

Special Section: From Guilt To Grace

You Can Say No (Without Feeling Guilty)

Even Jesus didn't do it all!

By Kevin A. Miller



Illustration by Stefano Vitale

Jesus clearly said, “Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you” (Matthew 5:42). Then to drive the point home, He added, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34).

Motivated by these clear commands and by Christ’s love, my wife, Karen, and I have thrown ourselves into ministry over the years. For four years, we helped lead a youth group. Then, Karen launched (and I assisted) a hospitality ministry that provided meals for church families in times of crisis. I’ve served as a church elder, with all the early-morning prayer meetings and grueling late-night discussions. Karen has counseled unwed pregnant teenagers, and we’ve invited people to live in our home.

Unfortunately, a couple of years ago, when Karen and I were both deeply involved in “people helping,” we got in over our heads. It seemed we were gone more nights than we were home. When conflicts sprang up in some of those ministries, our bodies began to tell us what we weren’t hearing any other way.

I developed a stress-related eye infection. Karen began having severe muscle cramping and pain in her shoulders and along her neck. One of our children began having problems with frequent urination. After testing her, the urologist asked, “Is there any extra stress in your household right now?”

That painful experience taught us a lesson. We need to give to others, but not to the point of neglecting ourselves and our families. There’s the dilemma: How can we be totally committed servants of Christ and also set healthy boundaries for ourselves?

How did we get in this mess?

If you don’t set healthy boundaries, sooner or later you’ll feel it.

Socrates warned about “the barrenness of a busy life,” and the cover of one Discipleship Journal described it: “You don’t know why you keep going anymore—you wonder if anyone appreciates all you’ve given. . . . Does it seem like you’re serving more but enjoying it less?”

When Karen and I reached that point, we began to search for ways to help others without killing ourselves. I began studying the Bible to see how Jesus handled people’s demands.

Once, the Bible says, Jesus “instructed his disciples to bring around a boat and to have it standing ready to rescue him in case he was crowded off the beach. For there had been many healings that day, and as a result, great numbers of sick people were crowding around him, trying to touch him” (Mark 3:9–10, LB).

Imagine the biggest football crowd you’ve ever seen. That’s what Jesus was facing. Every time He took a step back toward the lake, a thousand people took a step and a half forward. Jesus kept moving back, and back, until His heels were getting wet. He had to escape into a boat so the mob wouldn’t suffocate Him or drown Him.

That’s the kind of demand we sometimes feel from people who need help. How can we say no?

To survive that pressure, like Jesus, we need a safe place to minister from. We need to set a healthy boundary—climb into a dry, sun-warmed boat. That way, we can stay near people and continue to help them, but keep ourselves from being crushed.

What are those safe places? From my study, I found three key boundaries that Jesus established in His life.

Boundary 1: Listen to the Father, not the crowd.

When I feel out of breath from doing too much, I ask myself: *How did I get into doing all this? How did it all end up on me?*

The answer is interesting.

At first, I list the immediate reasons: The project took longer than I thought it would. I wasn’t planning on two people quitting the committee. Whatever.

But when I dig deeper, I usually find buried in my heart the real reason: I couldn’t say no. I wanted people to like me. My desire to help was partly a desire to love and help someone, but it was also my insecurity saying, “Love me! Affirm me! If I volunteer, step forward, help, maybe I’ll get that!”

You’ve probably discovered that our time and energy can never keep up with a desire for more approval. Soon our lives feel like an overstuffed glove compartment.

Jesus never operated that way. If He had, He would have had thousands of bosses, because literally thousands of people wanted His help. They wanted Him to come now.

But Jesus didn’t have a thousand bosses. He had one—His Father. Jesus did what His Father wanted Him to do. “I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. . . . As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me” (John 8:28; John 9:4).

Obedying His Father, Jesus sometimes helped people so much He didn’t even have time to eat (Mark 3:20–21)! He obeyed and gave up dinner.

But other times, Jesus’ Father must have said, “Leave those people behind and come away with Me,” because Jesus abandoned the crowds and went off by Himself, to pray and rest (see Matthew 14:22–23). He stepped away from people’s needs and into the Father’s loving presence.

