

THE ANSWER IS NO!

A Sermon by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Psalm 32:1-7
Matthew 4:1-11

February 22, 2026

Within each of us there are certain guidelines or we might say, "No, No's" that help regulate the way we think and act. These "No, No's" are necessary for a healthy and basically happy life. For example, if you have a toddler around the house, you know only too well how the "no's" seem to flow out of your mouth one after the other...

NO, that's breakable

NO, don't touch it's hot

NO, don't put that into your mouth

NO, don't go into the street after your ball.

NO, you cannot eat candy for breakfast

We try to make sure our children understand that "No" means "no," so don't do it. They may not like to hear that response, but they learn early that our response to their questions and behavior is sometimes "No." As our children grow older, the "no's" may come a little less often, but they are no less necessary, even if they are often perceived as being unreasonable and placing too many limits on what they want to do.

NO, we tell our 8-year-old, you are not old enough to ride your bike to a friend's house in another neighborhood by yourself.

NO, we tell our 12-year-old, you cannot hang out with your friends until 10 o'clock on a school night.

NO, we tell our 16-year-old, you must stay away from drugs and alcohol

NO, we tell our college-age kids, we will not help pay for college if you do not keep up your grades.

We drum these "no's" and so many others into our kids' heads while we have them at home, hoping and praying that our lectures and lessons will sufficiently sink in. And we hope they will carry those "No" lessons with them wherever they go in life. If we've done our job successfully, perhaps little "guilt-bombs" will detonate in their hearts, minds and souls whenever they are confronted with potentially dangerous and ethically questionable situations. As parents, we hope our "no's" will help them say "no."

Each of us, from childhood through adolescence, through young adulthood, middle age and into older age, we all face situations and questions in which the right answer, the answer God is looking for from us is "no." We might try to avoid that response, because saying "yes" may seem more popular, attractive, fun and easier at the time. And yet, even though Jesus' ministry was characterized by many "yes's" such as "yes" to children, "yes" to sinners, "yes" to doing good on the Sabbath, "yes" even when it made the leaders of the day angry, he also knew how and when to say "no." And when Jesus said "no," he meant NO. There was no "maybe" about it. There was no "let's see what others

think.” There was no taking a vote and tabulating for the purpose of coming up with the most popular response. When Jesus said “no,” he meant NO.

It was before Jesus’ official ministry of teaching and calling disciples that he firmly established the “no’s” that would guide his ministry. Right after his baptism by John in the river Jordan God’s Spirit led him into the Judean wilderness. There in the wilderness, in what we would consider a desert setting, Jesus spent forty days praying and fasting. I don’t think any of us can really imagine what that was like for Jesus. Perhaps the first couple of weeks, Jesus said his prayers standing up. Then when his legs gave out, he said them sitting down and finally, near the end, he said them while laying flat on the ground with his belt pulled as tight as it would go. It was at this later time, towards the end of the 40 days, when Jesus was hungry and weak that the devil showed up for a visit.

You see, temptation tends to show up at our weakest, most vulnerable moments. Satan knew better than to start when Jesus was fresh and well fed having just experienced God’s blessing and affirmation at his baptism. So, he waited for Jesus to come down from his spiritual high, and he waited until Jesus had run out of his own resources and was in a tired, depleted state. He waited until Jesus might just be open to accepting a little outside advice and help. This is exactly when temptation comes to most of us as well. It is when we are caught up in a difficult situation and are desperate for relief. It is when we are lonely, hungry, tired, discouraged, angry, yearning for acceptance, craving power; it’s when we are vulnerable in some way that temptation comes nipping at our heels, making suggestions that often seem so reasonable and even justifiable.

For Jesus, it had been forty days and forty nights with no apparent sign of God. The sky had stayed shut. There was no dove descending – no voice from heaven speaking reassuring words. There was just Jesus, the desert, the heat, the insects, the wild animals, and finally, temptation. Ever so subtly, it’s suggested that Jesus deserves better than what God was giving him. Why should the Son of God be famished? Why should he so much as stub his toe, or be subject to anyone else when everyone should be subject to him? If God was not going to do better than that when it came to his Son, then the devil suggests that maybe Jesus should start shopping around for someone who would take better care of him than his heavenly Father – a Father who seemed absent at a time when Jesus was struggling and needed care.

Satan is so smart. Everything he asks Jesus to do in and of itself is not necessarily bad – in fact, it’s basically good. After all, bread is good. Human beings need to eat. Think of what the world would be like if we had the ability to turn stones into bread. Likewise, the suggestion that Jesus throw himself down from the top of the temple has the potential of reassuring Jesus of God’s abiding presence and care. Sometimes we all want to experience that reassuring presence. We want to know that God is close by and ready at any time to swoop in and rescue us. We want to know that God will lift us up and carry us through difficult times. And even the temptation for more power, specifically political power is not necessarily a bad thing. Being able to influence others and society

for good is not bad. Such power can impact communities and the world in ways that make them better. Despite our often negative feelings toward politicians these days, there are laws and legislation and programs that do a lot of good. Political power in the hands of the right person has the potential of being a good, right, and just thing that honors God.

