

Practicing Our Faith: Saying Yes and Saying No

*A sermon preached on Deuteronomy 30:15-20 on Sunday, September 13, 2026,
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I.

As Baptist pastor Kyle Childress tells the story: “I was ordained over 30 years ago by a small, rural Texas Baptist church who had called me as their new young pastor a couple of months before. [For my ordination service], I invited a retired preacher whom I knew from my college church to preach it. He was in his mid-80’s, gentle and kind, as attentive to others as anyone I’d ever known, had a deep prayer life, and rumor had it that he had memorized the entire King James Bible. He preached a fine sermon on loving God, loving the Bible, and loving God’s people. After the service, of course, we all joined in a country church dinner on the grounds of which legends are made. Soon thereafter, I escorted the old preacher to his car. He laid his Bible on the roof of the car as he opened the door and turned to me, “There are two more things you need to know about being a pastor. You’ll need to learn to say ‘No!’ and ‘[Heck] no!’” With that parting word he got in his car and drove away.”¹

II.

You know as well as I do that Texas Baptist pastors tell it like it is, lest they be misunderstood! But I can assure you that it’s not just new pastors or Texans who need to learn about saying yes and no. Decisions face every one of us, all day every day, right? This shirt or that one? This sofa or that one? This coffee or that Diet Coke? Netflix or Apple TV or HBO Max or Prime Video or Disney Plus or Paramount or Peacock or Hulu or YouTube TV or all the others I’ve not named? These few are but the tip of the decision iceberg.

¹ As quoted in Kyle Childress’s devotional at The Ekklesia Project,
<http://www.ekklesiaproject.org/blog/2013/02/saying-yes-and-saying-no/>

So it probably doesn't surprise you that everyone from anthropologists to market researcher tell us that more choices aren't making us better consumers, rather they're leading to choice overload and decision paralysis. As one research study showed, when standing in front of a shelf in the grocery store that shows us 27 different kinds of jam, the average consumer will buy one of them only 3% of the time. But narrow that selection to 6 jars of jam? 30% of us will buy one.² (And yes, grocery stores like Trader Joe's have figured this out!) The curation of items, then, reduces our cognitive load, mental fatigue, and inevitable regret that maybe we made the wrong choice.

Decisions, as you know, aren't just about jam and streaming channels. They aren't just about our money and how we spend it on items, this or that, but decisions also include our allocation of time and intentions. This sugary cereal or that Greek yogurt? Early morning at the gym, or an extra hour of sleep? Reading a chapter in your book, or spending another 30 minutes doomscrolling? Laundry or lounging? Studying for the test or peeking at your neighbor's work instead? Ignore the needy neighbor's call or answer it once again?

Significance in the decisions we make heightens along the way, as we shift from "this or that" to "yes or no." When you think about it, some of the most consequential and life-changing answers in the world are contained in these two little words: "yes, I will marry you," "yes, I'll take the job," "yes, you're getting a baby," "yes, I'll follow Christ," "yes, we're going to war" ... or "no, I won't risk all my money on that hot stock option," "no, I won't leave you,"

² <https://medium.com/@jodiemshaw/choice-overload-6280f9b8bf29>

“no, I’m not taking that on” “no, he did not survive,” “no, it didn’t end the way I’d hoped.”³

These past summer weeks, we have been exploring the practices of the Christian faith, or rather, how our Christian faith impacts the things we do in our everyday life. Today’s practice is that of “saying yes and saying no.” In *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, Shawn Copeland reminds us: “learning when and how, to what, and to whom to give our yes or our no is a lifelong project. It is learning to live not merely in dull balance or tedious moderation but in passionate, disciplined choice and action.” She says, “we must learn the practice of saying no to that which crowds God out and yes to a way of life that makes space for God.”⁴ Or as a wise one in my life constantly reminds me, “when you say yes to one thing, it means you’re saying no to something else.”

What do the world’s noted thinkers have to say about this dilemma of yes or no? Let me tell you a couple. Augustine mused that “there is so much beauty in the world you can’t love it all. And there is so much good to do in the world, you can’t do it all. And to try to, is sin.”⁵ Mahatma Gandhi said, “A ‘no’ uttered from the deepest conviction is better than a ‘yes’ merely uttered to please, or worse, to avoid trouble.”⁶ Or if you’re ChatGPT founder, Sam Altman, you’re bragging about how cool it is that Gen Z’ers “don’t really make life decisions without asking ChatGPT what they should do.”⁷ (When the

³ Wonderful list of these from Barbara Brown Taylor’s *An Altar in the World*, p121-122.

