

Some people are very uncomfortable with the idea of disappointing anyone. They think that if you are kind, you'll never disappoint anyone. They think that if you try hard enough, if you manage your time well enough, if you're selfless enough, prayerful enough, godly enough, you'll never disappoint anyone. I fear these people are headed for a rude awakening.

I know this, because I was one of those people. For so many years, I was deeply invested in people knowing that I was a very competent, capable, responsible person. I needed them to know that about me, because if that was true about me, I believed, I would be safe and happy. If I was responsible and hardworking, I would be safe and happy.

Fast forward to a deeply exhausted and resentful woman, disconnected from her best friends, trying so darned hard to keep being responsible, but all at once, unable. Something snapped, and my anger outweighed my precious competence. Something fundamental had to change.

This is what I know for sure: along the way you will disappoint someone. You will not meet someone's needs or expectations. You will not be able to fulfill their request. You will leave something undone or poorly done. Possibly, this person will be angry with you, or sad. You've left them holding the bag. Or maybe instead of sadness or anger, they'll belittle you or push all your shame buttons—maybe they'll

say things like, "I guess you're just not a hard worker." Or, "I guess you're just a low-capacity person." Or, "I thought

I could count on you." These are basically sharp blades straight into the hearts of people like me, people who depend very heavily on meeting people's expectations.

But here's the good news: you get to decide who you're going to disappoint, who you're going to say *no* to. And it gets easier over time, the disappointing.

What you need along the way: a sense of God's deep, unconditional love, and a strong sense of your own purpose.

Without those two, you'll need from people what is only God's to give, and you'll give up on your larger purpose in order to fulfill smaller purposes or other people's purposes.

To be sure, finding your purpose can take a long time to figure out, and along the way it is tempting to opt instead for the immediate gratification, the immediate fix, of someone's approval. But the sweet rush of approval, the pat on the head, can often derail us from real love, and real purpose.

Time always helps me make these decisions, because if I'm rushed, I always say yes. When I have time, I can instead say to myself: *Go back to being loved; go back to your purpose.*

*This thing I am being asked to do will not get me more love.*

*And this will not help me meet my purpose.*

Some of us have trouble disappointing people in authority. Or people we want to impress, or people who seem fancy or important in some way. I've realized one thing that makes it hard for me to disappoint people is my tendency to overestimate how close I am to someone, and then how imperative it is that I don't disappoint this dear, dear friend. But upon closer inspection, I am probably not this person's dear friend. This is probably not a deep heart wound, but probably more a small professional disappointment. Those are very different. And there's a difference between forsaking a friendship or family relationship and speaking the truth about our limitations. I'm finding that many of our friendships actually grow when we're more honest about what we can and can't do. People who don't care much about what other people think of them don't generally struggle with disappointing people. Frankly, I'm not there yet. I think this is harder for women than for men, and harder for moms than for other women, possibly because we're in that mode—that nose-wiping, cereal-pouring, need-meeting season of life.

I remind myself: This will not make me feel loved, so if that's why I'm saying yes, that's not a good reason. The love I want will not be found here, and what I will feel in its place is resentment and anger.

I'm committed to a particular, limited amount of things in this season, and if what's being asked of me isn't one of those, then it stands in the way. That's why knowing your purpose and priorities for a given season is so valuable—because those commitments become the litmus test for all the decisions you face.

Picture your relationships like concentric circles: the inner circle is your spouse, your children, your very best friends. Then the next circle out is your extended family and good friends. Then people you know, but not well, colleagues, and so on, to the outer edge. Aim to disappoint the people at the center as rarely as possible. And then learn to be more and more comfortable with disappointing the people who lie at the edges of the circle—people you're not as close to, people who do not and should not require your unflagging dedication.

To do this, though, you have to give even the people closest to you—maybe especially the people closest to you—realistic expectations for what you can give to them.

We disappoint people because we're limited. We have to accept the idea of our own limitations in order to accept the idea that we'll disappoint people. I have *this much* time. I have *this much* energy. I have *this much* relational capacity. And it does get easier. The first few times I had to say *no* were excruciating. But as you regularly tell the truth about what you can and can't do, who you are and who you're not, you'll be surprised at how some people will cheer you on. And, frankly, how much less you'll care when other people don't. When you say, *This is what I can do; this is what I can't*, you'll find so much freedom in that. You'll be free to love your work, because you're not using it as a sneaky way to be loved or approved of. You'll be free to love the things you give to people, because you're giving them freely, untangled from resentments and anger.

My knee-jerk answer is yes. My default setting is yes. But I'm learning that time and honesty and space and prayer and writing and talking with Aaron help me see more clearly what I can and can't do, with a full heart and without resentment or hustling.

A friend I don't know well asked for help with something recently. And all the old impulses kicked in. Of course! I'm your girl! Anything for you! And then I waited and breathed and prayed and waited some more, and then I lovingly, kindly disappointed her, and I'm happy to report we both survived. Baby steps.