



KNOWING WHO I'M NOT • Boundaries

What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?

Exodus 18

Background

Before going to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, Moses left his wife Zipporah and two sons, Gershom and Eliezer, with his father-in-law, Jethro. Moses crosses out of Egypt with several millions of Israelites in tow. Safely out of Egypt, Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, comes to him, bringing with him Moses' wife and sons who had been staying with him for safekeeping. Upon arriving, Jethro spends the day with his son-in-law observing him as he attends to his vast responsibilities as the father of a nation.

Jethro, being older and wiser, and having a great deal of experience in leadership himself, makes an important observation. There are hordes of people waiting to have their court cases tried by the great judge Moses. Why? Because Moses, alone, meets with God face-to-face, so who better to decide what God's will is?

Upon seeing this, Jethro states, "What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you can not handle it alone." Jethro makes a profound observation. Moses was doing the work of a dozen men. He was wearing himself out – he was stretched too thin – and the people weren't all that happy having to wait for him to try their case.

The solution proposed by Jethro is delegation. He tells Moses to appoint qualified representatives from the people who can hear simple matters. Moses was to teach these new judges the existing case law – decisions God had already given regarding different types of disputes. This would then provide enough information to decide the bulk of the disputes. If an issue came up that was too difficult, or had no legal precedent, it was only at this juncture that Moses' involvement was required.

Observations

Moses had come to see himself as the only person qualified to rightly judge the people's disputes. As a result, he was assuming more responsibility than he could possibly handle. He was assuming a burden that God never intended for him to shoulder by himself. The exhaustion it produced most likely increased his loss of perspective and objectivity, not allowing him to see his way out of his circumstances.

What's the Big Idea?

In the previous study, we looked at the unique way God has gifted each believer. Part of what it means to mature as a Christian is realizing who God has uniquely made us to be. Understanding our identity has a second component: recognizing who we are not. This study looks at the Christian's need to exercise self-control, realizing what we should take responsibility for and what we should not.

What's the Problem?

Due to pressure and our own emotional and sinful needs, we take responsibility for things that we shouldn't.



Application

In the last study we focused on the need to know the unique way God has made us: what we excel in and what gifts we have. Basically, how are we best able to serve? The corollary to this knowledge is realizing our limits, knowing what we can't do and not taking responsibility for things we shouldn't. The term often applied to this knowledge is "boundaries". Think, for example, of property boundaries: typically a fence demarcates what's on your property and what's not, what you're responsible for and what you're not.

Just Say No

Sometimes guilt, fear, insecurity or even an unhealthy need for control can cause us to take responsibility for things that are not ours to own. We need to exercise good stewardship and self-control and learn – often against emotional pressure – to say, "No." When we say no to things we know we cannot do (or should not do), we erect a fence, effectively saying, "This is where my property ends!" We can encourage others and even lend a hand, but this is far different from assuming responsibility or control.

The first step in this process is realizing that God is not calling you to do everything and that it isn't godly to say "yes" to everything. Saying "yes" to some things automatically means other things will go undone. This is as it should be. This is only problematic when we say "yes" to everything and then what goes undone are the things we were best at – the things God actually wants us to do.

Other Implications

When we begin to erect boundaries in our lives as it relates to responsibilities and relationships, we notice this self-control backwashing into other areas of our lives as well. We'll find ourselves building fences against other encroachments and find ourselves saying "no" to things such as overeating, unhealthy relationships, even sexual sin. Self control is a muscle, and the more you exercise it, the stronger it gets.

Just Say Yes

While most people have a tendency to over-commit, and therefore need to erect fences to keep themselves reigned in, there are some who need to grow in their ability to take responsibility. We have all known people who have seemingly disowned their need to be responsible for their own actions, behavior, comments, bodies, children and responsibilities. For these folks, maturing as a Christian does not involve erecting fences as much as occupying the property that's already theirs.

