

Say No To Say Yes

Jonathan Rue

Mark 8:34-38

07.26.09

'Live Upside Down' Series

Last weekend most of us went to the Breathe Festival 2009: Revolution. And if you did not get the chance to come out to Breathe, I hope that you will next year. We had a wonderful time of seeking after God in a big field together and hearing from Jay Pathak and Mike Erre who talked about how the gospel calls us to live in a radically different and revolutionary way. The call of Jesus to come and follow him is a call that challenges our cultural norms. It challenges our life of comfortable ease. It challenges our fears. And when we allow Jesus to really take hold of our life and do what He wants to do in us, the result should be that our lives begin to turn upside down. And as our lives begin to turn upside down, we begin to influence other people and see God begin to change their lives too. And so we join with the disciples who were described in Acts 17:6, I love the way the New King James version says this. It says

SLIDE:

Acts 17:6 (NKJV)

“...those who turned the world upside down.”

That was the description of the disciples in the early church were those people that turned the world upside down. We're starting a new series tonight called ***Live Upside Down***. Where we discuss together what it means in our lives, practically, to follow the radical, revolutionary words of Jesus. To follow in his lifestyle and begin to live out the way of Jesus in our own lives personally.

Phillip Yancey is a prolific Christian writer who wrote:

SLIDE:

“Taking God’s assignment seriously means that I must learn to look at the world upside down, as Jesus did. Instead of seeking out people who stroke my ego, I find those whose egos need stroking; instead of important people with resources who can do me favors, I find people with few resources; instead of the strong, I look for the weak; instead of the healthy, the sick. Is not this how God reconciles the world to himself?...God’s gifts are best used in the visible world when we give them away in serving those who have less.” –Philip Yancey

So the next several weeks, we're going to look at different aspects of the way that the world normally works and how God flips them upside down.

Well, tonight I'm going to go way out on a limb and assume that you like to say yes to you. Do you ask yourself questions that you love to say yes to? Should I have a dessert after dinner tonight? Why yes I should. Should I sleep in today, I'm really tired? Definitely yes. Should I buy a new pair of shoes, I'm kind of sad today? Yes.

We love to say yes to ourselves. We always look out for number one. The person we care most about is ourselves. And we do not like to deny ourselves anything. Any pleasure, any success, anything good in life, we want to experience it ourselves. And it is so counter-intuitive to us to tell ourselves no, to deny ourselves, to put limitations on our life, and to miss out on anything a life has to offer us. It just runs totally opposite of what every desire and motivation inside of us wants to do.

Yet when we come to Jesus, we are confronted with a problem. We discover that saying yes to ourselves has unforeseen consequences that make it impossible to say yes to Jesus in a full way. We simply cannot say yes to ourselves and yes to Jesus, just like we cannot say yes to McDonalds and lose weight. You see there are certain fundamental laws that are written into the way that reality works that you just can't get around. If you say yes to something, it means that you are saying no to something else. Example:

- You cannot say yes to sleeping in as late as you want everyday, and say yes to having a job. You can't do it.
- You cannot say yes to lusting after any woman you see, and say yes to a warm loving marriage. You are sleeping alone buddy. You just can't do it.
- You can't say yes to buying everything that you want, and yes to saving money for retirement & emergencies. And so I hope you know that you're not saving any money by getting 1% back on your Visa purchases. You still spending the 99%.
- You cannot improve your intelligence by watching Vin Deisel movies.

There's lots of things in life where it's got to be one or the other. And this is the same way in our spiritual lives, though it is something that you can be a follower of Jesus for a really long time before you come to figure out. Because it is easy to say yes with our lips but speak no with our lives. It's easy to say yes but mean no.

SLIDE:
When we say yes but mean no

We think that we are saying yes to Jesus, by believing that He is God and dies for our sins, so say yes with our lips but we never allow the Holy Spirit into our lives to change us. So our lives are speaking no.

