

Developing a Personal Rule of Life
Dr. Les Hardin
Professor of New Testament
Johnson University Florida

What is a “Rule of Life”

Everything works by structure. Even the most free-flowing jazz has an embedded structure beneath it, most notably key signature, tempo, and progressive chord schemes. The most beautiful abstract art still makes its impression upon the mind and heart by attending to complementary color schemes. The only thing that doesn’t work by some structure is chaos. Nothing good and lasting happens by accident. What mostly happens by accident is bad (which is why we have insurance), and what good happens by accident we call “luck” ... and we don’t expect it to happen very often.

So we need structure. That’s exactly what a “rule of life” is—a structure of discipline by which to order your life and grow in the Spirit. The name “rule” is a bit misleading, and may bring up thoughts of legalistic rules and regulations in your thought. Actually, the term “rule” comes from the Latin *regula*, meaning “straight edge, principle, or standard.” Our English words “regular” and “regulate” come from this word. So think of a “rule of life” as simply a standard by which to live regularly.

Consider Marjorie Thompson’s definition:

A rule of life is a pattern of spiritual disciplines that provides structure and direction for growth in holiness.... 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.¹

Simon Chan, in *Spiritual Theology*, defines it as a way of “living a life under a certain pattern of discipline in order to achieve ascetical proficiency.”²

A rule of life is a way to order our daily, weekly, and yearly life so that the love of God comes to the forefront in everything we do. It’s a way of being intentional about life, Spirit-uality, and holiness.

Examples of Communal and Personal *Regulae*

The “rule of life” is not new to the study of spirituality. Our forefathers have been developing systems and structures by which to live and grow in Christ since God established Israel in her homeland. Every Jew was to pray *The Shema* (“Hear, O Israel, YHWH is our God. YHWH alone. And you are to love YHWH your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength,” Deut. 6:4-6) twice a day—morning and evening. (There is some evidence that by Jesus’ day it was three times a day.³) That’s a basic “rule of life”—every day, pray *The Shema* three times. Daniel made it his business to stave off the advances of Babylonian religion and culture by doing some specific things daily (see Daniel chs. 1 and 6).

We find the early Christians ordering life around a common set of spiritual activities, for Luke tells us that the earliest believers “devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and the prayers ... Every day they continued to meet together in the Temple

¹ Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 138.

² Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998), 190.

³ For more on this, and Jesus’ spiritual routine, see my *The Spirituality of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009); also “The Quest for the Spiritual Jesus,” in *Stone-Campbell Journal* 15 (Fall 2012).

courts” (Acts 2:42, 46). Paul’s “rule” seems to have also included meeting with his Jewish brothers in the synagogue on the Sabbath, and reasoning with Gentiles in the marketplace or the cultural centers (like the Areopagus) on the weekdays.

The subsequent generations have followed their example, even if developing those *regulae* further. One of the first *community* rules was developed by Benedict. The *Rule of St. Benedict* is a systematic outline for monks in the Benedictine community to work, live, and pray. The *Rule* called for the monks to rise early for worship and study, to spend the morning working, more study in the afternoon, and prayer and worship in the evening.⁴ (Similar structures were laid out by other monastic orders.⁵)

Example of personal “rules of faith” are also common among our teachers. John Wesley formulated a rule for the Methodist societies under his care, and called his people to live by these three principles: “avoiding every kind of evil” (personal and social evils), “doing good of every possible sort to all men” (feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, etc.), and “attending upon the ordinances of God” (prayer, worship, Lord’s supper, Scripture reading, etc.).⁶ Pope John XXIII developed his “rule” as a seminary student, and included in it 30 minutes in the morning for prayer and Bible study, examination of conscience and prayer before bed, and arranging his daily activities (study, recreation, and sleep) to make this rule possible.⁷ Evangelist Frank Laubach (1884-1970) determined to live every minute of his life in the conscious awareness of God (i.e., to think of God every minute of every day).

As you can see, there is great latitude and freedom in these *regulae*. Some of them are more book-length treatments (Benedict, Wesley), while others are shorter lists (Pope John XXIII, Frank Laubach). Some are communal, others are more personal. The main thing to note is that each of them is designed to be practical, is focused on helping us love God more, and doing so in practical, demonstrable action. Perhaps seeing these rules among the ancients isn’t quite as helpful as seeing it work in someone you know and can relate to.

My Own Personal Rule

My own personal rule of faith and life consists of several elements. First, I spend the early morning hours studying and writing. This is when I’m thinking at my best (I tend to get sluggish in the afternoon). I spend the first hour of the day in spiritual reading (either Scripture or theology) while I’m drinking my coffee. I tend to spend the rest of the morning teaching or writing.

I have a very busy and stressful ministry, so it’s important that I manage my time well. Toward that end I tend to put a limit on the number of things I do throughout the day. It’s not uncommon for any given day during the school year to be a 10- to 12-hour work day. If I’m traveling to teach on a Wednesday night, the work day tends to get up to 16 hours. So I’ve had to be very intentional about two things: scheduling and physiology. As for the scheduling, I tend to put on my schedule the things which *only I can do*. It’s not that Yard Day at church is beneath me; I do my own yard work at home. But I have to focus on the things that only I can do, and that means teaching in churches, preaching on the weekends, writing, teaching courses at FCC, committee work, and attending to my wife and kids. I’m away from home no more than 2 nights a week (with some exceptions for high-activity periods in the academic calendar). Saturdays are days of rest. No going

⁴ *The Rule of St. Benedict*, trans. A. C. Meisel and M. L. del Mastro (New York: Doubleday, 1975).

