

TO SAY NO, JUST SAY YES

NO! NO! NO! NO! Did you ever notice how during EVERY phase of life, our actions and attitudes are CURTAILED by at LEAST a certain number of what we might call **NECESSARY NO'S**. If you have any toddlers in your family, you KNOW about these *necessary no's*: *NO! You CAN'T run into the street to get your BALL! NO! You CAN'T reach for that steaming POT on the woodstove! NO! You CAN'T have peppermint stick ICE cream for BREAKFAST! NO! You CAN'T have a slightly squashed earthworm for LUNCH!* And AS we get OLDER, these *necessary no's* may become a little less PERVASIVE, but they are NO less PERSUASIVE. They KEEP cramping our style, don't they?

As my children were growing up, I found that it helped me be a good PARENT if I thought of myself as the one who had to decide what size PLAYPEN my children were going to have. So, MY job was to make sure that EACH child's playpen was the appropriate SIZE for the CHILD. Once our toddler had PROVEN, for example, that he could handle his little PLAYPEN by himself, we MIGHT let him have the run of the PLAYROOM. And once he could handle the PLAYROOM by himself, he MIGHT get to play on ONE entire FLOOR of the house. And pretty soon, it was the WHOLE house. And THEN, it was the YARD, and then it was the NEIGHBORHOOD. You see: his PLAYPEN kept getting BIGGER as he GREW. And THAT'S what GOOD parents DO! They CONSTANTLY make sure that the PLAYPEN fits the CHILD. And they keep EXPANDING the PLAYPEN to FIT their child's growth and maturity. But in the PROCESS, we ALSO have to be CONTINUALLY ready to say the **NECESSARY NO'S** that our children NEED to hear, and we CAN'T feel BAD about it. We HAVE to tell our 8-year-old: *NO! You're not OLD enough to ride your bike downtown all ALONE!* And we HAVE to say to our 13-year-old: *NO! You CANNOT stay out at the MALL until it closes, and then ride HOME with some 16-year-old.* And we HAVE to desperately preach to our 16-year-old: *NO! You may NOT get involved with ALCOHOL or DRUGS or SEXUAL activity.* And to our college-bound child, we HAVE to be ready to say: *NO! We can't AFFORD to buy you a new car AND pay your tuition!*

You see: at EACH stage, we DRUM these **necessary NO'S** INTO our children, HOPING and PRAYING that our little lectures and lessons will SINK IN, so that they'll be able to SAFELY handle THAT size playpen, AND get ready to handle the NEXT size playpen. And IF we've done our jobs successfully, then these little *no's*, these little *guilt-bombs*, will DETONATE in their SOULS whenever they are confronted with potentially dangerous, or ethically dubious, situations THROUGHOUT their entire LIVES, because even ADULTS still live within the confines of a PLAYPEN. We STILL have certain LIMITS that we CANNOT safely BREAK. And SO, we HAVE to be able to tell OURSELVES the **NECESSARY NO'S**.

Well, in today's Scripture Lesson, we see JESUS saying **NO**. So, I began wondering about the various **NO'S** that Jesus SAID during His ministry. I mean, His disciples would get FRUSTRATED with Him because He didn't say *no* ENOUGH. They'd try to have a serious conversation with Him and He'd be surrounded by rowdy, crowding, cuddly little KIDS. And He'd DRAG the kids into His LAP and USE them as an EXAMPLE of the POINT that He was trying to make. And His disciples would get UPSET. OR, instead of telling women like MARY to go back to their REAL work of preparing meals and caring for their families, Jesus would ENCOURAGE these women to sit down and listen to Him, and learn. And instead of REJECTING the embarrassing attentions of women like the one who poured costly OIL over his head, Jesus PRAISED her for her unique INSIGHTS and unhampered compassion. And of course, Jesus could NEVER say **NO** to invitations to sit down to dinner and fellowship, even

with DISREPUTABLE people like tax collectors and prostitutes. And THIS would FRUSTRATE His disciples to NO END. **AND** of course, it would ANGER the religious leaders around Him.