I want to look at a parable, this fictional story that Jesus tells us in order to illustrate this point. Look with me in Matthew chapter 21 where Jesus is speaking in the temple courts to the chief priests and the elders. These are like the religious big shots. And they're asking Jesus some questions and then he tells this story to them.

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Matthew 21:28-32 (TNIV)

There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.'

29 "I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. 30 "Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go.

31 "Which of the two did what his father wanted?"

"The first," they answered.

So the first son says no, I'm not going to go. I like this guy. He's honest. He's not trying to just say the right words to please his dad. He's got the courage to say, no, I don't want to do what you're telling me to do. And I'm not going to do it. But then later on, he's convicted in his heart and he goes out and he actually does it. He works in the field.

The second son is a total people pleaser. He's terrified of actually confronting his dad with the truth that he doesn't want to go work in the field so he just tells him what he wants to hear. He says yeah, ok, I'll work in the field. That's what you want to hear. But then he doesn't go work in the field. And Jesus' question is fascinating. He says, which of the two did what his father wanted? And of course, the answer is the first son, the son that said no, but actually went out and worked in the field. What God is not looking for is for us to tell him what he wants to hear, but then go and do the opposite. He does not want us to say yes to him with our lips when we really mean no with our lives. What God is looking for is for us to say no in order to say yes.

SLIDE:

Saying no in order to say yes

God wants us to say no to ourselves in order to say yes to him.

This is way harder than saying yes. Tony Blair used to be the Prime Minister of Great Britain. And he said

SLIDE:

The art of leadership is saying no, not yes. It is very easy to say yes.
—Tony Blair

Isn't that true? It's so much easier to say yes to other people isn't it? Someone asks you, "Hey will you be at our party next week?" "Yeah man, totally." Even though you're pretty sure that you can't make it, but there's enough people coming that they probably won't notice. Those of you married folks out there, did people do this to you at your wedding? See now we're talking about real money. Just be honest with me, I'll forgive you for not coming to my wedding, but for saying you'll and so I buy you food and then not showing up, that's dangerously close to an unforgivable sin.

It is so much easier to say yes to ourselves, than to say no. Look at America, most of the population could lose a few pounds, let's be honest. But we're not a nation of athletes because the natural questions that we ask ourselves as human beings are not should I workout right now, but should I have more mash potatoes.

The hard part is saying no.

If we looked at the business world, we see so many companies have committed suicide by now saying no. Steve Jobs, the head of Apple Computer was speaking about the success of Apple and he said,

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"It comes from saying no to 1,000 things to make sure we don't get on the wrong track or try to do too much." - Steve Jobs

So many companies have started out on a successful track of doing something really well, but then they begin to add more and more different kinds of things and then they get so spread out and they are no longer doing the things really well. And so they can't stay competitive.

I love going to a restaurant that has a really small menu. Cheesecake Factory is just insecure. I mean they give you 75 page book that is bound and they call it a menu. Some of the best pizza I've ever eaten in my life was at a small little pizza shack in Naples, Italy. They made a grand total of two things, pizza with cheese and pizza without cheese. That was their menu. Their drink menu was larger than their food menu. There was four things you could order to drink. You could order a water, you could order a coke, you could order one type of beer or you could order one type of red wine. And that was the best pizza I've ever eaten in my life. My favorite hamburger place is in California. I don't know if they have

these up here, but it's called In and Out Burger. In and Out Burger doesn't have all of the options of McDonald's or Burger King. It has hamburgers, and cheeseburgers and French fries, sodas and shakes. That's it. But it's the best hamburger you're ever going to eat.

Well tonight I want to talk to you about how we can say no to ourselves in order to say yes to God and see the life of Jesus Christ take hold in our own lives. I've called tonight's talk Say No To Say Yes. Let's pray.

TITLE SLIDE:
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Well tonight we're going to take a look at a passage out of Mark chapter 8 where Jesus makes a profound statement about what it means to be his follower. Because to be a follower of Jesus really does mean something. It's not the same thing as saying I follow Cold Play, meaning I pay attention to what the band Cold Play is up to and when a new CD comes out I buy it. So yeah, I follow Cold Play. That's not what Jesus is talking about when he talks about people following him.