⁵ Examples of other monastic rules can be seen in the *Longer Rules* of Basil the Great and that of the Third Order of St. Francis. In more contemporary times, Dietrich Bonhoeffer developed a rule of life for the students of the underground seminary in Finkenwalde who were training for ministry in the Confessing Church. See his *Life Together* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1954).

⁶ Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 195.

⁷ Thompson, *Soul Feast*, 139.

to work (with a few exceptions throughout the year). The scheduling for me is very intentional. (*After I wrote that paragraph, I had my annual performance evaluation. My Dean tells me I'm doing too much. How often do you hear your boss say that? Guess I got some work to do on the scheduling part!*)

It's also important that I eat well and exercise to keep the stress levels down and keep healthy for this kind of schedule. So I watch my sugar intake and exercise at least three days a week.

Sunday mornings are spent with the people of God. No exceptions (barring illness). I'm an introvert, and I'd rather just stay home. But this is a rule in our home, as it was for Jesus.

While not part of our "rule," we have generally tried to practice something I learned from Dr. Terry Wardle, my spiritual formation professor at Ashland Theological Seminary. He told us that every person should have a *daily diversion*, a *weekly withdrawal*, and an *annual abandon*. Reading is my daily diversion. Saturday is my weekly withdrawal. And every Christmas our family goes north for three weeks (four if the calendar falls right between semesters). On that annual trip we get away from our normal routine and spend three weeks doing whatever—eating at our favorite places, visiting family, playing card games, having snowball fights, etc. That trip has become sacrosanct for us, and a necessary part of unplugging from the work appliances that zap our energy.

While not a bulleted list, this is something of what my rule of life looks like. It has theological roots, and is formed by Scripture and the saints (whether it actually quotes any verses or not.)

Some Thoughts on Formulating a Rule of Life

It's almost time for you to begin thinking about developing your own rule of life. As you think about it, let me offer you some practical advice to guide you in the design stages.

1. **Focus on action.** As you're designing your rule, try to stay away from statements like "I want to ..." or "I hope to ..." or "I'll *try* to ..." (I hear master Yoda saying, "Do, or do not. There is no try." Rather than saying, "I'll try to get up early for prayer," focus more on action statements like, "I will rise at 6:00am and pray for 30 minutes." This will help tie your rule to demonstrable action rather than hopes, dreams, and unfulfilled wishes.

2. **Keep it realistic.** One of the most common mistakes in developing a rule of life for the first time is the mistake of over-committing.

Many beginners bite off more than they can chew, probably the result of mere intellectual conversion to the potential of a new and exciting idea. On learning of what a rule of life can do, they embark on an optimal plan that includes two hours of prayer and four chapters of Bible reading a day. Needless to say, the rule quickly becomes an insupportable burden."⁸ So strike a proper balance between the spiritual life you *want* to live and the spiritual life you're *able* to live. You may say that you want to spend two hours a day in prayer, but your schedule may not allow it. Be honest about that. The old adage comes into play here, "Pray as you can, not as you can't."

3. **Keep it adaptable.** If we learn anything from the Jewish leaders that Jesus encountered, it's that any rule has a tendency to become a crushing and burdensome law that is unable to be broken. Don't let your rule become a legalistic, Pharisaic burden. Keep it adaptable. You may say, "I will get up at 6:00am every morning to pray," but if you had an emergency the night before that kept you up until 2:00am, then the most spiritual thing you need to do is sleep. (Never underestimate the spiritual value of a good night's sleep!) Serving at the soup kitchen on Saturday night may be a priority for you ... unless your kid is sick and needs you to stay

⁸ Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 193.

home. Always keep the goal of your rule in view: to love God with everything you have—all your mind, soul, strength, heart, time, money, talent, resources, influence, etc.

We need to strike a balance between flexibility and perseverance, especially at the beginning of the implementation of our rule. Flexibility is needed in the initial stages when we are still trying to find our rhythm. Some changes or adjustments may be necessary. On the other hand, we should not be too quick to make changes just because our scheme does not seem to work initially. We need to give ourselves some time to try out the scheme before deciding whether certain parts need to be changed. Developing a new habit, especially if it is a good habit, takes time.⁹

4. ***Design a Plan for YOU.*** If you've never done this kind of thing before, you may find it tempting to adopt someone else's plan, or various individual elements of another person's rule of life. If you are more alert in the morning, then it's probably best to focus your prayer and study time then, rather than trying to do so in the evening when you're groggy and tired. Ask yourself what will prod, challenge, and complement *your* strengths and weaknesses rather than someone else's. Marjorie Thompson asks three good questions that are helpful for designing a rule of life:

- a. What am I deeply attracted to, and why?
- b. Where do I feel God is calling me to stretch and grow?
- c. What kind of balance do I need in my life?¹⁰

If you can reflect upon and answer these questions, then your rule of life will not only focus on channeling your strengths, but will help to develop some weak areas of your life.

The following links might be helpful.

1. the C. S. Lewis Institute's document "A Personal Rule of Life."
(http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/webfm_send/338). Their post is shorter and works from some of the same sources that I'm working from, so it will be a bit redundant for you.
2. This article from The Gospel Coalition: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/skip-resolutions-make-rule-life/>

⁹ Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 195.

¹⁰ Thompson, *Soul Feast*, 142.