So, MY question is: *what DID Jesus say NO to?* Well, George H. Morrison, one of the greatest preachers our country has ever produced, once preached a SERMON called, *The REFUSALS of Christ* (#33 in George M. Docherty, *The Greatest Sermons of George H. Morrison* [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959], 204ff). And IN this sermon, Morrison looks at those very FEW and FAR between times when Jesus says **NO**, when Jesus feels that it's necessary to register a NEGATIVE. He ALSO studies the SILENCES of Jesus, because THEY too are a way of saying **NO**, aren't they? WHAT did Jesus REFUSE to SAY? WHAT did Jesus, in His silence, REFUSE to DO? And WHAT do His **NO'S** affirm?

Sometimes, for example, Jesus REFUSED to work a MIRACLE, as in today's Scripture Lesson. Jesus' MINISTRY will to be RICH in miracles, and yet HERE, He BEGINS His ministry by REFUSING to perform one. WHY? Well, MORRISON claims that Jesus REFUSED this FIRST temptation, the temptation to turn stones into bread, because He was refusing to use, for HIMSELF, powers that God had GIVEN Him for OTHERS. It was for OTHERS that Jesus CAME into the world. He came into the world, NOT to be ministered TO, but to MINISTER. And THIS was certainly a SIMPLE miracle, a miracle He COULD have EASILY accomplished, IF He had CHOSEN to. In fact, *the day was coming*, says Morrison, *when Jesus would feed 5,000 by a MIRACLE. BUT, by a MIRACLE, He NEVER fed HIMSELF.* (p. 205)

Now, one distinct advantage that JESUS had over US, as we WRESTLE with OUR temptation NOT to say these *necessary NO'S* to ourselves and to our loved ones, is that Jesus really KNEW who He WAS. AT His baptism, if you recall, Jesus had His TRUE self REVEALED to Him. HE was the *Son of GOD*, and He KNEW it. And therefore, He was FREE from all the DOUBTS of self-worth that constantly seem to plague US. HE had no NEED to practice acts of self-promotion, OR self-absorption. Jesus didn't NEED to change stones into bread just to PROVE that He could FILL his stomach. But WHAT Jesus DID need to DO, which He DID by REFUSING to succumb to His TEMPTER, was that He NEEDED to demonstrate His genuine SONSHIP, that He WAS indeed the SON of God. And he NEEDED to demonstrate it by COMPLETE and utter OBEDIENCE to God.

Jesus also refused to answer PRAYER sometimes. Morrison reminds us of what happened near the tombs one day: a demoniac, cured, clothed, and now in his right mind, prayed to CHRIST that he might follow Him and SERVE Him. But Jesus REFUSED the demoniac, and instead, told him: *Go home to your friends, and TELL them how MUCH the Lord has done for YOU.* And this refusal REMINDS us that WE are not HERE so much to SIT with Jesus and ENJOY Him, as we are to SERVE Him. SO, Jesus tells him **NO**. And let's face it: sometimes it's the UNANSWERED prayers that end up leading us to our TRUE service and love. After all, St. Paul PRAYED, but his THORN in the FLESH was NEVER removed, and SO, he USED it to MAKE himself a better MINISTER. Likewise, Jesus prayed: *Father, IF it be POSSIBLE, let this cup PASS from me!* But He STILL didn't get the NAILS taken out of His flesh. And Morrison reminds us: *God's NO to THAT prayer SAVED the world!*

SOMETIMES in the gospels, Jesus says **NO** when He's asked to EXPLAIN something. In Matthew 21, for example, the chief priests and elders COME to Him and DEMAND to know *by WHAT authority He TEACHES and performs MIRACLES.* But Jesus REFUSES to answer the question of these troublemakers UNTIL they answer HIS question: *DID the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of HUMAN origin?"* And AS they mull over their OPTIONS, the TRUTH is never even considered. ALL they CARE about is HOW the crowd is going to REACT to their answer, and whether it will upset the ROMANS. SO, Jesus REFUSES to dignify their question about HIS authority with the TRUTH, because THEY'RE not really SEEKING the TRUTH. Likewise, before Pontius Pilate, Jesus refuses to ANSWER *even a SINGLE charge* that these BITTER priests and elders have levied AGAINST Him.