⁴ M. Shawn Copeland, “Saying Yes and Saying No,” Dorothy Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, p 60 & 62.

⁵ I can’t remember where I first read this quote; it has lived in a long compilation of sermon notes I’ve culled over the years from which I pulled for today’s sermon. After preaching it, I have worked to locate the source of Augustine’s quote here and discovered that, though it riffs on themes from *The Confession* and *The City of God*, it is a modern take on these themes. I apologize to the reader and hearer for the misattribution!

⁶ As quoted by Arun Gandhi in *The Gift of Anger: And Other Lessons from My Grandfather Mahatma Gandhi*.

⁷ <https://fortune.com/article/sam-altman-chatgpt-gen-z-millennials-life-advisor-operating-system/>

stakes are high, here's where I channel that old Texan with a no and a heck no!)

III.

Instead of asking stores how we should shop, or great thinkers how to choose, or machines how we should live, let's turn to our ancestors. Biblical wisdom on yeses and noes stretches from Genesis to Revelation. Jesus talks about choosing the narrow way of life, so narrow it's like fitting through the eye of a needle. Paul speaks of freedom in Christ, used not for self-indulgence but for one another. But before all that, Moses was creating a path for the people of Israel through the wilderness. Theirs was a 40-year trek, traveling in body and spirit to the land promised to them by God. And in today's text, they neared that end. The horizon grew with promise. In his final farewell to the people of Israel, Moses's "valedictory address," as some scholars say, Moses reminds them of the ultimate choice set before them — life and prosperity or death and adversity. If you say yes to God: "obeying the commandments of the Lord your God by loving the Lord, walking in the Lord's ways, and observing the Lord's commandments," Moses declares, "then you shall *live* and become numerous and blessed." If you say no to God, then you shall perish.

Remember that Moses has been with his people all along the way. He remembers the times they wished to go back to the slavery of Egypt, the times they yearned for a golden calf – a god they could see and understand, the times they hoarded the manna and quail from God because they didn't trust in God's provisions. It's fitting, then, that his final words to them would say *choose life!* Choose the way of covenant, relationship, hope, and

compassion. *Choose life*, Moses said with a knowing smile, so that you might live!

This was an invitation to the generation before him, and it has become an invitation to every generation ever since. Now it might feel too simplistic or overwrought to say the decision is between choosing God and choosing everything else, but sometimes, that's what these choices boil down to. Invitations to say yes to a call, a path, a relationship, a way. Encouragements to say no to power, greed, certainty, despair. Sometimes it's just that clear! No matter the context or the hour or the trial, each and every time that scarcity and abundance are set before us, the Spirit of God hovers near with an invitation: *choose life*!

But it's not always that clear, right? I don't know about the decisions you have set before you on a regular basis, but I can tell you that from my experience, far too many decisions fall into that messy middle between "life" and "death." What do you do when you're choosing between two good places to donate your money, or lots of meaningful options about how to spend your time, or many great schools, or several paths out of a complicated situation? How do you know which is the "life" choice when they're all various shades of the same? How do you know when it's hard to discern a response? What do you do when you've made your pros/cons list, done your analysis, and trusted your gut, but the decisions still seem so hard that you just want to ignore them or decide quickly lest you languish in the liminal in-between? But then the hardest thing: what if the decision you choose ends up feeling wrong?

IV.

The late great singer Luciano Pavarotti said that when he was a boy, his father, a baker, introduced him to music. He urged Luciano to work hard to

develop his voice. Arrigo Pola, a professional tenor in his hometown in Italy, even took Luciano as a pupil. But not wanting to limit himself, Luciano also enrolled in a teachers college. After graduating, he asked his father, "Should I be a teacher or a singer?" "Luciano," his father replied, "if you try to sit on two chairs, you will fall between them. For life, you must choose one chair."