But Jesus sees deeper than the attractive words and the seemingly innocent suggestions. For God is not a reflection of our wants and needs and desires. God has plans for us; God has commands and obligations for us that are meant to be taken to heart. Yes, we believe God cares about us and meets our needs, but we also believe God changes our needs and gives us a heart for that which we would not have considered if we were not committed to serving God. God has some very specific, very particular expectations of us – you could even call them demands. And honestly, we know that not everything we want is what God wants for us. All our ways are clearly not God's ways.

I assume most if not all of you know at least something about the Academy Awards. The annual awards night is only three weeks away, and it is always a big night for the entertainment business and for those nominated to receive an award. Back at the 1997 Academy Awards, Billy Bob Thornton was interviewed for his writing, directing of and starring in the award-nominated 1996 movie "Sling Blade." When asked what he would do if he won an award. Thornton replied that he would thank his parents. Knowing that he is a man of faith, the reporter asked, "Would you thank God?" "No," replied Thornton. "God has got better things to worry about than my Oscar. God isn't here to help me get an Oscar. God is here to be obeyed."

Obeying God means knowing when to say "yes" and when to say "no." Satan knows all too well our individual weaknesses. He knows our desires that are not God's desires, and we are tempted accordingly. Jesus was tempted to use his powers selfishly. And yet, despite that very real temptation, Jesus was able to reach down deep within himself and say "NO." No, "*One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God*" (Matthew 4:4). We do not live by something as basic, as essential as food. Instead, there is a hunger that is deeper and more profound which needs to be satisfied. We have been given life not simply to feel good and happy and satisfied. We are also here to bend our will towards God, to obey God.

Jesus also found the strength to say, No, "*Do not put the Lord your God to the test*" (Matthew 4:7). We are not to get ourselves into situations in which we then expect God to bail us out. True faith is not dependent on signs and wonders. It is not daring God and then expecting God to respond to our beck and call. Jesus trusted in God's rescuing power without testing to see how far God would go.

Finally, Jesus said, No, "*Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him*" (Matthew 4:10). Only God is worthy of our worship; power and money and popularity are not worthy. Just think of how many followers Jesus might have had if he would have just bent himself a little to the world. A little bit of compromise might have gone a long way in not alienating so many important,

and powerful people. But Jesus could not change the world by becoming like the world. And in the same way, we cannot defeat evil by compromising with it.

It's true that the specific temptations that Jesus faced are not ours to face, because we have neither his power nor position. And yet, in many different ways you and I are faced daily with temptations that encourage us to think of ourselves first. We are tempted to use whatever influence or power we have to benefit ourselves above others. And despite the choices we make, we expect God to respond immediately and to rescue us from all the difficult situations we get ourselves into. We expect God to fix all the broken relationships in which we had a part in breaking. We expect God to go above and beyond to prove his love and his desire to save us, like he hasn't already done so in Jesus. If honest, we probably need to admit that we are often tempted to give our devotion to and place our faith in someone or something other than God if we think we might benefit in some way. Of course, most often this temptation confronts us in very subtle ways so as not to cause our defenses to go up. And that's because the goal of temptation is not for us to fight it, but for us to give in to it.

When temptation comes at us in dramatic and obvious ways, our defenses tend to immediately go up, and we are more likely to stand our ground and fight. That is unless the fear factor kicks in and has us turning around and running in the opposite direction. Both responses are natural responses when we are scared or feel like we are being attacked. But ohhh, we need to watch out for those sneaky, subtle temptations that don't seem all that bad! We like to tell ourselves that God won't mind if I choose sleep or other activities over worship; God doesn't need me to make time for prayer since God already knows what I'm thinking; God can see that I don't have time in my busy day to read the Bible; God loves me and wants me to be happy, so God certainly doesn't expect me to sacrifice anything for him or for others. These are the subtle temptations of life that can so easily turn into a way of life for each one of us.

I remind you now of how this story of Jesus' temptation ends. It doesn't end with the fulfillment of Jesus' every desire and apparent success. Yes, he passed with flying colors the wilderness temptations, but his life ended violently, painfully on a cross. The story ends with Jesus doing what Jesus did out in the wilderness – placing himself and his life into his Father's hands. His years of learning and preparing for ministry, his time away in prayer and fasting helped him to say "no" when it meant disobeying God. After this wilderness testing, Jesus' loyalty to his Father's will was firmly established. Jesus would carry out God's plans, not his own, not Satan's, not anyone else's. Jesus would not allow anyone or anything to sabotage his relationship with his Father.

But what about us? It is so easy to sabotage our relationship with our heavenly Father. It's so easy for us to justify and to choose our own desires and comfort over God's will, but Jesus tells us not to do it. In the face of temptation that is contrary to God's purposes – that is contrary to loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and loving our neighbor as ourselves, Jesus gives us the correct answer. Here at the end of my message, I think all of us know the correct answer. Let's say it together, "The Answer is NO!" Amen.