Discernment

Our last application has to do with discernment. In the story, Moses does not simply retire from his job as judge. He assumes only the cases others can't figure out. He does what only Moses can do. He knows his role and gifting and, therefore, where he must stop and others must begin to take responsibility. Two things are worthy of note. First, when we choose wisely, we have more time and energy to put into the things we should be doing. Second, it's critical to take time to pray and plan before we commit ourselves to things, in order that we may choose wisely.

What's Our Response?

The most significant application is for the group to understand that saying "no" is not ungodly. In fact, it is a crucial aspect of godly character and wise stewardship. You want the group to leave with a desire to begin thinking through their lives and schedules, considering when they need to say "yes," and where they need to erect boundaries by saying "no."

What Are the Questions?

Exodus 18

LAUNCH

Do you ever feel like you don't have enough hours in your day? What are the "unplanned" or "unscheduled" things that seem to constantly crowd out the important things that you need to be doing?

EXPLORE

Read Exodus 18.

1. As an outsider to the situation, what was Jethro able to see and discern about the way Moses was spending his time?
 2. All of our choices have consequences. What are the consequences that Jethro warned Moses about if he were to continue in his current patterns of leadership?
 3. What's Jethro's solution?
 4. Moses has encountered a wise counselor, yet he still has the freedom to choose what he will do with the insight and advice offered to him. How did Moses respond?
 5. When we see a person make decisions to not over-commit, it typically brings conviction for all the ways we are over-committing. What things come to your mind?
 6. What are some principles you can draw from this incident to help you determine what you should and should not be doing?
 7. In what ways do you tend to over-extend yourself (with your time, in relationships, in activities) or take on more than you can accomplish? Why do you think this pattern is in your life?
 8. Like Jethro, has anyone ever confronted you about over-extending yourself? How did you respond?
 9. A fence is often used to set a boundary, marking what is our rightful property and responsibility, and what is not.
- What sorts of feelings or emotions often cause us to take responsibility for actions, responsibilities, people or choices that ultimately don't fall on our property?
10. Sometimes our emotions can cause us to take responsibility for things that aren't on our property. Check off those things you feel would be on your property:
 - Someone continually needs help with schoolwork because they fail to plan or prepare.
 - You feel you should have to be a parent to your siblings because your parents are uninvolved.
 - You feel responsible for your parent's divorce.
 - Someone is lonely and you feel an obligation to be his or her friend.
 - Your boyfriend says that you are making it difficult for him because you won't have sex.
 - Your roommate never cleans up the room, so you feel you have to do it for her.
 11. What would be a godly response to someone who is asking, or guilted, you to own more than you should?
 12. Some people can do the opposite of over-extending, erecting tight walls or boundaries around themselves. What would be the consequences of having these kinds of boundaries? Do you know anyone like this?
 13. There were still some things Moses continued to do. What were these things and why was it important that he do them? What principle could you apply from this?

APPLY

14. Where would you place yourself on this spectrum? What things should you continue to say "yes" to? What are you saying "yes" to that should be "no." What are the personal issues and sin that are keeping you from obedience to God in this?

Closed off to letting other people into your life or getting involved in others' lives

Usually say "yes" and "no" to appropriate things

Always living beyond emotional and physical limits

What Are the Answers?

1. Jethro was able to see that Moses was spending his time doing things others could be doing.
2. The consequences included both he and his people getting worn out.
3. The solution Jethro offers involves appointing others to judge the easier cases.
4. Moses follows Jethro's advice, perhaps because he was already worn out and feeling the need for a change.
5. Allow the group to discuss.
6. Seek the council of others. Think through your own gifting. Reflect on your use of time.
7. Allow the group to discuss.
8. Allow the group to discuss.
9. Sometimes guilt, fear, insecurity, or even an unhealthy need for control, can cause us to take responsibility for things that are not ours to own.
10. You are not looking for a right answer as much as surfacing the need to discern.
11. You can encourage them to take responsibility. You may also offer to help, but that is different from taking control.
12. They need to be encouraged to take more responsibility and risk.
13. Moses still decided the hard cases. Moses did what only Moses uniquely could do.
14. Allow the group to discuss.

Memorize

What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone.

Exodus 18:17-18