Pavarotti, later in life wrote: "I chose one. It took seven years of study and frustration before I made my first professional appearance. It took another seven to reach the Metropolitan Opera. And now I think whether it's laying bricks, writing a book, [or] whatever we choose, we should give ourselves to it. "Commitment," he says, "that's the key. Choose one chair."⁸

I love this story, because it speaks of the HOW of the decision-making process, reminding us that even when choosing between good options, the commitment to one drives the choice. Another encouragement I've heard before is to apply the "10/10/10 rule" to decisions we make, meaning how will I feel about the decision 10 minutes from now, 10 months from now, and 10 years from now? These are some ways to think about how we decide, but what might our faith tell us?

In her chapter from *Practicing Our Faith*, Shawn Copeland gives us some other things to try. We practice through **prayer**, she says, through the intentional setting aside of regular time to sit in the presence of God. Prayer gives us a mechanism to seek clarity of direction and discerning wisdom from God. We also practice through **personal reflection**, through examining our conscience for the purpose of deliberate meditation upon what decisions we've made in relation to our desire for a whole and holy life. This type of

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<https://guideposts.org/articles/inspiring-stories/stories-of-faith-and-hope/guideposts-classics-luciano-pavarotti-on-making-the-most-of-gods/>

inner work allows us to recognize patterns that might be unhealthy or destructive, so that we are equipped when they arise again. Finally, we practice through **conversation** with other Christian practitioners, faithful friends who share life together in beloved community. In these relationships with others, we find support and challenge where that old adage is profoundly true: “comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable.”⁹ Later this fall, we’ll add to these practices that of discernment, which sharpens our listening to the voice and invitation of God.

But if you find that HOW you decide isn’t the hard part, but WHY you say yes or say no is, here I’d add Brett Younger’s words. He said: “the choices [we face] are not usually labeled ‘life’ and ‘death.’ Most of our decisions do not seem important, but life and death are before us every day... Death is a slow process of giving ourselves to what does not matter.”¹⁰

So for those of you who need to practice the process of deciding, finding you too often get stuck and stressed, or for those of you who need reminding why the choice of life is one of abundance – the how or the why – here’s your homework to practice, and you’ll notice it sounds a bit like what Psalm 1 described for us earlier: when we are like “trees planted by streams of water that bear good fruits” of the Spirit.

Your homework is to choose love — doing the hard work of love and forgiveness and daily relationships with the people around you, including ones who have disappointed you, frustrated you, wounded you, or let you down. When you choose love, you say yes: yes to love, yes to God.

⁹ As described by Shawn Copeland in *Practicing Our Faith*, p68-72.

¹⁰ Brett Younger, “Deuteronomy 30:15-20,” FOTW, p341.

Choose joy — practicing a deep gladness instead of cheerful optimism through how you spend a free hour this week or what small delight you experience in nature. When you choose joy, you say yes: yes to joy, yes to God.

Choose peace — fiercely winding your way to restoration and reconciliation with someone in your life, even and especially when it's hard. When you choose peace, you say yes: yes to peace, yes to God.

Choose patience — calmly but persistently refusing the anxiety of racing through your schedule, your list, your day, your seasons, your desires, and your life with the frantic speed of this world. When you choose patience, you say yes: yes to patience, yes to God.

Choose kindness — practicing towards those around you the simple acts of compassion and grace as an extension of kindnesses shown to you. When you choose kindness, you say yes: yes to kindness, yes to God.

Choose generosity — letting go of the impulse of scarcity to hoard or manage or fragment or withhold, so that you abundantly give others your presence, your attention, your time, your resources. When you choose generosity, you say yes: yes to generosity, yes to God.

Choose faithfulness — practicing daily presence with those who matter. When you choose faithfulness, you say yes: yes to faithfulness, yes to God.

Choose gentleness — treating yourself and your life's traveling companions with mindfulness and intention and care. When you choose gentleness, you say yes: yes to gentleness, yes to God.

Choose self-control — actively resisting the seductive beckoning of your screen, your calendar, your vices, your despair. When you choose self-control, you say yes: yes to self-control, yes to God.

These might seem so simple, so straightforward, so obvious! But choosing these fruits of the Spirit of a living God over and over again build a life! **Beloveds, it is when you say yes to God, you *choose life so that you might live!*** Indeed, the choice before you is significant. The invitation is to choose a chair, choose to practice your faith, choose God, choose life! And the answer is yours: will you say yes, or will you say no? Amen!