

Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel  
Sunday morning, September 29, 1946  
By Frank S. Hickman

#### WHEN GOD SAYS NO

Text: Acts 16.6,7:

"Now when they (i.e., the Apostle Paul and his company) had gone throughout Phrygia and the region of Galatia, and were forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia, after they were come to Mysia, they assayed to go into Bithynia: but the Spirit suffered them not."

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I heard recently of a little boy, reared by a Godly widowed mother, who went into his room to pray for a bicycle which his mother protested she was too poor to buy for him. When he came out his mother saw that he was smiling, and asked, "What did God say?" The cheerful and instant reply was, "God said, No."

The story of St. Paul, trying to do work in Asia Minor when the divine leading was toward Europe, through Macedonia, is on a much loftier plane than that of the little boy to whom I have referred. But God said "No" to him just as surely and as plainly as he did to the little boy.

St. Paul was a pure-blooded and aristocratic young Jew when he became a convert to Christianity. But also he was a Roman citizen, because his father had been granted that honor. His Jewish religious mind had therefore a Roman outlook, and he felt driven of the Spirit to carry the gospel of Christ into the pagan strongholds of the empire.

The Apostle Paul was naturally predisposed to do his missionary work in his homeland. His floating dream of carrying the gospel out into the heart of the Roman Empire had never come to the focus of a definite conviction until he came to his impasse about doing any further work in Asia Minor, and then experienced the vision of the <sup>77</sup>Man of Macedonia calling him to come over into his country and help his people.

Paul had to summon all his spiritual resources to relinquish the lesser good of a mission in the home country for the greater good of an adventure into a part of the world largely foreign to him. The hardest decision any one has to make is between his lesser and his greater obligations. We all know what God's "No" means with reference to turning our backs upon what is clearly evil. But we have to learn what it means when God says "No" to some good work we want to do, in order to open the way to us for some other and more crucial task.

Paul clearly felt unequal to the task of laying out for himself the grand strategy of the Christian campaign against the paganism of the Roman Empire. But he felt, as all Christians do, that God had opened to him his own mind, however dimly. God's "Yes" and "No" often seem incomprehensible to us; but there is no other way by which our human nature can bring itself into line with the divine will and purpose.

Even Jesus had to come to grips with God's "No", when he reached the crisis of his life in Gethsemane. His sensitive soul was at the point of sick revolt against the coming cross, and he cried out, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me!" But he felt within the depths of his soul God's sorrowful and gentle "No"; and eventually in complete surrender he exclaimed, "Not as I will, but as thou wilt!" (*Matt. 26. 39*)

God does not require of us more than our minds and personalities can carry. He fits us, just as we are, into the great work which he is doing in the world. But within our own limits and according to our own possibilities, he does lay obligation upon us. He expects us to come into tune with his Spirit and purpose; even to lay our very lives down for the advancement of his kingdom in the earth. He expects us to think and plan; but he reserves always the right to say "No" to our judgments when they do not reflect his own mind for us.