

## **How to Develop a Personal Rule of Life**

*Adapted from Emotionally Healthy Spirituality by Peter Scazzero*

We are called to order our lives around spiritual practices and disciplines – that is, a “Rule of Life,” something utterly foreign to the world around us. It is a call to order our entire life in such a way that the love of Christ comes before all else. And in doing so, the very quality of our lives holds the possibility of being transformed into a gift to our families, friends, coworkers, and communities.

### **THE ANCIENT TREASURE OF A RULE OF LIFE**



Please don't be intimidated by the word *rule*. The word comes from the Greek for “trellis.” A trellis is a tool that enables a grapevine to get off the ground and grow upward, becoming more fruitful and productive. In the same way, a Rule of Life is a trellis that helps us abide in Christ and become more fruitful spiritually.

A Rule of Life, very simply, is an intentional conscious plan to keep God at the center of everything we do. It provides guidelines to help us continually remember God as the Source of our lives. It includes our unique combination of spiritual practices that provide structure and direction for us to intentionally pay attention and remember God in everything we do. The starting point and foundation of any Rule is a desire

to be with God and to love him.

Very few people have a conscious plan for developing their spiritual lives. Most Christians are not intentional, but rather functional, like cars on autopilot. Our crammed schedules, endless to-do lists, demanding jobs and families, constant noise, information bombardment, and anxieties keep us speeding up, not slowing down. We do have routines to manage other parts of our lives. For example, each morning we may get up, feed the cat, then make coffee, exercise, get dressed for work, and eat breakfast.

The reality, however, is that every person has an unconscious Rule for developing his or her spiritual life. We each have our values and ways of doing things. This may include, for example, attending a church on Sundays, participating in a small group, serving in a ministry, and/or then minutes for prayer and Bible reading before going to bed.

However, our present spiritual practices are not enough to keep us afloat in the ocean of the beast, the Babylon of our twenty-first century world. Fighting against such a strong current, without the anchor of a Rule of Life, is almost impossible. Eventually we find ourselves unfocused, distracted, and adrift spiritually.

Is it any wonder that most people live off other people's spirituality rather than taking the time to develop their own direct experience of God? Most Christians talk about prayer but don't pray. Most believe the Bible as the Word of God but have little idea what it says. Our goals for our children differ little from

those of “pagans” who do not know God. Like the world, we too grade people based on their education, wealth, beauty, and popularity.

Nurturing a growing spirituality with depth in our present-day culture will require a thoughtful, conscious, intentional plan for our spiritual lives. To plan well, however, requires we go back to Daniel and early church history to consider the roots of this hidden treasure.

### **DANIEL’S “RULE OF LIFE”**

Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian armies, with their gods, conquered Jerusalem and carried off most of the city’s inhabitants as slaves. One of those was a young teenager named Daniel. Cut off from his family, teachers, friends, food, culture, and language, Daniel was brought into the Babylonian court of the king and sent to the best university in the land. He studied a completely foreign and pagan way of viewing the world – history, mathematics, medicine, religion, literature. He learned about myths, astrology, sorcery, and magic – all things banned in Israel. Pagan priests and counselors educated him in their wisdom and religion. In Babylon’s effort to assimilate Daniel, they even changed his name.

Babylon had one simple goal: to eliminate Daniel’s distinctiveness as a God follower and absorb him into the values of their culture.

How did Daniel resist the enormous power of Babylon? He was not a cloistered monk living behind walls. He had heavy job responsibilities with people giving him orders. He had a minimal support system, and, I imagine, a very long to-do list each day.

What Daniel did have was a plan, a Rule of Life. He did not leave the development of his interior life to chance. He knew that “going to church on Sundays, along with a fifteen-minute daily quiet time” would never be enough. He knew what he was up against. While we know little of the specifics, it is clear that he oriented his entire life around loving God. He renounced certain activities, such as eating the king’s contaminated food (see Daniel 1) and engaged in others such as the “Daily Office” – prayer three times each day (see Daniel 6). Daniel somehow fed himself spiritually and blossomed into an extraordinary man of God in this hostile environment. He knew resisting the beast of Babylon and thriving required a plan that would enable him to pay attention to God.



### **A SHORT HISTORY OF THE RULE**

From the end of the third century to the fifth century, men and women withdrew from society into the deserts of Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and Arabia to seek God. They wanted to free themselves from any distractions between them and God. A number of these monks later formed communities and organized their daily life around an agreed-upon plan consisting of work, prayer, and study of Scripture. They called this plan a Rule of Life.

