

**"How To Say No!"**  
**(Matt 4:1-11)**  
**March 6, 2022**

Lent is about choices. However, the options to choose this year have become extremely limited than ever. Is the COVID pandemic over already? No. Has global access to affordable COVID vaccines been realized already? No. Is there a solution to food insecurity for vulnerable people locally and globally, especially amid the current crises? Again, no. The United Nations, which has 193 member States, is an intergovernmental organization. Its Charter has 111 articles grouped into 19 chapters, mandates the UN and its member to maintain international peace and security, uphold international law, achieve "higher standards of living" for their citizens, and lots more. Do you sense the leadership of the UN in the crises of COVID-19, the world food problem, the invasion of Ukraine, and other current urgent world issues that require rapid supportive responses? No again. We know that the number of these global issues is innumerable, and the complexity of the problems is simply beyond our imagination. It seems that it doesn't need any effort to say "No." However, are we satisfied hearing the same answer "No" as a standard answer to all the critical issues?

More than two thousand years ago, Jesus was facing the same impasses. In the parable of the lost son (Luke 15: 11-32), Jesus made it clear what the son preferred to do when he was starving. He even ate the pods for the pigs. When he remembered how easy it was to get food at home, he didn't mind saying sorry and being humiliated, not anymore. Then he did something he could still do. He made up his mind and returned home. It's clear what motivated him. He wanted to have a second chance and to get better. The Canaanite woman Jesus met knew

no Jews would help her, but she still dared to ask Jesus, a Jewish rabbi, to heal her demon-possessed daughter. (Mark 7:24-29; Matt 15:21-28) She was desperate for her daughter's well-being. She was motivated to approach the rabbi, open her mouth and ask. The woman with hemorrhages, the lepers, the blind men, and others Jesus met were all desperate. They dared to cross the boundaries to ask for help. Some even had physical contact with Jesus because they all share the same motivation - to become better.

For a short while, Jesus did have hesitation about whether he should meet all these needs. He had to choose whether to stick to the principle, serving his people only (Matt 15: 24), or reset his priority, helping all he encountered. We all know what he chose, which was reflected in his answer to the first temptation, "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" To tell the stones to become bread was a temptation to Jesus because he could do it. On top of that, he was hungry after forty days and nights in the wilderness. He was hungry and needed food. That made the situation a real temptation. However, instead of the easy way, he found another way to deal with it. He found the "word that comes from the mouth of God" more meaningful. He was inspired to say no to the drive that motivated him to say yes.

Some might say, "Good for you, Jesus, because you trusted the bible. But I don't." Could the solution Jesus found be beneficial to all? First of all, Jesus was not a Biblicist. He was not a guy who followed the scripture literally. I think that has something to do with how he learned, felt, and lived. Jesus was very sensitive to people's feelings, and he was also very creative with the scripture.

Do you realize that our society tends to worship written words? Many years ago, my son Felix had nose bleeding. I couldn't stop the bleeding and needed to

call 911. The paramedic came, they tried to stop it, but it was unsuccessful, so they advised bringing him to the hospital and letting a doctor deal with it. I agreed and followed the ambulance with my vehicle. When the ambulance was almost there, Felix's nose bleeding stopped. So, I saw Felix walk out of the ambulance by himself into the ER. According to the regulation, the use of the ambulance in his case was deemed medically unnecessary. So I got slapped with a bill of about \$200.

Most of us have home and automobile insurance. But, how many of us know how to interpret an insurance policy when there's a claim? It's frustrating, most of the time. And there are always arguments, even between professionals. As a Chartered Insurance Professional (CIP), I was in the middle of these messes before.

"Every word that comes from the mouth of God." Jesus relied on that to control the exercise of his power. He could set his needs in priority easily by just using the power within his control to make it happen. But he said "No" to that. Does the "word" equivalent to the written scripture or the word through the mouth of a prophet? Most faith seekers, including religious institutions, believe that God's word means the written scripture. The reason is simple, something written is always easier to manage and handle. Is it true, though? No. The written words provide us mainly an environment where the arguments could start. It happens with the contracts that affect our daily living, and the written scripture is no exception.

Jesus knew very well these frustrations and where they originated. It's the nature of the whole creation. God said it's good, but it's also imperfect. We are social animals, and we enjoy more living in a society. We want freedom because

we feel restraints when living together. However, the only time "freedom" would make sense to us is when we know how to limit ours so that others can have theirs. Paul summarized the human predicament in a few words, "What I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." (Romans 7:15) Jesus' solution to that was to take your life, the control back from the drives within us, the reasons why we are motivated. To regain one's ability to say "No" to one's legitimate needs is the first and most crucial step. The written words capture a certain part of the realities, but they are not the realities they represent. The written word is subject to human manipulation, but the living word of God shouldn't be.

With little understanding of the human hearts, "You shall not murder," "You shall not commit adultery," "Do not break your oath" have little relevance to most people. However, by deepening the implication of these sayings to address the God-given faulty human nature, Jesus made the word of God alive and contemporary. (Matt 5: 17-37) When someone is coercing us to do something in the name of the bible, Jesus offers alternatives, "It is also written ..." (Matt 4: 7) somewhere with something else. "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only." (Matt 4: 10) Worship and Service come hand in hand. Walk the walk, talk the talk. "Reveal who God is, and set the world right." (The Message) That's one interpretation of "Hallowed be your name." If it makes sense to you, make sense to those around you, and bear witness to it through your actions. Politely say "No" to something that creates dependency and take action to become independent. Slowly say "No" to become dependent on provisions and start planning to be providers. God's gift is abundant, and it'll take some time for our scarcity mindset to comprehend it.

It's storytime again.

A spiritually reputable man came to the master. He said, "My prayer has become weak, my understanding of the scriptures is no longer sharp, and the spiritual exercises I prescribe I can no longer follow. What should I do?"

The master said, "Then give it all up."

"But how can I? People believed I was a holy man. So I shouldn't upset them."

Then the master sighed, "Today, holiness has become just a name but unreal. It is genuine only when it's real. So there's no need for a name as such."

Lent is about choices. God fully understands our limitations. May God help us choose the right ones, if not now, then later. Amen.