

RULE FOR LIFE

WE ALL HAVE RULES LIKE “Do your best.” “Never give up.” “Never say never.” “Just do it.” These mottos tether us to certain behaviors and attitudes so we can, in the words of another rule, “be all we can be.” They help us live toward what we most want. Developing a “rule for life” is a way of being intentional about the personal rhythms and guidelines that shape our days. One of the early Christian rules for life is found in Acts 2:42. Here we find that believers “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” This rule shaped their lives and hearts in the circumstances they were in. It acknowledged the impossibility of becoming like Christ through effort alone. The rule offered disciplines that made space to attend to the supernatural presence of the Trinity at work in and among them. The rule of the early church described distinct practices that were different than the cultural norms. Over the years Christians have developed rules and rhythms for living that center their lives in loving Christ rather than the world. The Rule of Saint Benedict is an example of an ancient rule still in practice today.

A rule for life is a simple statement of the regular rhythms we choose in order to present our bodies to God as our “spiritual act of worship” (Romans 12:1). Each rule, or rhythm, is a way we partner with God for the transformation only he can bring. Rules keep our lives from devolving into unintended chaos. They aren’t a burdensome list of dos and don’ts, enumerating everything you might do in a day. Life-giving rules are a brief and realistic scaffold of disciplines that support your heart’s desire to grow in loving God and others.

A rule honors your limits and God-given longings. It mitigates against grandiosity and must be written for who you are, not for who you aren’t. It addresses your world, your sphere of influence, your fears of loss of productivity, your relationships. It takes into account where you need to stretch and change as well as where you are tired and need balance.

Don’t be afraid to experiment with a rule; it can easily be changed and revised, but should not be subject to whims. Allow yourself to settle into the rule so it has time to shape your life. Ultimately a rule will help you love God more. If it becomes a legalistic way of earning points with God, it should be scrapped.

Before making a rule, take stock of your desires, natural rhythms, limits and times of closest connection to God. The following questions can provide you with insights about what is most important to you in a rule. (If the word *rule* makes you anxious, write a “rhythm for life.”)

WRITING A RULE

1. When and where do you feel closest to God? How do you enter most deeply into an awareness of his love for you?
Pay attention to the experiences, practices and relationships that draw you toward God.
Are there particular practices that open you to God?
Are there practices that seem to stymie you?
2. What is most important to you?
What gives you a sense of security and self-worth?
What would people who know you best say it's like to live and work with you?
Where do your relationships need attention?
Who do you want to become?
What receives the most attention in your life? Your spouse? Job? Family? Friends? Hobbies?
(These are not bad things. But when we love them more than God, we have an idol in our heart. See "Detachment.")
If you had six months to live, how would you spend your time?
If you could write your own eulogy, what would you want to say?
3. What do you currently do to realize your goals and longings? Work? Study? Pray? Network? Socialize? Diet? Work out?
Which of these things hinder and which help your spiritual journey?
4. What practices suit your daily, monthly and yearly rhythms and cycles?
What limitations are built into your life at this moment?
What longings remain steady throughout?
What responsibilities and rhythms change with various seasons?
5. 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.
6. Choose several disciplines that arise from your desire for God's transforming work and that suit the limits and realities of your life. Begin your practice.

SAMPLE RULES FOR LIFE

- Dedicate every day (in the morning) for the glory of God.
- Confess my sins before I go to bed.
- Worship the Lord alone and with others.
- Practice the presence of God.
- Don't hold grudges—forgive others.
- Eat sensibly.
- Pray for others.

- See my spiritual director once a month.
- Give all wandering thoughts to my Savior.

A RULE FROM PSALM 16

“I said to the LORD, ‘You are my Lord;
apart from you I have no good thing.’”

- Set my heart on God.

“As for the saints who are in the land,
they are the glorious ones in whom is all my delight.”

- Journey with friends.
- Delight in the body of Christ.
- Reach out.

“The sorrows of those will increase
who run after other gods.”

- Confess

“LORD, you have assigned me my portion and my cup;
you have made my lot secure.

The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
surely I have a delightful inheritance.”

- Give thanks.

“I will praise the LORD, who counsels me;
even at night my heart instructs me.”

- Worship and praise.
- Listen, pay attention, be teachable.

“I have set the LORD always before me.
Because he is at my right hand,
I will not be shaken.”

- Persevere and hope.
- Speak courageously.

“Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;
my body also will rest secure.”

- Take myself less seriously.
- Receive my body as it ages.

“You will fill me with joy in your presence,
with eternal pleasures at your right hand.”

- Live in the presence of God.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What unspoken rules govern your life right now?
2. How do you determine what you will and won't do?
3. Does the idea of a rule for life appeal to you? Why or why not?
4. How has being disciplined affected your life?
5. How does a rule for life differ from a mission statement?

SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

1. Write a rule for life using the questions in "Writing a Rule." Take your time. Answer a question a day until you feel you have the information you need to write a life-giving rule.
2. Read the Rule of St. Benedict. What does this ancient rule show you about the Christian life? • What parts of this rule might encourage you today?
3. Look at the disciplines that consistently thread their way through Jesus' life. How do they shape what he did or didn't do? • Which of these disciplines do you consistently practice?
4. Consider where you are longing to change yet find changing difficult to impossible. Talk to God about this area in your life. Acknowledge your powerlessness to change through your own efforts. Ask God to give you a way of making space for him in the middle of this difficult place. • Consider which spiritual practice can provide you with a rhythmic awareness of God's work in and through you to accomplish his good purpose. Consistently practice your discipline. When you fail, gently come to God and begin again.
5. A rule for life can act like a plumb line, allowing you a still point from which you can gauge the intentionality of your spiritual journey. On a regular basis look at your life in light of your rule. What do you see? • Where is God drawing you? • What is giving you life? • Where is your life out of control and not centered in Christ?

RESOURCES ON A RULE FOR LIFE

Living with Contradiction by Esther de Wall

The Rule of St. Benedict

Soul Feast by Marjorie Thompson