It is hard to say no to people’s powerful requests.

“We need somebody who’s really talented to take charge of this, and we think you’re just the person who could do it.”

“Can you help me mail the invitations? It’s just this one time. Please? Everybody else has turned me down, and you’re my last hope.”

It’s hard to say no, because we want to be liked. But we can say no, if we can say yes to something even more powerful.

We can say yes to the God who perfectly loves and accepts us. He is ultimately the one true

director of our lives—not everyone who asks us to do something. If we know that God loves us, we can find from Him the strength even to endure people’s disappointment with us when we say no.

Sometimes I have turned down activities—good activities full of promise for God’s kingdom—because I felt God was not directing me to say yes to them.

Want to avoid burnout? One thing that protected Jesus—and will protect us—is listening to the Father, not the crowd. As you humbly obey the Father, you will find focus, the strength to say no, and a healthy boundary against insecurity-driven overcommitment.

Boundary 2: Find your specific mission.

God hasn’t asked us to do everything, to go everywhere, to help everyone.

Jesus had a specific, narrowly defined ministry. He didn’t try to do everything.

Jesus said He was called to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” the Jewish people. Yes, He is the Savior of the world, but His time and energy, while on earth, were poured primarily into the Jewish people.

While Jesus was on earth, the Roman Empire boasted 57,000 miles of roads—more than in our interstate highway system. Jesus could have traveled the Mediterranean world, as Paul later did, and seen Greece, Italy, Turkey, and Spain. People in all those places desperately needed Him. But Jesus stayed within one tiny chunk of the world, mostly within the regions of Judea and Galilee.

Why? That’s where the Jewish people were, and they were His primary calling. Jesus poured Himself out for people, but within the limits of the calling God the Father had given Him. He focused.

What is your focus? Your calling? As you stay within those, you will find yourself much less likely to overextend, to do too much, to burn out.

Let me share how this works in my life. Your callings will be unique to you and different, but maybe mine will spark your thinking.

One thing I know: God has called me to be a husband. That means He’s not going to call me to something that destroys my ability to lovingly care for my wife and my children.

For example, a few years ago, I was invited to join the board of a Christian organization. I really believed in the work, and I wanted to help. To me, even being asked felt like a dream come true. I was ready to start the day before yesterday.

But as I talked with Karen, she pointed out all the Saturday meetings and the evening phone calls that would come with the position. With her in graduate school, the family already felt stretched, and time for just the two of us was at a premium. She didn’t think I should join the board.

I did not want to hear that. I grumped at her and felt irritable inside. How could I say no to something that would please God and perfectly match my interests? For three days, I went back and forth between yes and no, not sure what to do.

What helped me finally make this grueling decision was to pray, “God, what specific things have You called me to do?” One answer was, “Love your wife and children. Support them and help develop their gifts.” If I joined the board, I realized, I couldn’t fulfill that very well. As much as it hurt to say no, I had to turn the opportunity down. My specific calling as a husband became a protective boundary.

I believe that another calling in my life is to teach. I will often say yes if asked to write an article for a magazine, teach kids on Sunday morning, or help my neighbor figure out her computer program.

But when that same neighbor needs help putting up drywall, I will probably beg out. Helping would be a great way to show Christ's love, but I can't do everything. I'm not especially good at hanging drywall, and I have to stay within my main areas of calling. As I do, I protect myself from burning out.

I can't emphasize enough how important it is to discern what God wants you to do and then stick with that. God will give you the strength for what He has specifically called you to do.

Boundary 3: Accept your human needs and limitations.

Ever read in the Bible something like, "Then Jesus departed from Judea and went to Galilee"? How did He do that?

There were no cars or planes. So he had to walk—miles. Walking miles takes a long time. You can't do much ministry during that time. All you can do is look at the countryside and talk with friends. In other words, recharge.

Or how did Jesus eat? There were no McDonald's drive-throughs. If He wanted a meal, He and the disciples had to catch fish, then clean the fish, then build a fire, then wait till the coals burned down. Only then could they cook the fish, let alone eat. During that time, there was nothing to do but sit and talk and smell the cooking fish. Recharging.

