**Developing a Personal Rule of Life**

The word “rule” conjures up images of school and dreary regulations. But a Christian “rule of life” is not that sort of thing. A “Rule of Life” is a framework for freedom – deliberately chosen habits and customs which we have chosen because they help us to live God’s way more closely. One of the most famous and far reaching Christian “rules of life” is that of the sixth century St Benedict of Nursia which remains the joyful heartbeat of the Benedictine Order to this day. This rule and many others were written in Latin: The Latin word “regula” means rule in the sense of a straight edge for measuring and drawing lines…. Like using a ruler to draw a straight line, It helps us to accomplish what we want without getting wobbly! The other meaning of the word “regula” is a regular rhythm – a chosen rhythm of life brings freedom rather than restriction, a practical way of seeking God more authentically and living more fully and joyfully for him. All growing Christian disciples have a rule of life although they may not know that this is what it is called.

A Rule of Life is an intentional pattern of spiritual disciplines that provides structure and direction for growth in holiness. A Rule establishes a rhythm for life in which is helpful for being formed by the Spirit, a rhythm that reflects a love for God and respect for how he has made us. The disciplines which we build into our rhythm of life help us to shed the “old self” and allow our “new self” in Christ to be formed. Spiritual disciplines are means of grace by which God can nourish us. Ultimately a Rule should help you to love God more, so if it becomes a legalistic way of earning points with God or impressing others, it should be scrapped. If the traditional, ancient term “rule” concerns you because it sounds legalistic, think of “rule” as a “rhythm of life” or as a “Curriculum in Christlikeness” (Dallas Willard), or as a “Game Plan for Morphing” (John Ortberg).

A rule of life will vary widely, depending on the character and life situation of a person. Not only will people choose different disciplines but how the disciplines are practiced will also be different.

Although every believer should pray, for example, the frequency or length or times or kind of prayer will differ. Thomas à Kempis writes, “All cannot use the same kind of spiritual exercises, but one suits this person, and another that. Different devotions are suited also to the seasons [of life]....”

It is helpful to include three areas:

1. Where you are now

2. What you will do

3. How you will be accountable

Here is a suggested way to do this:-

**1. Where I am now**

Start by with a clear self-assessment that briefly describes your current situation in life–family responsibilities, work schedule, and other life circumstances. Your self-assessment should also reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of your character. Are you blessed, for example, with self-control, a compassionate heart, a bright mind, or a spirit of joy? Which vices do you most struggle with? It might be helpful to evaluate yourself in relation to the 7 deadly sins and their opposites:

Sloth Fruitfulness (not productivity)

Envy Love

Greed Generosity

Pride Humility

Anger Gentleness

Lust Chastity

Gluttony Self-denial, moderation

If you struggle with anger, for example, keep a journal for a week, noting what you get angry about and why, and rating each incident. Once you’ve identified a weakness, you can do something about it.

In general, talk over your self-assessment with someone who knows you well and ask for that person’s candid feedback. Beginning your Rule with an honest self-assessment will push you to develop a rhythm of life which is unique to your personality, circumstances, and needs.

**2. What you will do (Spiritual Disciplines or Habits)**

Second, describe the way in which you will practice specific habits or good disciplines.

Here is a list of some classic spiritual disciplines taken from the book “Celebration of Discipline” by Richard Foster. Your Christian life will probably include most of these but your Rule may focus on some a lot more than others

Prayer Simplicity Confession

Meditation Solitude Worship

Fasting Submission Guidance

Study Service Celebration

This list is not exhaustive!

It is also helpful to include an explanation of why your choices not only fit your situation in life but also how they address areas where you especially need discipline and growth. In other words, describe how your Rule contributes to the goal of your spiritual formation, namely, being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others. Always remember this goal as you develop your Rule.

Making choices about specific disciplines requires prayer and wisdom. As you decide on specific practices (e.g. how and when to pray, serve, practice simplicity, etc.), consider the following questions:

a). What disciplines and specific practices are you attracted to and why you are attracted to them?

There is nothing wrong with choosing spiritual practices because they seem suited to your personality (e.g. an introvert may be drawn to more inward disciplines). You will likely engage in those disciplines with the greatest consistency and satisfaction. They may not, however, be the practices that will stretch you toward the greatest growth or the ones you most need. Still, they are probably a good place to start, especially if you have little spiritual discipline in your life at the moment.

b) Where do you sense that God is calling you to stretch and grow? Where do you want to change?

c). What kind of balance do you need in your life?

Does your Rule exercise your thoughts, actions, and affections (head, hands, and heart)? Does your Rule contain both corporate and individual practices? Both inward and outward disciplines? Don’t be confused by the title “Personal Rule of Life.” It’s a “Personal Rule” (as compared to a communal Rule) because it’s drawn up by you, it’s about you, and you are the one committing yourself to it. “Personal Rule” does not mean that you only engage in inward disciplines or private disciplines. Your personal Rule should include corporate disciplines (such as worship, confession, celebration, or spiritual direction) and outward disciplines (such as service, simplicity, or chastity).

d). If you could hear your own eulogy, what would you want to hear?

e). Is your Rule realistic for you to commit to?

A Rule is not a load of things you must add onto an already busy life. The disciplines you choose should not only be realistic for your life but should also balance, help to prioritise, interweave, and impregnate your entire way of life, better enabling you to take your ordinary life–your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life–and place it before God as an offering [Rom. 12:1, The Message].

**How you will be**

Once you have chosen your spiritual disciplines and explained your choices, you could stat the name of the person who will hold you accountable and pray for you as you practice your Rule. For this role, consider a friend, a small group, or a spiritual director. Spouses and other family members should know enough of your Rule to be able to encourage, or at least not interfere needlessly with, your practice. However, it may be unwise to expect your spouse to be the only person holding you accountable in your spiritual life. The person(s) holding you accountable should also help you to discern when your Rule needs to be re-assessed and adapted.