

FINDING YOUR

YES

YES

YES

Living a Life That's Open to God's Invitations

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Chapter One

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YES OFTEN STARTS WITH NO

I would like you to consider leading your sorority Bible study.”
“I don’t think I’m the right choice.”

“Would you consider going into full-time campus ministry?”
“Maybe in a decade or two.”

“We are offering you the fifth grade teacher position.”
“But I wanted to teach kindergarten.”

“Have you thought about finishing that degree?”
“I’m too busy.”

“You would be our first choice for divisional director.”
“I wouldn’t touch that job with a ten-foot pole.”

“Would you write an article for our blog?”
“I’m not a writer.”

Fear of failure. Lack of confidence. A limited vision of what God could do.

More often than not, I have initially answered no to what eventually turned out to be the most meaningful opportunities I’ve had.

This a mere sampling of the invitations God has given me in the course of my life and the ways in which I’ve initially responded.

My responses may seem rational. After all, people are busy, not everyone is gifted in the ways needed, and we certainly are allowed preferences. Sometimes I shake my head in amazement at how I went from “I’m not the right choice to lead the sorority Bible study” to landing in full-time ministry for the past twenty years. I followed a twisted path going from “I won’t touch that job with ten-foot pole” to finding myself on an airplane bound for the divisional director interview in Chicago. And lately I’ve been laughing at my initial response of “I’m not a writer” . . . to writing this book!

We have the freedom to say no to invitations and opportunities; however, what if there’s a yes buried in the no?

The first layers of reasoning for no may be the first steps in finding a yes. A journey that uncovers your desires, gifts, and calling. A process that brings confidence and clarity. An experience that grows your relationship with God and with others so deeply, you wonder how you didn’t encounter this adventure before now.

Once a yes is finally found, it could bring healing and wholeness to someone’s life. That yes might bring hope to a world in despair. Perhaps that small but mighty act of obedience to say yes, will bring honor and glory to God. And possibly God may want to use that buried yes to make a difference in a person’s life or in this world . . . or maybe in you?

The first steps to yes often start with no.

MOVING FROM HERE TO THERE

What took me from the no to the yes? In short, the answer is Jesus. It’s a very simple Sunday school answer, but it’s the truthful one. Gravity pulls me toward comfort. Often my gut reaction is to stick with the first layers of reasoning to say no to all of these things. It’s easier. It’s safe. It takes less time and allows me to

retain control over a portion of my life. Many of these opportunities placed me in unfamiliar situations and messed with my plans—plans I had for my time, my resources, and even my future.

Where does gravity pull you? Perhaps saying yes conjures up a level of anxiety as you think about the energy it will require and how it will disrupt your routine. Nervousness may bubble up around the thought of whom you may have to say yes with and work alongside. Maybe finding a yes is steeped in obligation. Guilt drives your yes, along with the familiar phrase, “I should say yes.” Perhaps freedom to simply be open to either yes or no with no expectations would be a stretching invitation for you.

When faced with these risky invitations, fear can take over. But when I’m open to Jesus meddling in my life, then the journey begins.

This holy and sacred ground is where I turn my clenched fists into open palms. I start to release my grip on my life, trust Jesus with my fears in all their various forms, and believe that he has my highest and greatest good in mind. I choose to believe that he is doing something in my life that is purposeful and meaningful, and he wants me to join him in expanding his kingdom here on earth. I trust in the fact that Jesus knows me better than I know myself. If he is asking me to say yes to something, he must think I can do it, with his power moving through me. In following Jesus, he asks me to surrender to his plans and ultimately his love and leadership. This path from no to yes isn’t easy, but it is transformative and can bring joy. It’s not just for me; it’s for you too.

The goal of this book is not to have you say yes to every opportunity that comes your way . . . although plenty of people would be happy for you to do this! The hope and prayer of this book is to create space for you to think and connect with God, yourself, and others, about being *open* to yes. Open to the path that could lead from no to yes. Open to the yes that invests in the

kingdom of God—a path that leads to sharing God’s love deeply and richly using your God-given strengths in a surprising way, and to knowing God’s delight as you invest with your yes.

God could lead you on a path of discernment that points you in the direction of a solid no. It is possible that a no is the best choice. But too often we say no without considering our motivations or asking God for his thoughts on the matter. If we be-

lieve Isaiah 55:8-9, that God’s ways are higher than our ways, and his thoughts are higher than our thoughts, then we must pause and consider the yes; consider what God might do, even if it seems crazy.

What would it look like to be open to saying yes?

HOW JESUS CALLS US TO YES

Jesus thought this concept of saying yes and investing in the kingdom was important enough that he included it in some of his final teachings to the disciples before his death. The disciples needed to understand what it would mean to live this life without Jesus physically present with them. Jesus had used many parables in the Gospels to describe what the kingdom of God *was*.

