

“SEVEN WORDS THAT CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE:
VI – YES & VII – NO”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
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Exodus 20:1-17

Matthew 5:33-37

Those of us who are turning 65 this year graduated from high school in 1973. Those of us who went on to college that year witnessed a pretty interesting phenomenon. It was called streaking. For whatever reason, individuals thought it would be funny to run around the campus naked, eliciting hoots and howls from those hanging out dorm windows looking on.

I hadn't thought about that in a long time, until this week I was reading a sermon by a pastor who was preaching about putting on the full armour of God. You know the scripture – how it lays out all the parts of the armor a child of God should wear? The belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, shoes of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit.

Well, in this sermon the pastor said this: “I don't want any Christian streakers running around my church.” Then went on to explain that Christian streakers are those who only wear the helmet of salvation, not the full armor. (Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, p. 98)

He was trying to tell his congregation that the whole thing mattered – the whole armor of God – all parts of it were important. All parts were needed to make a whole person of faith.

Well friends, in much the same way, both words in today's sermon title – “Yes” and “No” are needed in the life of a person of faith, in the lives of Christians. In order to be a faithful Christian, as Jesus said, your “yes” needs to be “yes” and your “no” needs to be “no.” No waffling. “Yes” means “yes” and “no” means “no.”

Let me explain. Too many times Jesus was witnessing people saying, in essence, “Yes, but . . .” or “No, but . . .” In other words, their words were conditional, subject to rationalization or justification. And he didn't like it. Your “Yes” should be “yes” and your “No” should be “no” as a person of faith.

The Bible is filled with guidelines on how to live that way. Most important of all, in the life of a Christian, is the “yes” we say to Jesus. The “yes” we say when we give our life to him. “Yes, Lord, it's you and you alone who is the center of my being, to you I give my life, to you I yield my spirit.”

That “yes” then colors how we live, and everything that we do, including saying “yes” and living out what Jesus says are the greatest commandments – “to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself.”

And there are others which call for a “yes” from us, which we find when we turn to Exodus. Yes, we will keep Sabbath; yes, we will honor our parents.

But there are also “no’s.” No, we will not have any other gods but God himself; no, we will not bow down before idols; no, we will not take the Lord’s name in vain; no, we will not murder, commit adultery or steal; no, we will not lie or covet what someone else has.

The Bible is filled with guidance for us on the importance of character in the life of a person of faith, of being persons who keep our word, or rather, our words. Persons whose “yes” means “yes” and “no” means no.

These words of scripture are there for us, to guide us. Pastor James Moore put it this way: “The ethical guidelines of the Bible are not harsh rules laid upon us to restrict and hinder us. On the contrary, they are God’s gift to us to show us how life works best.” (James W. Moore, *There’s a Hole in Your Soul Only God Can Fill*, p. 44)

And oh, how I think we need to remember them, especially now, for we’re living in a time of moral uncertainty – a time when lying has become commonplace, a time when people rationalize their behavior, a time when truth is being questioned. A time when too many people, including people of faith, are saying “yes” but living “no.”

I read a rather startling sermon this week entitled just that, “Saying ‘Yes; While Living ‘No’” in which the pastor, Delmer Chilton, talked about the ways we Christians do that. I have to tell you that, as I read it, I thought there must have been a lot of people squirming in their seats that day.

He started first talking about Christians who don’t come to church and the excuses they make. He told about a pastor who received a letter from a family that had become inactive in his church in which they laid out the reasons for their various absences – like summertime at the lake, busy weekends with sports, vacation trips at Christmas and Easter. And then they closed the letter with this: “But one of these days, don’t be surprised when you look up and see us out there in the congregation, because we just love you, and we just love our church.”

Then Chilton said, “We just love our church;’ we just can’t be bothered with showing up and participating in any noticeable way. This is a pretty clear example of saying ‘yes’ while living ‘no.’ Wow!

He went on to talk about the hypocrisy of pastors who preach about tithing, while not giving anything to church themselves, because in their minds, they’re not making much money anyway. Saying ‘yes’ while living ‘no.’