Pachomius (AD 290-345) wrote the first known “Rule of Life” for his monastic communities in Egypt. Others followed with shorter and longer rules. Spiritual seekers from the Western church, most notably John Cassian, learned



from these Desert Fathers and returned home to develop their own Rule of Life. Finally, this climaxed with Benedict (AD 480-547), who wrote the most widely know of monastic rules: the Rule of St. Benedict. The Rule of St. Benedict has not only shaped Western monasticism for the last 1500 years, but continues to guides tens of thousands of people around the world today from all church traditions.

The great, buried gift in a Rule of Life is its goal of regulating our entire lives in such a way that we truly prefer the love of Christ above all things.

### **GETTING STARTED – THE BIG PICTURE**

God has made each of us unique and different. Our goal is the same: union with God in Christ, transformation into his image, and the freeing of our hearts from anything that stands in the way of Christ living in and through us. How we get there will vary, depending on our personality, gift mix, temperament, geographic location, and particular calling from God. In addition, God will have different practices and emphases at different seasons and phases of our lives.

You may want to add new elements or delete others. Developing an intentional Rule of Life takes trial and error. You will need to learn a great deal about yourself in order to form an effective Rule. For example, what kinds of spiritual practices bring you closer to God? Which drive you away from him? How can you discern the right combination for your particular Rule of Life?

My personal Rule of Life is a constantly changing document. It is a “live” work in progress – always. For example, due to my highly intuitive, conscientious temperament, I rarely write down my goals and commitments. For me, it can easily become a “have to” rather than a “want to” out of love for Christ. Give yourself lots of time for the slow development of what works best for you.

If possible, find a companion for this journey. It may be a spiritual director/guide, a mentor, a trusted friend, a mature Christian, or a small group. This will serve to keep you on track.

Don’t be hard on yourself. St. Benedict writes at the beginning of his Rule of Life:

Therefore we intend to establish a school for the Lord’s service...Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset. But as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God’s commandments, our hearts overflowing with an inexpressible delight of love.

While an infinite number of variations exist for a Rule of Life, I like to see a panoramic view of the big picture first. The following is a suggested list of elements to consider as you begin to develop your personal Rule of Life.

## **SUGGESTED ELEMENTS FOR A RULE OF LIFE**

### **SCRIPTURE**

God speaks to us in and through the Word. Your plan during one season of your life may be reading through the Bible in a year or following the lectionary of Scripture readings from the Book of Common Prayer. In recent years I have moved to a reflective meditation on smaller portions of Scripture. *Lectio divina*, the ancient practice of contemplative reading, has become a weekly practice for me. This begins with reading a short passage of Scripture and then reflecting on it, allowing it to quietly work on you, as leaven in bread or water on a stone. The key is to read slowly, chewing over the words and allowing them to feed and transform you. This has led me also to prayerfully memorize small portions of Scripture each week.

### **SILENCE AND SOLITUDE**

It is said of Abbot Agathon, one of the Desert Fathers: “For three years he carried a stone in his mouth until he learned to be silent.” I think I could use a few good rocks myself! This is one of the most challenging and least practiced disciplines among Christians today. When we are silent, we come face-to-face with our addiction to being in control and always trying to fix things. As Dallas Willard says, “Silence is frightening because it strips us as nothing else does, throwing us upon the stark realities of our life. It reminds us of death, which will cut us off from this world and leave only us and God.”



I often integrate my times of silence into the Daily Office each day. I seek to take between five and twenty minutes, a few times each day, to “be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him” (Psalm 37:7). This continues to be the core of my cutting edge for growing in Christ.

It also makes sense to work regular private retreats into your schedule – perhaps biannually or quarterly – even if they are only for one day or a half day. (*By the way, Highrock Guides can provide a list of local retreat centers if you are interested!*) Remember that even Jesus stole away in the midst of his busy ministry to “lonely places” to pray.

### **DAILY OFFICE / PRAYER**

The term Daily Office (also called *fixed-hour prayer* or *liturgy of the hours*) differs from what we label today as *quiet time* or *devotions*. It refers to brief prayers which we do at specific times of the day – usually at morning, noon, and evening. David practiced set times of prayer seven times a day (see Psalm 119:164). Daniel prayed three times a day (see Daniel 6:10). Devout Jews in Jesus’ time prayed 2-3

times a day. Jesus himself probably followed the Jewish custom of praying at set times during the day. After Jesus' resurrection, his disciples continued to pray at certain hours of the day (see Acts 3:1 and 10:9ff). About AD 525, a monk named Benedict structured these prayer times around 8 Daily Offices, including one in the middle of the night for monks. The Rule of St. Benedict became one of the most powerful documents in shaping Western civilization.