As he and the disciples traveled closer to Jerusalem, the place where Jesus would be crucified, he was revealing *how* to live in this newly described kingdom. Choosing to say yes and invest their God-given resources, time, and talents in the kingdom of God was a top priority for the disciples. They would be left to lead the mission of sharing the good news of Christ with the world. Jesus was leaving them in charge and would send the Holy Spirit to work in and through them.

He made it clear that the kingdom of God was to multiply beyond Jerusalem; it was to go to the ends of the earth. God wanted, and still wants, every people group in every corner of the

world to know the transformative love of Christ. The disciples would be, as my pastor, Dave, says, “plan A” for leading this growth of the kingdom, including making more disciples and bringing love, justice, and healing to this broken world. The disciples had a big yes in front of them as they headed toward Jerusalem with Jesus in those last days, and so do we.

In Luke 19, Jesus tells the parable of the ten servants. In the story, a nobleman is about to go away to a distant empire to be crowned king. Before he leaves, he gives a pound of silver each to ten of his servants. The king tells the servants, “Invest this for me while I am gone.” When the king returns, he discovers that two of the servants have made him a profit, but a third servant was fearful of the king and buried his silver in the ground. The king was thrilled with the two servants who invested their silver, and as a result, he gave them promotions to be governors of cities in his kingdom. In contrast, the king was furious with the third servant who chose to bury his silver. The king gave his buried silver to the first servant who had multiplied his investment tenfold.

For a long time, I understood this parable as great material for a financial stewardship sermon. I would hear this preached right before the congregation would be challenged to increase their monetary giving for the year or prayerfully consider their charitable contributions. As one who does fundraising for a portion of my job, I appreciate the application of investing our money into the kingdom of God, multiplying those resources as far as we can, and knowing the pleasure of God in the midst of it. This is not an incorrect application, but the vision is too narrow. This passage came alive to me when I began to really understand what Jesus meant by silver.

Silver was, and still is, a valuable commodity. The NIV translates this as “mina.” One mina equaled three months of an average salary in the first century. It’s reasonable to assume that Jesus primarily

challenged the disciples and all who were hearing this parable to invest their money into the things of God and watch the kingdom, and their investment, multiply as a result. However, when we look at the texts surrounding this passage, we find people saying yes and no to investing different kinds of “silver” into the kingdom.

Earlier in Luke 19, Jesus interacts with Zacchaeus, a corrupt tax collector. Curious to know Jesus, Zacchaeus climbs into a sycamore tree to rise above the crowds and get a good look at him. Jesus sees Zacchaeus and states that he is coming to Zacchaeus’s house for dinner. As the religious folks grumble about Jesus going to this sinful man’s house, joy overwhelms Zacchaeus that Jesus would see him and want to be with him. Zacchaeus is so transformed by his time with Jesus that day, he gives half of his wealth to the poor and more than compensates those he cheated in taxes. Zacchaeus’s “silver” is money *and* it’s what happens in his heart. His “silver” is a vision to bring hope in the broken place of poverty by giving to the poor. His choice to say yes in using his “silver” is so deeply connected to his love and surrender to Christ that Jesus claims salvation for Zacchaeus. This yes changed the trajectory of Zacchaeus’s present and eternal life.

In Luke 18 we see a different type of investment from the persistent widow. This is another parable Jesus told, of a widow who was seeking justice in a dispute with an enemy. The widow kept coming to a judge, asking for justice, and pleading for him to listen to her case. The judge finally relented and granted her request because she was driving him crazy with her persistence. This widow likely didn’t have much in the way of wealth, but her “silver” was her ability to persevere and never give up. She used that endurance to influence the judge for justice.

Jesus uses this parable to teach us about persistence in our prayers to God, as God is a loving Father and will never tire of us.

I can't help but think of the good gift it would be to the kingdom of God if we had more people saying yes through the use of persistent and even stubborn prayers—saying yes to praying for justice for the marginalized, hope for the persecuted, and for eternal change in someone's soul. This, too, is “silver” in God's economy, which if invested, will surely multiply.

Then there's the story of saying no. In Luke 18, Jesus encounters a rich man who has followed the rules of God since he was young. The rich man asks Jesus what he should do to inherit eternal life. When Jesus tells him to sell his possessions and follow him, the man becomes sad. In the Mark 10 account, the man also walks away. Not only did Jesus ask him to invest his silver in the kingdom, he also tapped into a deeper heart issue. Would he trust that saying yes to Jesus would be worth it, that saying yes to investing his physical silver would bring incredible joy, fulfillment, and transformation to his life? That following Jesus would be more valuable than his wealth? It appears that at least in that moment, the rich man says no. He walks away.

