

## The Practice of Writing a Rule of life

### Learning about the Practice:

A favorite "get to know you" exercise of many is "A day in the life of yours truly." In this exercise one person has another person answer the following questions: "What time of day do you usually wake up? How do you start your day? When is your most creative time of day? What do you get excited about? Who are the people you enjoy being around?" These questions ask about the habits of our day; hidden in our habits are rules about what we do and value. If you look at your daily schedule, what would you discover about how you spend your time each day? How one spends their time shows their priorities. Writing an "intentional rule of life" enables a person to devote themselves to the things that are important to them. Adele Calhoun says, "Developing a 'rule for life' is a way of being intentional about the personal rhythms and guidelines that shape our days."<sup>i</sup> How does that happen? Consider Marjorie Thompson's thoughts on this subject:

*"A rule of life is a pattern of spiritual disciplines that provides structure and direction for growth in holiness. When we speak of patterns in our life, we mean attitudes, behaviors, or elements that are routine, repeated, and regular. Indeed, the Latin term for "rule" is regula, from which our words regular and regulate derive. A rule of life is not meant to be restrictive, although it certainly asks for genuine commitment... It is meant to help us establish a rhythm of daily living, a basic order within which new freedoms can grow. A rule of life, like a trellis, curbs our tendency to wander and supports our frail efforts to grow spiritually."<sup>ii</sup>*

One of the earliest Christian rules for life is found in Acts 2:42. It states that the believers in the Early Church "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." This rule describes the practices that shaped their individual and corporate spirituality. The rule offered practices that opened space for them to attend to God's presence in and among them. Practicing this rule set the early Christians apart from the rest of the culture in which they lived. The practices identified them as Christians, following Jesus Christ.

Over the centuries Christians have developed rules and rhythms for living that focus their lives in loving adoration of Christ. A "rule of life" is an intentional way to seek to have one's life shaped by God, rather than the world. An example of an ancient rule still in practice today is The Rule of Saint Benedict. Written in the Sixth Century, Benedict's rule is still widely used today not only by monks and in monasteries, but also by businesses, schools, and seminaries. It became the classic rule for Western Monasticism. Jennifer McKenzie, writing about an experience she had at a Benedictine immersion retreat, comments, "...we are taught by Benedictine spirituality to work within the framework of expectation that time is a gift, and that available daylight and human energy are limited. Benedictine spirituality respects the created order and finds a way to 'fall in line' with that order. For the Benedictine the day is ordered and balanced. Through living this way, even for a week, I learned that much of my anxiety and stress comes from living my daily life and practicing my faith in a disordered way."<sup>iii</sup>

### Preparing for the Practice:

A rule is a regular rhythm we choose for our life in order to focus more on the ways of God. Through a rule, we partner with God's transforming work in our lives. A rule of life gives us priorities and direction. It serves to weed out things that do not lead us closer to God. It is an intentional way of thinking about your own spiritual journey and how you are growing to become more like Christ. As Adele Calhoun says, "Life-giving rules are a brief and realistic scaffold of disciplines that support your heart's desire to grow in loving God and others." <sup>iv</sup> To begin the process of developing a rule pay attention to the experiences, practices and relationships that draw you toward God. Are there particular practices that open you to God?

A rule must reflect who you are and what is important for you. A rule is a way of observing your spiritual life and asking some self-reflective questions. A rule addresses your life, relationship with God, other people, and the world. Your rule is for your own growth; it is not a way of comparing your life and spirituality to someone else's. Rules are guides, they are not carved in stone. They can be changed and adapted easily. The value of a rule, however, is once adopted and put to work, it will help to shape your life.

### Engaging the Practice:

#### Writing a rule of Life:

Before you begin to write, prayerfully take stock of the rhythms of your life. After taking time to prayerfully focus, ask the Holy Spirit to walk through these questions with you. <sup>v</sup>

1. When and where do you feel closest to God? How do you enter most deeply into an awareness of God's love for you?
2. What is most important to you? Are there certain passages of Scripture that clarify this for you?
3. What practices suit your daily, monthly and yearly rhythms and cycles?
4. Where do you want to change? Where do you feel powerless to change? Ask the Holy Spirit to help you do through grace, what you cannot do through effort alone.
5. Choose several disciplines that arise from your desire for God's transforming work, and that suit the limits and realities of your life.

Now that you have answered the questions, do you see any patterns emerging? Are there certain things you are already doing that you would like to formalize? Are there things you *are* doing that are *not* good for you, and you would like to stop doing?

Thinking through your week, take a calendar and begin to block out times to do the things you *want* to do. An example would be to rise at 7:00 a.m. and spend twenty minutes in centering prayer. Read a passage of scripture and say a prayer at lunch time. Take an afternoon nap, or a walk around the block. Spend one day a month resting, or in silence. End each day by practicing the Prayer of Examen. Remember when starting, keep it simple. It is better to work one practice deeply than to scratch the surface of several.

After you have gone through the first week, reevaluate and see how the practices are working for you. Make adjustments where needed. Remember a rule is a structure for growth, not a law. It is meant to be life-giving, not restrictive and guilt-producing. Always remember God partners with you in spiritual growth, so be encouraged.



Rhythms	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Morning							
Afternoon							
Evening							

## Writing A Soul Training Plan:

### God:

- Silence an awareness of creation
- Counting your blessings
- Praying Psalm 23
- Lectio Divina
- Reading the Gospel of John
- Solitude
- Writing a letter to God
- Living one day devotionally
- Reading a devotional classic
- Reading the Bible during free times
- Two hours with God
- Worship

### Self:

- Sleep
- Silence
- Solitude
- Margin
- Slowing down
- Play
- Keeping the Sabbath
- Media fast
- Nonspeaking
- Finding an accountability friend
- Forgiveness exercises.

### Others:

- Hospitality
- Praying for the success of competitors
- Secret Service
- Deaccumulation
- Prayer
- A day without gossip
- Four acts of peculiarity
- Sharing your faith
- Treasuring our treasures
- Loving those we disagree with
- Stewardship of resources.

Growing in the Practice:

John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002.

Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*. Louisville: Westminster, John Knox Press, 2005.

*The Benedictine Handbook*. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2003.

Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform us*. Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2005.

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i. Calhoun, 36.

ii. Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville: Westminster, John Knox Press, 2005), 145-146.

iii. Jennifer McKenzie, Benedictine Spirituality and Congregational Life: Living Out St. Benedict's Rule in the Parish, *Congregations Journal*, Alban Institute, Winter 2004, p.32.

iv. Calhoun, 36.

v. Calhoun, 37. Adapted.