All these people realized that the stopping for the Daily Office to be with God is the key to creating a continual and easy familiarity with God's presence the rest of the day. It is the rhythm of stopping that makes the "practice of the presence of God," to use Brother Lawrence's phrase, a real possibility. I know it does for me. The great power in setting apart small units of time for morning, midday, and evening prayer infuses into the rest of my days activities a deep sense of the sacred, of God. All time is his. The Daily Office, practiced consistently, actually eliminates any division of the sacred and the secular in our lives. *(For more on how to do this, please see Emotionally Healthy Spirituality in Pastor Dave's Library!)*

### **STUDY**

Few people recognize that spending intentional time reading and studying is a spiritual discipline. Yet these, too, are an important way of encountering God in new ways. Growing, maturing Christians are always exploring, reading, and learning. Consider studying not simply information but for the purpose of formation in Christ. Pray back to God what you are learning.

### **SABBATH**

Develop a rhythm of setting apart one 24-hour period each week for pure rest, worship, and holy play. Don't do anything that could go on a to-do list. Trust God to run the universe without you. Begin to look at your weeks as preparing for the Sabbath. Ask yourself, "What kinds of activities bring me joy and delight? What truly replenishes me?" Take a nap. Enjoy God. Do something totally different from your work. Remember that God actually *commands* us to rest – it is the fourth of the 10 commandments! Though we have some flexibility as New Testament people about exactly how to celebrate Sabbath, we would be foolish to overlook the importance of rest to the development of holy and satisfied living.

### **SIMPLICITY**

The primary issue here is to remove distractions and remain free from attachments. Try to keep your life free of unnecessary complication. Ask the Lord what he wants you to be involved with, and let go of anything else that devours your time and energy.

The principle of tithing is also an important component to simplicity. It teaches us to let go of what is not necessary and to remain dependent on God as our security and source. Jesus himself taught that "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). We have been increasing our financial giving percentage each year as part of our Rule of Life and have seen God work miracle after miracle in providing for us. Get out of all unhealthy debt by attending a money-management seminar.

### **SERVICE AND MISSION**

The question here is in what way(s) is God inviting me to serve him at this stage of my journey? In what way can I use my time, talents, resources, and gifts for others? For some of us, our challenge is to do something for others outside our comfort zone. For others like me, the issue is limits. How can I embrace my God-given limits and not go beyond what he is asking me to do?

### **BODILY CARE**

Many of us take poor care of the bodies God has given us. Yet caring for our bodies can be as spiritual as prayer and worship. What might you want to include in your Rule of Life about exercise? How many times a week will you exercise? What will you do? What about your work habits? Do you get adequate rest and sleep? When is the last time you went to the doctor for an annual checkup? Listening to our bodies can be an important way to listen to God. When we care for our bodies, we acknowledge the holiness of all of life and honor the fact that God is within us.



### **EMOTIONAL HEALTH**

This has been part of my Rule of Life for the last 11 years. For a couple of years, it was as simple as paying attention to my families and journaling about them to God a few times a week. Then I would ask God how he might be speaking to me through them.

It may be that you recognize you have a lot of unprocessed grief due to losses from your past. You may want to make that part of your plan over the next year. This may include reading, journaling, meeting with a trusted friend or counselor, or going on a personal “grief retreat.” Part of your plan may include joining a small group that works through this book slowly. You may want to join a group that focuses on practical relational skills such as resolving conflict well or healthy communication practices. Growth in understanding your sexuality, both as a single or married person, would come under this element. But like anything else, this, too, takes intentionally.

### **FAMILY**

This element applies both to people married and single. Marriage, parenting, and our relationship with our family of origin are all crucial discipleship issues. How can you invest in family members adequately and make sure you devote adequate time to them? If you are married, be sure to discuss this one together with your spouse. What does he or she think a healthy family life looks like?

### **COMMUNITY**

Under this heading in your personal Rule of Life, you will want to ask yourself about the kind of companions you need for this next stage of your journey. What support networks might you need inside or outside your local church? I recommend that everyone be involved with a small group. I also have a mentor and a spiritual director. Be open and creative about how God might want you to walk this out during this season of your journey.

### **NOW IT'S YOUR TURN!**

Reread or rethink your Rule of Life regularly. St. Augustine wanted his read once a week! Minimally, you will want to review and revisit your Rule of Life every year.

Begin slowly working on only one or two elements at a time. Be willing to make mistakes, try again, and learn new things. You may want to try sketching out a Rule of Life for a four-week period such as Advent or during Lent.

Remember, as Benedict wrote 1500 years ago, "Your way of acting should be different from the world's way. The love of Christ must come before all else." Keep that before you and you won't go too far off.