There's a deeper level of following Jesus that he is calling us into, beyond just having a vague familiarity with the stories about Jesus. But the "following" that Jesus calls us into also doesn't mean that we have to join a political party, start wearing a certain type of nerdy looking clothes and listen to certain angry talk radio stations and listening certain bland, imitative styles of music. There's so many cultural elements that have been tacked on to what it means to be a follower of Jesus, but when we listen to Jesus tell us himself what it means to be his follower it has nothing to do with memorizing great knowledge about him or changing our external appearance, but has to do what he calls becoming a "disciple" and the way that we do that is through the deep and painful act of dying to ourselves on the inside. Look at Mark chapter 8, starting in verse 34.

SLIDE:
Mark 8:34-37 (TNIV)
Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said:
"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. 36 What good is it for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul? 37 Or what can you give in exchange for your soul? 38 If any of you are ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of you when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

So Jesus is not calling us into a Christian club, he is inviting us to be his disciples. This word “disciple” means learner or apprentice. Like if you wanted to become an electrician, you would have to apprentice yourself to an electrician that knew what he was doing. So Jesus had 12 official disciples, that verse 34 references when it says that he called his disciples to him. But the best part of this verse is that it explicitly makes clear that Jesus didn’t just call the disciples and speak this to them, it says “he called the crowd to him along with his disciples.”

So this teaching is for the crowds following Jesus as much as it was for the official disciples. So though you might be tempted to excuse yourself from this passage because Jesus is so intense and using language that is so extreme that you might think that maybe he’s just talking to the elite disciples. But look at verse 34.

SLIDE:

Mark 8:34a (TNIV)

Then he called **the crowd** to him along with his disciples and said:
“Whoever wants to be my disciple...”

Whoever wants to be my disciple. This teaching of Jesus is not for the elite, it is for everyone. If you desire to be a disciple of Jesus, a learner of Jesus, an apprentice of Jesus, someone who is submitting their life to Jesus and saying I want to learn from you and follow you and shape my life around how you are living your life, than this text, this teaching is for you.

Jesus called the crowd to him and said whoever wants to be my disciple and now he’s going to proceed to give us the steps that we need to go through to say no to ourselves so we can say yes to him. And the first step in that process is to deny ourselves.

SLIDE:

Saying no in order to say yes

Step 1: Deny

And we see this in verse 34.

SLIDE:

Mark 8:34b (TNIV)

Whoever wants to be my disciple **must deny themselves...**

Now this is an unpopular teaching. This is something that flips the tables on how we want to live our lives. We don’t want to deny ourselves. We don’t want to tell ourselves no. We want to tell ourselves yes. Am I alone in this? The natural tendency is to desire our own success and enjoyment and Jesus is heading in

exactly the opposite direction by telling us that if we are going to follow him, we've got to deny ourselves.

Now a fair question is, Jesus what do you mean? What does it mean that I've got to deny myself? Deny myself what? All forms of pleasure and entertainment so Christian are marked by never going to the movies or eating ice cream? I don't think that is what Jesus is saying. And praise God for that. Because I would do that for God, but I am also really glad that that is not what he is asking. No, what Jesus is asking is not that clean cut and formulaic. It would actually be way easier if we know several discreet things that God wanted us to give up. But God is asking for something way harder than giving up ice cream. He is asking us to deny our right to have things our way. He is asking us to deny our own agenda and desires in our life. He is asking us to put Jesus first above all else. That means that Jesus is more important than your career, Jesus is more important than you finding a husband or a wife, Jesus is more important than how you look, Jesus is more important than your friends.

