

## Study 7

# Give Yourself Permission to Say No

The Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has made the right choice, and it will not be taken away from her.” Luke 10:41-42

Martha went back to the kitchen choking back tears. *How could He be the Son of God and give an answer like that?* Jesus’ words echoed endlessly through her head: “*‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, ... Mary has chosen what is better’*” (Luke 10:41-42, NIV).

“Chosen what is better!” she grumbled, slamming a pot. “Sitting around is better than helping me prepare the meal? Does He think the food’s going to appear miraculously like manna from heaven? Or maybe He’s planning on whipping up something from nothing, like he did on the mountainside.” She wiped her eyes and went back to her cutting board. Alone. Fuming. Disillusioned.

Of course, Luke doesn’t tell us what happened after Jesus’ instruction to Martha (Luke 10), but it’s not hard to imagine Martha storming back to the kitchen because, frankly, that’s what we might do. **We’re not very teachable when things seem unfair.** So although Jesus gave her permission to stop fussing with dinner, I’d guess that Martha may not have given herself permission.

If God gave you permission to say no to some of the things that are overloading you, would you still do them anyway? Would you respond as our hypothetical Martha above? Or, would you choose “better” over “busier”?

When questions like these are just words on a page, the answers seem obvious. Of course we'd give ourselves permission, we respond dismissively. Who wouldn't do that? When it comes to actually making hard choices, though, we sometimes find out that we wouldn't do that.

Consider the requests for our time we encounter every week—requests for worthy efforts or requests voiced by people we may know and care about—and consider how difficult it seems to say no to them. A relative asks you to baby-sit on Saturday night. Your daughter asks you to coach her softball team. A troop leader asks whether you can cover for him at the Boy Scout meeting. A pastor asks you to work in the church nursery, to teach Sunday school, or to serve on as a deacon. A teacher asks you to assist at school once a week. A friend asks you to counsel someone who might benefit from your experience. A coworker asks you to pitch in voluntarily with a project that's behind schedule.

These are all great service opportunities and the foot washer in us says it's time to grab a basin and towel and get to work. And it might be, for some of these requests. **But perhaps God wants us to set some appropriate boundaries—to wash ten feet this season, not twenty or thirty.**

The truth is that sometimes God does give us permission to say no to serving others. We saw that in Study 6. But when He does, we have a role to play, too: we have to give *ourselves* permission to say no. We have to put down the pot, shed the apron, and be still, confident that God will find another way to meet the need that we're not going to meet.

Until we escape the tyranny of the "automatic yes"—that is, until we give ourselves permission to say no to serving others—the overload will persist. In fact, it will likely get worse, since the more we say yes, the more people will ask of us.

If there's one area where Christians are under-taught, it's this one. Perhaps that's because it's so easy to hear these words as heresy. But teaching that it's okay to set boundaries around our service is not heretical, if our motivation for those

boundaries is right—if our motivation is to have the space to do with excellence and joy what God wants us to do.

When your life is overloading you, give yourself permission to say no to new requests. It's not a sin and it's not un-Christian. Quite the opposite. It's choosing what's better.

### **Think About It**

What are two time-consuming things you agreed to do, even though you didn't have the time to do them?

Why didn't you give yourself permission to say no to these requests?

### **For Group Discussion**

Saying no to serving others is appropriate if God first gives us permission to say no to them. How will you know whether God is giving you permission to say no to a request for your time?

### **Talk to God About It**

Read again the story of Martha and Mary in Luke 10. Take some time to explore with God what's stopping you from embracing Jesus' teaching to choose time with Him over more activity.

### **Your Freedom from Busyness Plan, Part 7**

List a non-negotiable priority that you will not neglect when people request more of your time.

What's your plan for saying no when you encounter a worthy need that would compromise this non-negotiable?