And on the CROSS, Jesus REFUSES drugged WINE. He REFUSES the CUP that would have DEADENED His PAIN. And about THIS, Morrison preached grandly in the old homiletic CADENCES of an earlier AGE. He says: *IN the hour of BATTLE, the CAPTAIN must be AWAKE.... In the last storm and assault, it will NOT do for the leader to be SLEEPING. And the crowning assault on SIN, and DEATH, and ... HELL was made by our mighty leader ON the cross.* (p. 208) SO, JUST as Jesus refused to turn stones to bread at the BEGINNING of His ministry, here at the END of his ministry, Jesus REFUSES the MYRRH, the PAIN-RELIEVER, upon the cross.

But HERE'S what I want you to notice. It's true for JESUS, AND it's true for US. Jesus can only say **NO** to something because He's ALREADY said **YES** to something ELSE. He can ONLY say **No** to the powers and principalities of THIS world, because He has already said **YES** to the ULTIMATE power and authority of God. **NO necessary NO** can EVER be invoked without the affirming **YES** that goes WITH it. Jesus can ONLY say **no** to His TEMPTER because He had ALREADY said **yes** to His Father in Heaven. Jesus can ONLY say **NO** to this wilderness SEDUCTION because He has ALREADY said **YES** to the authority of GOD'S Word in SCRIPTURE. Jesus can ONLY say **NO** to drugged WINE on the cross because He has already said **YES** to remaining ALERT and ALIVE to EVERY moment of His earthly existence, feeling ALL the joy and ALL the pain of it. Yes, friends, in ORDER to say the **necessary no's**, Jesus must ALREADY have said **YES** to something HIGHER.

And the SAME is true for US! WE have to decide AHEAD of time, BEFORE we are faced with temptation, what's IMPORTANT to us, WHAT we will take a STAND for, and WHAT our VALUES are. And whether it's a decision that we NEED to make as loving PARENTS, or a CHOICE that we must make regarding our own HEALTH, or a RESPONSE that we are CALLED to make as we live in COMMUNITY with each other -- both locally and globally -- in EVERY case, WE need to know WHAT it IS we AFFIRM, what it IS we say **YES** to, BEFORE we can KNOW, or SAY, the **necessary NO'S**. For example: can ONLY say **NO** to our children: **NO!** *You CANNOT play in the street*, because, as loving parents, we have ALREADY said **YES** to SAFEGUARDING their health and well-being. We can ONLY say **NO** to DRUGS and OTHER things that would HURT us, because we have already said **YES** to CLEAN, SOBER and FULLER living! We can only say **NO** to crankiness, irritability and judgmentalism, because we have already said **YES** to kindness and compassion. We can ONLY say **NO** to REVENGE, because we have already said **YES** to peacemaking and forgiveness. We can ONLY say **NO** to ANY kind of temptation because we have already said **YES** to self-control and discipline. We can only say **NO** to RACISM and SEXISM, AGEISM and HOMOPHOBIA, because we have already said **YES** to LOVE and RESPECT for ALL people, and the value of DIVERSITY. AND, we can only say **NO** to prejudice, oppression or VIOLENCE because we have already said **YES** to JUSTICE and goodness, peace and NONVIOLENCE. And SO, to say **NO**, we just need to say **YES!**

And AS we go through this holy season of LENT, I hope and pray that ALL of us will USE this time as a time to consider and RECONSIDER, in LIGHT of JESUS and everything that He TAUGHT us, WHAT it IS that WE truly AFFIRM, WHAT it IS that WE truly VALUE and UPHOLD, WHAT it IS that WE truly STAND for, and WHAT it IS that WE would even DIE for, because UNTIL we know what we would DIE for, we do NOT know what we are LIVING for. Yes, we ALL need to say LOTS of **necessary no's!** They're a BIG part of life. But in order to say **NO**, we FIRST have to say **YES**. THINK about that, my friends! THINK about it and PRAY about it! Amen.