Denying ourselves means that in relationship with other people, we are not to put our own self-interest first, but we are to totally focus on the interests of others and put them out ahead of our own. For the apostle Paul, this self-denial is part of the very definition of what it means to love someone else. In I Corinthians 13, he says this

SLIDE:

1 Corinthians 13:4-5 (TNIV)

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It does not dishonor others, **it is not self-seeking**

Love is not self-seeking. Love looks to the interests of others. So let me bring that down into real life, because you probably don't know someone named "other." I just got married, and so I am on the front lines of learning how to put another person above me every moment of every day. Because that's what marriage is all about. Now of course, it's a whole lot easier because the person that you are learning to put above yourself, you are also madly, deeply, terribly in love with. But even with that being the case, it is still a learning process to put someone else's interest above your own. This is such an upside down revolutionary thing to do, that you really have to train yourself.

For example, for 30 years I have been a single man, and so I have made my own sandwich to take to work for lunch. Now you might think that as a married man, who works at the same place as his wife that I might think as I am making my sandwich in the morning, "I wonder if Staci would like a sandwich today too?" You would be incorrect. I initially did not put Staci's lunch interest ahead of my own. That just was not the natural thing for me to think. I was too busy considering what kind of potato chips I wanted and if I preferred spicy brown mustard or plain yellow mustard on my sandwich today.

And this is exactly what Paul is talking about in 1 Corinthians 13. Marriage isn't about saying some vows and having a great honeymoon, which we did. Marriage is about the nitty gritty moments all day long where our selfishness is exposed by this wonderful person that God is sovereignly and graciously using to teach us how to put the interests of others first.

A few months back, some friends of ours were telling Staci and I about how much they loved marriage and some of the things that they do to love one another. One thing that they mentioned that Staci and I have adopted is that whenever your spouse asks you to do something with them, you say yes automatically, unless there is something that truly makes it not possible. But if you are reading and in a riveting part of your book, and your wife says "I'm going to the store, wanna come?" You go. If you're watching your favorite TV show and your husband asks you to go for a walk. You go. This can be incredibly inconvenient, but just about the best thing that you could ever do for your marriage because it values the other person over yourself and sends a clear message that they are more important.

So for Paul, self-seeking is the opposite of love. And it's such a big deal to Paul that he continues in Romans chapter 2, he describes it this way.

SLIDE:

Romans 2:7-8 (TNIV)

To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he [God] will give eternal life. 8 But for those who are **self-seeking** and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.

Selfishness is a big deal to Paul. It's a big deal to Jesus. It's a big deal. And it is a mark of growing in our faith and our faithfulness to Jesus Christ that we move away from selfishness, from self-seeking and we begin the hard work of turning our lives toward Jesus Christ and toward other people.

Think about an infant child. When you were born, you were totally self-seeking. And that wasn't a bad thing because you didn't know any different. But babies are the most selfish creatures in the world. They want what they want and they want it now. They don't care if it's 3am and it's inconvenient to be waking you up, they want to eat. They give no thought to how that impacts the sleep patterns of their parents. They give no thought to the fact that this might be an inconvenient time to scream right in the middle of mom and dad having a really important conversation. Babies just don't care that you're really into this TV show and you want to see how this movie ends. They only care about themselves. But they're babies, so it's totally alright. They don't know any better.

But, if that baby begins to grow up and never becomes aware of other people and never begins to think about how their actions might impact other people, then you have 20 year old babies and 30 year old babies where the world revolves only around them. You know these people, right? Maybe you are one of these people. I had a roommate in college one time that liked to play his music full blast in his room at odd hours, really late at night, he would play his music and he would just blast it so it was shaking the walls. And there was time after time after time I was woken up out of my sleep at 2am, woken up to this loud noise. I go and bang on his door and he opens up his door and looks at me and says, "What?" And I would say, "Could you please turn your music down? You just woke me up." And with a look of irritated disgust and disdain, he would say, "fine. I'll turn it down." And then he would proceed to lower it by one volume notch and slam his door shut. Not exactly a picture of self-denial. He didn't have an awareness of other people. And how his life was affecting others. He just wanted to listen to his music really loud.