Or, how about, Chilton said, “when I was growing up in the 60’s and my Sunday School teachers taught me to sing ‘red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight;’ and then I heard them standing in the church parking lot using the ‘n’ word in a mean and hateful fashion. Saying ‘yes’ while living ‘no.’

And one other – Chilton says, how week after week in worship we pray the Lord’s Prayer and we all say, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us;’ yet there are some who go on for years harboring resentments, nursing grudges, withholding grace and forgiveness and reconciliation while accepting it ourselves from God. Saying ‘yes’ while living ‘no.’ (On-line, Delmar Chilton, “Saying ‘Yes’ While Living ‘No,’ 9/22/14)

This life of discipleship, this life of faithful commitment to Christ, is not always easy, is it? It is far too easy, as Chilton says, to say “yes” to Christ but slip into living “no,” because we’re in a world that tempts us and that has normalized self-centered living.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of the greatest theologians in the past century, a man who worked tirelessly against the Nazis, wrote a seminal work on Christian faith and discipleship entitled *The Cost of Discipleship*. He was straight up about saying the life of a follower of Christ wouldn’t be easy, it would be costly. Saying “yes” and saying “no” would take courage, but he even went further.

One Sunday in 1938 he was preaching for a confirmation service, and he said this to those young confirmands: “you have only one master now . . . But with this ‘yes’ to God belongs just as clear a ‘no.’ Your ‘yes’ to God requires your ‘no’ to all kinds of injustice, to all evil, to all lies, to all oppression and violation of the weak and poor, to all ungodliness, and to all mockery of what is holy. Your ‘yes’ to God requires a ‘no’ to everything that tries to interfere with your serving God alone, even if this is your job, your possessions, your home, or your honor in the world. Belief means decision.” (On-line, Bonhoeffer: “Your “yes” to God requires your ‘no’ to all injustice, to all evil, to all lies . . .” No author noted in FB post)

Friends, as persons of faith, as those who have given our lives to Christ, whether we say “yes” or “no,” underneath both of those words is our commitment to live fully and faithfully the life he calls us to live. And when we do, we and others

experience full, real, abundant life. Life the way God created it to be, life where all of creation is loved and cared for, where honesty and goodness and character are the standard.

These two words, “Yes” and “No,” as you know, are the last two words in this sermon series, “Seven Words That Can Change Your Life.” We started off with “Thanks,” then went to “Sorry,” then to “Help,” “Enough” and “Wow,” and now finally, “Yes” and “No.” It is appropriate that these be the last words, because in the end they are words that encompass all of the other five. How we say those words, and how we live those words depends on first saying “yes” to Christ and then saying “no” to all that would draw us away from him.

I’ve told you more times than I can count that people are watching us. They are watching we who call ourselves Christians to see if we put our money where our mouth is – if our lives reflect the one in whom we say we believe. Do the words that come out of our mouths show others that we follow a Savior who lifts people up, who defends them, who respects them and cares for them? Do the actions we take show that we are not the center of our own universe but seek to live for others as Christ did? Are we people of integrity, whose “yes-es” mean “yes” and “no-s” mean “no”? People looking at us want to know what it means to be a follower of Christ. Do they see it, hear it, in our lives, our words, our actions?

This thing called discipleship is a tough calling. To be true to Christ, to live as he calls us to live, is tough – and it is, most assuredly, these days, counter-cultural. People are more surprised these days by someone doing something sacrificial than selfish. That’s why Facebook is filled with so many “feel good” stories – because they are too rare these days. The world calls us to take care of ourselves first, to do what we want, when we want. Lying is accepted, rationalization is a way of life, putting walls around ourselves and protecting ourselves is lifted up.

So, to be a follower of Christ today, is to go against the grain, but do it we must, because we’ve said “yes” to Christ. And the best news of all, is that he walks with us as we strive to be faithful. His Spirit will give us what we need to live the way we are called to live.

Friends, be strong in your faith. Put on the whole armor of God, and may your “yes” be “yes” and your “no” be “no.” In so doing, you will know the full and abundant life Christ lived and died to give you, and you will offer an invitation to that full and abundant life to others. May it be so.

Amen.

