice today is who you become tomorrow. So what are you practicing? Who do you hope to become?

During this sermon series, we'll be looking at six different practices, and in our Sunday School time, we'll be looking at six more. You can see all those listed in your bulletin. Today, we start with the practice of saying yes and saying no. We thought that was appropriate considering we're at the beginning of Lent, and one of the traditions that marks this time of year is giving up something, usually chocolate or caffeine or some other unhealthy habit. I've decided that this year I'm giving up being a vegetarian. I really committed to trying it, but after about 15 minutes I decided I liked meat too much. To what are you saying no this Lent? Maybe a better question is, "Why are you saying no to something this Lent?"

That whole practice is rooted in self-control, one of the spiritual fruits Paul lists in Galatians. It's something believers have wrestled with ever since the serpent said to Eve, "Hey, doesn't that apple look delicious?" In the third century, there was a group of folks called the Desert Fathers that practiced an extreme form of self-control. They moved out to the middle of the desert to live, removing from their radar screen any form of distraction or temptation that could keep them from getting closer to God. One of these Desert Fathers said, "Do not trust your own self-righteousness, and control your tongue and your stomach." He wasn't a lot of fun at parties.

If you're like me, when you look at your email inbox or Facebook feed, there are days when moving to the middle of the desert sounds like a great idea. But in reality, we don't have the luxury of removing all obstacles between us and God. So instead, we have to figure out how to navigate around them, how to practice saying yes to things that get us closer to God and make us more Christ-like in the process.

This whole process would be a lot easier if we didn't have free will. Right? God, just tell me what to do and I'm obligated to do it. Instead, God did an awesome thing when God gave humans the freedom to decide for themselves. We are not mindless automatons pledging robotic allegiance to our Creator. We have been given the ability by God to choose. But this freedom comes with incredibly responsibility and at least two potential dangers. The first danger that comes is that we end up making so many choices that we can't tell the important ones from the not-so-important ones. And the second danger is that we don't acknowledge there are consequences for each decision we make, big or small. What you practice today is who you become tomorrow.

Today, in our world, there are millions of things competing for our yes, and if we don't have a plan for how we make those decisions, if we don't practice the discipline of saying yes and saying no, we'll end up saying yes and no to the wrong things. So what criteria should we use? How do we know when to say yes and when to say no?

First, we have to get the "why" behind the practice of saying yes and no. What are we trying to accomplish? What's the end game? Let's acknowledge that this is about a whole lot more than just giving up something for Lent. That practice actually works against the deeper discipline, because it presents itself as a temporary fix to a greater problem. If I can just say no to chocolate for six weeks, then I can gorge myself on all the candy that's 50% off at Target the day after Easter. Right? We've allowed saying no to become an end in itself, rather than a means to a greater end. But let's be honest, that Starbucks coffee you're giving up for Lent isn't the reason you're not getting closer to God. So why practice saying yes and saying no?

I heard a motivational speaker last month who talked about the importance of focused, intentional decision-making. He gave the example of getting up early to exercise. He said when that alarm goes off at 5:30 a.m., he has two choices: he can get up, get dressed, and do what he needs to do to take care of himself. Or he can go back to sleep and give it away. This was a bad

example for me, because if my alarm goes off at 5:30 a.m., I would choose to give it away every time. But his point was well-taken: You have been given the incredible gift of this one precious life. Don't give it away.

So here's a question I want to encourage you to ask yourself when you're wrestling with yes or no. Ask, "Will saying yes to this crowd out God, or will it help me to see God at work in my life?" That's tough, because using that question as our criteria might mean saying no to some things we really want to do. By the way, I'm horrible at this. I came out of the womb saying yes. I say yes way too much, and then in hindsight wonder why it takes me three months to read a book. Most days I strike a decent balance, and yet there are days when God might be trying to say something to me, but I just don't have the time to listen.

Maybe this can help us. In Galatians, Paul gives us a representative list of things to which we should say no: "fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these." I'm willing to bet every single one of us said yes to at least one of those things before we came to church this morning. You can't get on social media without saying yes to strife, anger, quarrels, and dissension. Our world invites us to say yes to all the wrong things. But what you practice today is who you become tomorrow. So who do you want to become? With two small words, yes and no, we make our days. With yes and no we engage, or pull out, or dig in, or do the first thing that pops into our head, we follow something shiny on our radar screen, or we intentionally focus on who we are becoming. This is your one life; don't give it away.

I'm sure if we all had this life to do over, we would change things. We would say yes to some things and no to other things. Isn't hindsight great? But we can't go back. All we can do is move forward, with whatever time we have left, being intentional about saying yes to the things that bring us closer to God and allow us to use our gifts. Maybe your next yes is to leading or serving in a new way. Maybe your next no is to a relationship that isn't life-giving. Maybe you need to say yes to a deeper investment in your children or grandchildren. Maybe you need to say no to a fun activity that you enjoy but that isn't helping you get closer to God. Maybe you need to say no to staying silent on social issues; maybe you need to say yes to staying silent on social issues. Only you can know what decision will crowd God out and what decision will bring God closer.

I'm glad we have free will and the ability to choose and so many options. But I also recognize that if we're not careful, we'll realize too late that we've said yes to so many earthly things that we've unintentionally said no to God. I'm so thankful that Jesus said yes to the cross, even though I'm sure he wanted to say no. But he knew that saying yes was God's will for him. Don't give it away. What will bring you closer to God? What will help you shine your light for others? What will be life-giving to you and those around you? Say yes to that. You were created by God to change this world, or at least to change someone's life for the better. You. You have been called to do that. When the opportunity comes to serve God, will you say yes or no? Don't give it away.