So it's not that he was trying intentionally to wake everybody else up and to irritate everybody else. He just was so focused on what he wanted that he couldn't even see how it might negatively impact other people. And we do this all the time in our lives. We're not maliciously trying to hurt other people. We're not trying to neglect other people and cause pain for other people, but we just simply don't think about other people. We're just so consumed thinking about our own live, our own desires, thinking about all of the things that we want in life, that we don't recognize all of the missed opportunities to get involved in the lives of other people and make a difference. To help other people. To listen to other people. To be there when your friends need you.

Are you willing to be inconvenienced by your friends? Are you willing to be put out a little bit by the people in your small group that might have a need that would interrupt your weekend? Sorry I had a nice little Saturday planned. I can't help you move tomorrow. I'm just going to go to the park. Jesus says whoever wants to be my disciple must *deny themselves*. If you want to live out the revolutionary, counter cultural teaching of Jesus, start putting others first and see what happens.

And so we are called into denying ourselves, but it's not just a denial for the sake of denial, but we are denying ourselves, our own agenda, our own desires and wants so that we might *take up* the desires and the agenda of Jesus.

SLIDE:
Saying no in order to say yes
Step 2: Take-up

Look at this in the second part of verse 34.

SLIDE:

Mark 8:34b (TNIV)

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and **take up their cross...**

And so Jesus tells us that we're not just supposed to deny ourselves for the sake of denying ourselves so that we're just some miserable aesthetic who spends our life sitting in a cave somewhere. Jesus says the first step is denying yourself in order to make room for the second step of taking up our cross. Now what Jesus means by this is that *we take up the mission and the ministry of Jesus*. We step into the way of Jesus that led him somewhere that he did not want to go: to suffering and excruciating death on a cross in order to bring forgiveness for our sins.

And as we take up our cross, what that means is that we step into the way of Jesus and that we take on things that we might not want to do for the sake of the mission and purpose of God. You see the question that you should be asking yourself about your life is not how good is my life? How happy am I in my life? How well are things going? The question that you should be asking yourself is, am I taking up my cross? Am I taking up the mission and purpose of God over my life?

The central concern of Jesus was not whether or not he was going to have to suffer. He was concerned about that, but that was not his central concern. The central concern of Jesus was doing the will of his father in heaven. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus cries out, "Father take this cup of suffering from me. I don't want to go through the pain and the suffering of the cross." "But," Jesus says, "not my will but yours be done." That is the central concern. If we are to follow Jesus and be a disciple of Jesus, we take up the purpose of God, of his kingdom expanding here on earth. Of his kingdom expanding in your life.

Do you know that God has sovereignly ordained your neighbors to live next to you. He has sovereignly put into place your co-workers, your friends at school for you to step into the purpose of God, of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with those who don't know him. One of the clearest and loudest purposes of God in the Bible is that everyone might come into a relationship with him. And God wants you to step out into that purpose, to take up the mission of God and share your faith with you friends.

So God invites us into his mission and purposes, even those that might be very uncomfortable for us. But it's so easy for us to still twist God's agenda and think that we're actually doing the ministry of Jesus and taking on the agenda of Jesus, but actually it's just a re-packaging of our own desires. Let's jump back to that story of the two sons again. Jesus is speaking to the religious officials in the temple courts and he's telling the parable about the two sons. The one son that says no and then does go out and work in the field and then the son that says yes but does not go out and work in the fields and we see in Matthew 21.

SLIDE:

Matthew 21:31-32 (TNIV)

31 “Which of the two did what his father wanted?”

“The first,” they answered.

Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32 For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

So, what Jesus is telling them, the religious officials, the people that think they're following God, he says, you've missed it. You were the people that said yes, but didn't obey your father. When these people, the prostitutes, the sinners, said no, they're lives are an open no. I'm not going to be obedient to God. Yet, when the message of John the Baptist, who preached the righteousness of Jesus Christ, they responded to that message in their heart and yielded their life over to God. And so they have entered the God ahead of you.