When the sun went down in Jesus' time, there were no electric lights. What do you do in such a situation? You lie on your back and look at the stars and think about the God who made them. Then you go to sleep.

For Jesus simply to make it through one day, He had to have slow times, rest times, recharging times.

Today, we have fax machines, and tape players in our cars, and phones, and even beepers. We have all these tools to be efficient, and we use many of them. Soon we wonder why we can't give to other people 22 hours a day.

God designed us with human limitations. We need to eat, sleep, and rest. We get sick and have to slow down. We need time to work hard but also time to play.

Yes, we may choose to sacrifice sleep in order to pray or give up food in order to serve people. But those situations tend to be exceptions, not rules. Overall, we have to live our lives and help people within our human needs and limitations.

Last fall, a couple we know was feeling turmoil and pain in their relationship. They asked if Karen and I could talk with them about it. We really wanted to, and we said yes.

But the night we were scheduled to meet, I came home with a pounding headache that only began to drum harder. Waves of nausea began to roll in my stomach. I realized I couldn't go.

We felt like we were abandoning friends who were drowning. But finally we had to call and say, "I know you're really looking forward to this, but we just can't make it."

A few days later, they called us. "We decided to talk through things without you," they said, "and God began to open up some things between us."

We couldn't believe it. We had been forced, kicking and screaming, to stay within our human limitations. But God wasn't limited. While we stayed home, He began to heal their relationship, and that healing has continued.

Jesus lived within His human limitations while on earth. Maybe it's okay if we do, too. To protect your life from "over giving," accept that you are mortal. God created you with the need to eat, sleep, and play. As you ensure those needs are not utterly neglected, you set a healthy, Christlike boundary in your life.

Writing Blank Checks

These three principles that I see in Jesus' life have helped me. Maybe the best way to explain how is to use a word picture of a checking account.

In the past, when someone would come into my life who needed help, I wanted to help the person, and so I would write him or her a blank check:

“Anything I can do for you, let me know.”

“Call me—no matter how late.”

“I'd love to get together with you anytime.”

I thought that was the Christian thing to do. I've discovered that, actually, that is an irresponsible and dishonest thing to do, and it ends up hurting people.

When I write a blank check on my time and energy, I let the person fill in exactly how much he or she wants to withdraw.

But what if the person wants to withdraw more time than I really have in my “account”—more emotional energy than I had saved up? Then one of two things happens:

1. I help the person, and on the inside, I feel mad and frustrated.
2. I realize I can't do it, and I renege on the promise: “Well, I know we said we could get together anytime, but really, I can't keep meeting every week.” And then the person gets hurt.

So now, before I give a verbal commitment to someone, I look at my account. I'd like to give the person a lot. But how much can I write and still have time to listen to a loving God? I need time with Him. How much can I write and still fulfill my specific callings as husband, parent, worker, teacher? How much can I write and still take care of my basic human needs for sleep, rest, and play?

I try not to overdraw my time-and-energy account. That only bounces checks. That only hurts people.

Where do we find the strength?

Although I try to set healthy boundaries for my life, God sometimes calls me to risk. If we are followers of Jesus, there are going to be times when we love people so much, we care more about their needs than our own.

On occasion we may do something “foolish,” outside the normal boundaries, because we feel God is calling us to. That doesn't undermine anything I've already said. It's simply a reminder that the Christian life is an adventure. To live it, we are going to have to depend on an adventurous, powerful God. He is the only true source of strength. He is the only one who can ultimately keep us from burning out.

Psalms 121 reminds us, “My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will not slumber” (Psalm 121:2–3).

Burnout is a real prospect. But the miracle of a Christian life is that we don't cross our mountains alone. We find help from the God who made the mountains. He will help us across.

Normally, you will want to stay squarely within the protective boundaries Jesus established. But there may be times when God is saying to you, “Call that lonely woman you met. Invite the couple for dinner. Join that group; it needs a Christian influence.”

You may feel, “How, God? I don't have the strength.” But if God is calling you, you will find His miraculous strength will carry you.

» **See Also:** *Sidebar: Do You Need To Set Boundaries?*



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