And this is why yes often starts with no. I resonate with the rich man. It's hard to trust Jesus with the investment of my “silver” in whatever form that may be. One of the first steps toward trusting Jesus is remembering that the “silver” is actually his “silver” not mine. He is the one who gave it to me and wants me to grow the kingdom with it. It helps me trust Jesus when I remember that he not only gave me the “silver,” but he gave me life. He created me and he knows me. He loves me too. This gives me courage to be open to yes, even if I want to say no.

A SURPRISING GIFT OF YES

A recent yes that started with no involved teaching this very parable at my church. In 2017, I received the gift of a discipleship

sabbatical with the campus ministry I work with. As I planned for this sabbatical, I began to realize how tired I was, how over-committed I had become, and I was looking forward to some time to unplug. I also planned to enjoy some of the things I don't get to fully be present for in the midst of my everyday responsibilities. Cooking, extending hospitality to my friends and family, and reading topped the list.

A nagging thought kept coming back to me as I considered my list: teaching at our women's ministry at church. No. Way. I had taught several times in the past few years but had declined opportunities recently due to work responsibilities. With this sabbatical approaching, the associate pastor asked if I might have interest in teaching again.

I didn't want to entertain this thought. Let me be clear, I love my church and I love women's ministry. I've been a small group leader for years and have even enjoyed the times I taught the whole group. I knew that teaching was part of the "silver" God had given me, as I had been affirmed in this by God and others for years. In my former life, I was a fifth grade teacher (another yes that started with no), but at first glance, this felt draining. It felt like I didn't have enough energy to spend thoughtful time preparing and planning for this undertaking. I felt exhausted and depleted. And honestly, I didn't want the extra pressure of performing that I put on myself for these types of things.

I knew how this would play out: I say yes, I try to prepare the teaching in the nooks and crannies of my other commitments, and then I wing a lot of the up-front speaking because I haven't had the space to practice the flow of the presentation. It would end up fine, but I'd be a nervous wreck leading up to the actual teaching.

No. This is not what God would have for me on a discipleship sabbatical, especially when I needed restoration of my soul. Or is it?

As I prayed, I wondered whether this was an invitation from God to remember my joy in teaching. Perhaps this was an opportunity to uncover the “silver” that had been hiding for several years? I used to teach much more at various college campuses and conferences, but my recent job responsibilities had required more time and a different set of skills. I no longer had the space to enjoy the study, preparation, and speaking that goes into teaching from Scripture. But as I prepared for sabbatical, God would be giving me space. A lot of space, actually.

No one begged me to teach, and I knew plenty of other women who would say yes. But I couldn't shake this nudging I sensed from the Lord. When I first started my relationship with Christ, I may have ignored these stirrings in my soul and stayed in my comfort zone. As I've grown with Jesus, I've learned to stop and pay attention. If I keep thinking of an opportunity or idea, I ask trusted others for their insight. I linger in the uncertainty. I ask God if there's something he is inviting me into. The invitation may go beyond an accomplished task; it may go straight to my soul and grow my heart.

To my surprise, the more I held the thought of teaching, the more it began to sound refreshing: prayerfully simmering over God's Word and being transformed by it, all while using the “silver” he had given me. And maybe God would have another layer of healing for me as I dealt with my performance anxieties. Maybe in this unhurried time, he would remind me of my identity in him and the peace that comes from this. It occurred to me that when we practice saying yes to God, we might not see the potential benefits until we take a step toward it.

*What “silver”
might be hiding out
in your life?*

So my no became a yes. One of my teaching assignments was the parable of the ten servants in Luke 19. Of course! God did all and even more than I expected in my risk of saying yes. He gave me energy to complete the task, I drew close to him in the process, and he blessed me with more freedom in my soul as I taught for and with him. So much freedom that I accepted another invitation to preach at my parents' church later that spring.

How could you create space in your life to pay attention to stirrings of the Spirit?

I'm grateful I didn't bury my "silver" this time. I'm thankful my no turned into a yes. The Lord continued to pursue me in using my "silver" this way, even if I wasn't very receptive at first. If I would have stuck with my no, several women in my small group may have stayed in their comfort zones instead of using their talents in new ways. If I held on to no, I would have missed out on the inspiration God gave me through this parable. Without this inspiration, there would have been no journey in writing a book. We miss out when we say no prematurely. When we do choose to say yes to invest in God's kingdom, he will not only grow the kingdom but will grow us as well.

The first steps to yes often start with no.

SPIRITUAL EXPERIMENT

Pray and ask God to remind you of any recent noes you've said. Spend time asking God if you might need to learn from or reconsider any of these noes. What might be gained from a no-turned-yes?