

Counselor's Toolbox

Help for Those Who Can't Say No



by TODD STRYD

Maria walks into her first counseling session visibly drained, explaining that she's "been saying yes to everyone but herself." She goes on to say that she wants to learn how to set healthy boundaries with her family and coworkers without feeling guilty. She laments that she often ignores her own needs to avoid conflict and make everybody else happy, leaving her emotionally drained and resentful. Maria then asks you for help to learn how to say no so she can focus on herself for once.

As counselors, we inevitably find ourselves swimming in the rhetoric and philosophy of boundaries. From professional recommendations to social media opinions, the cultural airwaves hum with calls to set firm limits, establish healthy relational guardrails, and prioritize self-care. In Christian circles, the boundaries model was popularized by Henry Cloud and John Townsend in their book *Boundaries*. The ideas have permeated Christian cultural discourse through imagery of relational property lines and self-care mantras.

The appeal of boundaries is undeniable. Promising a way out of people-pleasing, codependency, and over-responsibility, this system reframes the fear of saying no as a healthy act of self-stewardship rather

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than a self-centered one. Proclamations such as “I can’t commit right now” and “I’m sorry, but I need to prioritize myself” are presented as guilt-free refusals that enable the speaker to regain their autonomy. In a few decades, “drawing a boundary” has gone from obscure psychoanalytic jargon to everyday street talk. Centering on self-regard and self-protection, the boundaries model normalizes the struggle to say no, grants permission to decline requests without the stigma of selfishness, and supplies practical phrases and scripts for everyday scenarios.

With these new tools, this age-old struggle suddenly seems refreshingly solvable—set your boundary and use it to say no. This “solution” has infiltrated therapy and social media, but it also fills a perceived void in pastoral theology and counseling ministry.

If you’re a Christian counselor or a pastor, you might be wondering where this leaves you. There will always be counselees who wrestle with saying no—whether to a boss demanding extra shifts, a friend dropping by unannounced, or the quiet pressure to give time, money, or simply “go along to get along.” But is there a way to reclaim the conversation and biblically structure our help rather than defaulting to what the boundaries model offers? Thankfully, that’s the purpose of this article—to equip counselors and pastors with a framework that offers something better and richer.

Central to this provision is Paul’s decision-making framework in Romans 14. Unlike the boundaries solution, this framework offers wisdom rather than simplified skills and a love of God over a love of self. This article also provides a visual aid to illustrate the framework: the decision-making pendulum. This graphic can be easily drawn on a whiteboard or a piece of paper. It assists the counselor by offering a practical way to capture the biblical decision-making process, helping counselees grow in wisdom rather than just in techniques or rote behavior change.

Here is where we are going. I will describe the can’t-say-no problem, present Paul’s Romans 14 decision-making framework, show how the pendulum imagery captures the biblical decision-making process, and end with a sample dialogue that shows how to use the pendulum tool in the counseling room.

We begin by considering the can’t-say-no problem.

The Can't-Say-No Problem

In a world of ceaseless demands and expectations, many people struggle to say no. It's no wonder then that this problem consistently finds its way into the counseling room. As you can imagine, having a hard time saying no can quickly grow from a minor inconvenience into a life-shaping and even self-altering struggle. Whether it's agreeing to extra work, accepting social plans we don't want, or taking on favors that leave us drained, what starts as a good intention to keep the peace, avoid guilt, or spare disappointment gradually turns into a deeply ingrained pattern of reflexively saying yes. What begins as a series of minor accommodations can escalate into a life-altering pattern.

In repeatedly overriding our limits and dismissing our own preferences, we don't just become overextended or resentful; we begin to lose touch with our creaturely limits. When yes becomes our automatic answer, we inadvertently communicate to ourselves and others that our time and energy belong to everyone else, while other things that truly matter hold little weight. Over time, this insidious habit quietly erodes both our identity and our God-given dignity. As yes-sayers, we can lose sight of ourselves in ways that are not honoring to God.

Given how serious this problem can become, the answer is not just to use boundaries to say no. Instead, we need to look to Scripture for help. Therefore, next we will consider how Paul, along with the broader testimony of Scripture, reframes the can't-say-no problem and reveals a theological rationale for saying both no and yes and for knowing when each is appropriate.

The Decision-Making Framework

A Christian solution to the can't-say-no problem can be found in Paul's structuring of Romans 14. After discussing the believer's relationship to governing authorities in the previous chapter, Paul turns to matters of conscience—questions about food, drink, and holy days. While addressing these matters, Paul develops a structure for Christian decision-making by identifying the relationship between devotion to God, attunement to one's conscience, and sacrificial love for others. Paul tries to help his readers navigate their sometimes significant differences by

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