



"WHEN CAN I SAY 'NO' IN CHURCH LIFE?"

*Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you.
Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you
not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.*

1 Thessalonians 2:7-8

These are challenging verses because often we don't want to share our life with others; rather, we want to self-protect, and enjoy our own space and freedom. But Paul was delighted not only to share the gospel with those in Thessalonica but his life too!

In some cultures, it is very difficult to say 'No' to requests, especially from family and friends. When I taught English to speakers of other languages, we had a fun conversation lesson where the goal was to politely decline a request from another person for a personal favour. Some students found it almost impossible. Maybe you feel this as a ministry wife! You find yourself agreeing to do too much, and then you become overburdened and worn out.

"You agree to every request that comes your way: school fundraising, making meals for needy families in the church, taking on nursery duty, driving your kids to multiple sports events, sitting on multiple committees, and saying yes to work that you know you can't finish on time. You feel guilty or anxious when you are not running yourself ragged and consider yourself lazy if you even take 5 minutes to sit and have a break."
(Refresh, Shona & David Murray, p31)

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

How do you feel about saying 'No' or 'I'm sorry I can't do that'?

Where are there boundaries of service in Scripture?

Do you find you are overcommitted as a ministry wife?

What are the non-negotiable things you must do in your life?

THE UNAVOIDABLE

For every believer, the Christian life is one of sacrifice. The apostle Paul writes, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship.” (Romans 12:1-2)

Often ministry wives are involved in demanding, unglamorous, long-term, costly, inconvenient, unseen aspects of ministry. We need to deny ourselves and take up our cross as we live to glorify our Saviour. This is our unavoidable calling as Christians and as those engaged alongside our husbands in service within the church. We want to do this in joyful, thankful, response to all that Christ our Saviour has done for us, but it’s hard.

“A ‘living sacrifice’ is a strange expression. It means a sacrifice that goes on and on being offered, so long as life lasts... Perhaps the expression ‘sustainable sacrifice’ gets to the heart of the idea – the sort of self-giving living that God enables us to go on giving day after day.” (*Zeal without Burnout*, Christopher Ash, p26)

We need to make wise decisions and order our priorities well, so that we can go on ‘giving day after day’ for the long term.

THE UNTRUE

LIE 1: I AM INDISPENSABLE

In our minds we can subscribe to God’s sovereignty and believe that God’s power is at work despite us and without us, and yet, functionally, we can live under the illusion that we are indispensable to God’s kingdom purposes and feel that without our activity God’s purposes will fail.

LIE 2: MY WORTH IS IN MY SERVICE FOR GOD

Although we affirm that salvation is by God’s grace, his undeserved favour in Christ, we can live as if we are trying to earn our salvation or to merit God’s favour. Our works rather than God’s grace become the rationale for our actions. As a result, we don’t say ‘I’m sorry I can’t’ and we become overcommitted.

There may be other lies we believe. We need to examine our minds and our hearts in the light of God’s Word to see what is driving us to unhealthy patterns of living as ministry wives.

SAYING ‘YES’

Many times, the Bible tells us clearly what we are to say ‘Yes’ to. In the Old Testament, we find God’s rules for right living, the 10 commandments, which outline what pleases God. In the Gospels, Jesus shows us how these rules are perfectly lived out. The New Testament letters provide much practical direction for living. Here are some core things we should say ‘Yes’ to:

- **WORSHIP OF GOD** - Say ‘Yes’ to wholehearted devotion to our Lord. We are to have no other gods before him. So, we must prioritise personal time with the Lord, in his Word and in prayer each day, and attend corporate worship with God’s people. This will renew us for ‘sustainable sacrifice’.

- **SLEEP AND REST** - While God doesn't sleep (Psalm 121:3-4), we must! Unlike God, our strength is not inexhaustible; we need regular rest to renew our strength. We need daily, weekly, annual, and seasonal refreshment.

"We leave behind our frantic pace of life for a time to recalibrate our speed, to get a perspective on where we are going and why. We pause to remember God's role in our lives, to worship him for his all-sufficient grace, and to keep our eye on the ultimate horizon of eternity." (Refresh, Shona Murray, p100)

- **RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS** - We are to be faithful in marriage and grow in intimacy with our spouse: this takes time and intentionality. (see Adrian & Celia Reynolds' book *Closer*). Also, we are to honour our parents and, if we are blessed with children, we are to love and parent them wisely. God has made us relational beings. Good relationships and friendships are to be reciprocal as we give and receive the blessings of joy, love, and care.
- **GOD-GIVEN RESPONSIBILITIES** - Outside of the family, we may have other necessary commitments, for example, to our employers if we are in paid employment. These need to be factored into life and ministry and not be neglected.

SAYING 'NO'

We also need to be able to say 'No' if we are to establish some sensible boundaries.

We are always to say 'No' when we are tempted to sin, but there are other occasions when it is wise to say 'No'. All of us have limited capacity – we can't do everything and so choices must be made about where to invest our time and energy. It's helpful to appreciate that capacities vary from person to person. Some people have limited capacity due to other essential responsibilities, or a physical condition, or mental health struggles, whereas others are strong and energetic and have significant time available. But we are all human – everyone has a limit on what they can do.

For our physical, mental, and emotional well-being, each of us must readily admit at times that 'we can't...' and so, graciously, we decline an invitation to serve in a new demanding outreach ministry, knowing our work commitments mean we can't commit the time; or, we don't put our name down on a rota to provide childcare for a needy family, knowing we don't have the emotional capacity; or, we pray about a demanding pastoral situation rather than getting drawn in, knowing we don't have the mental capacity required for counsel; or, we provide a supportive home environment for our husband and children, rather than filling our free day with 1:1 Bible studies.

Saying 'No' to something enables a 'Yes' to something else, as we seek to order our lives to God's glory.

We might also say 'No' to let others grow in ministry. Ministry wives who are gifted in leadership and have significant pastoral experience can enable other women to grow in their God-given gifts by not responding to every opportunity to serve. We can weigh up the greater good of the body of Christ and seek to promote growth among the women of the church.

TRICKY TIMES

Sometimes it's hard to withdraw from an existing commitment. Commitments always involve people, and we feel we are letting others down or we shy away from the difficult and awkward conversations that are needed to extricate ourselves. If you are facing a difficult decision:

- Pray about your existing commitments and ask the Lord to help you order your priorities for his glory.
- Talk with your husband, be honest about how you feel. Listen to his helpful insights.
- Ask helpful questions of yourself – What is driving me to overcommit? Am I a people-pleaser rather than a God-pleaser?
- Be aware of unhelpful patterns, don't respond to that message or plea for help immediately, make sure you pause before committing yourself.
- Assess your weekly schedule to see what capacity you have.
- Build a team, especially when you are involved with those with complex problems.
- Guard against an individual who can monopolise you or place unrealistic expectations on you; there are those with complex needs that are too big for us.
- Be willing to make those tough changes, to ensure the sustainability of sacrifice.
- Depend on the Lord to supply all needed strength in the times you are overstretched.
- Thank God that he uses our weak efforts for his glory.

THINK IT THROUGH

1. What are you saying 'Yes' to each week? Make a list and ensure you are committed to the Lord in worship, to your family and friends, and to your work responsibilities.
2. Are you getting the sleep and rest you need?
3. How do you prioritise when you feel overcommitted?
4. Are there activities that you need to say 'No' to, so that 'sustainable sacrifice' can continue?
5. Can you testify to how God has worked in and through you when you have been confronted with your frailty? What have you learnt?