And those of us that have been Christians awhile...we know all about church, we know all about the bible, we know all about how things go. It's so easy to twist Christianity back into our own agenda and our own desires, so that we receive what we need through the church and through other people and through feeling holy and righteous and when we judge other people instead of taking up the real purpose and mission of God. It's not so that we can wield all kinds of power and influence and look like really important people. It's so that the kingdom of God might go forward.

And what it looks like for you to participate with God in pushing the kingdom of God forward might mean that nobody sees what you're doing, that you get no credit from anybody at church or anybody in the community for the things that you're doing. You might not get honored for what you're doing. But God sees. And God's asking you to have a conversation with your neighbor. God's asking you to go out and to serve the homeless, to be a tutor to an English as a second language student in our community center. To reach out and to be a part of the ministry of Jesus. So the first step is self denial, the second step is taking up our cross. And the third step.

SLIDE:

Saying no in order to say yes

Step 3: Follow

The third step is to follow Jesus. We see this is the next statement of Jesus in verse 34.

SLIDE:

Mark 8:34b (TNIV)

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross **and follow me.**

This is how we know that we're not pushing our own agenda. We're not repackaging our own desires and calling it the mission of God. We can know that we are taking up our cross if we're following Jesus, if we're pointing our lives directly at Jesus. Not Jesus and success at work. Not Jesus and a huge house full of beautiful children. Not Jesus and personal fulfillment. Just Jesus alone. The rest of that stuff will come, because God is good and he blesses our lives. Some people he blesses with big houses some people he blesses with having landlords their whole life who will fix stuff for them. Some people God blesses to have kids of their own, some people God blesses with being able to adopt kids because they couldn't have any of their own. Some people God blesses with their own kids and adopted kids.

All of these things in life can distract us from following Jesus, who is himself the most important thing in life. And you will never be in a better place to follow after Jesus in a radical way than you are right now. Never. Once you get a mortgage, or a larger mortgage, and more cars payments and more mouths to feed and have to worry about childcare and school districts and helping with homework, following Jesus gets more and more challenging. Radical discipleship happens through all of those things, but the temptations for veering away from Jesus increase.

And one easy way to know that we're headed toward Jesus is if we're helping other people. If we're caring about other people. Jesus was the man for others.

And I want to leave you with a picture of somebody that got it right. Somebody that knew what it was to deny himself, to take up his cross and to follow after Jesus. Paul speaks to us in the book of Philippians about a man named Timothy. And Timothy was a student of Paul. He was being mentored in leadership underneath Paul. And Paul tells us in Philippians 2:19 about what kind of a quality leader Timothy is.

SLIDE:

Philippians 2:19-22 (TNIV)

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. 20 I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare. 21 **For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.** 22 But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel.

May that be said of me one day. May that be said of you. But I want to focus on these two verses.

SLIDE:

Philippians 2:20-21 (TNIV)

I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare. 21 For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.

Paul says I have no one else like him who will show genuine concern for your welfare. Timothy is not a people pleaser. He's not doing things outwardly for a show in order to get credit, but inwardly not giving his heart to it. No, he genuinely gives his heart to the work of the kingdom and has genuine concern for the welfare of the people in Philippi. And Paul says this is because of his concern for Christ. Verse 21, he says for everyone looks after their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But Timothy looks out for the interests of Jesus Christ and that's why he shows genuine concern for the welfare of the Philippian Christians.

That's a great test for you. And for me. If we really are following Jesus, if we really are denying ourselves, denying our own interests, for the sake of the interests of Jesus, the way that that has visible demonstration is in the genuine care and concern that we have for other brothers and sisters in Christ. And our care and our concern for those that don't yet know Christ. Is your life pointed outward toward others? Is it pointed toward Jesus?

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When we say yes but mean no

Saying no in order to say yes (v. 34)

Step 1: Deny

Step 2: Take-up

Step 3: Follow