

The Practice of the Rule of Life

In his book *The Second Mountain*, David Brooks writes about what is required to keep a commitment to love--whether it's love committed to a spouse, to a career, or to God.²⁰⁸ "... the most complete definition of a commitment is this: falling in love with something and then building a structure of behavior around it for those moments when love falters."

Staying in love, with God and with neighbor, requires effort and intentionality. It demands, as Brooks reveals, structures for those moments when love falters. The classic Christian phrase for this is spiritual disciplines. Serving. Protesting. Praying. Reading. And hundreds of other private and public acts, personal and corporate acts. These are not ends in themselves. They are the means by which we nurture and protect love. We've explored some of the many disciplines available to us in this book.

A friend of mine was struggling to stay engaged in the spiritual disciplines he had chosen. Each time we talked he shared how difficult it was to pray or read or serve. But then he had an epiphany. "I started seeing each of these practices as a way of growing in love," he said. And now he finds abundant energy and motivation for these practices.

The earliest Christians thus committed to what they called "a rule of life." They understood that certain practices and rituals had to be embraced and embodied in order to become who we were meant to be. Stopping to pray at multiple hours during the day. Resting in silence and stillness. Listening and responding to the movement of the Spirit. These and hundreds of other disciplines shaped them into selfless saints. They knew that loving God doesn't just happen. We don't merely drift into it. It's something we work at over an entire lifetime, day by day, hour by hour.

The Christian life is about becoming genuine and selfless lovers of God and lovers of people (Matt. 22). But if we had to get to that finish line the day of our baptism, or even today, most of us could not. We are not capable (yet) of living and loving as Jesus did. We are, however, capable of some attitudes and actions that lean in this direction. And by focusing on what we can do, and then slowly increasing that over a lifetime, we reach our goal.

The "what we can do," are called "spiritual disciplines." They are the things we are capable of now that can lead to the life we want to be capable of in the future. For example, someone wronged by a careless and callous family member may not be able to forgive that person today. But they are able to pray a short line every day like "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." And this small step repeated over time slowly increases their capacity for forgiveness.

Spiritual disciplines are like the training runs taken in the months prior to a half-marathon. They are anything you *can* do with direct effort that will eventually help you do what you *cannot* do with direct effort.²⁰⁹ We must, therefore, not simply *try* hard to move along

²⁰⁸ David Brooks, *The Second Mountain*, (Random House 2019), 56.

²⁰⁹ John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted* (Zondervan, 2015), 47.

in this journey--we must *train* hard.²¹⁰ Spiritual disciplines are how we go into training to become more and more like Jesus.

They are not the only means by which God propels us down the path toward Christlikeness. God uses three things to shape us deeply:

1. the *trials* of life,
2. the powerful indwelling of the *Holy Spirit*, and
3. spiritual *disciplines*.²¹¹

Spiritual disciplines, in concert with the empowerment of the Spirit and the hard transformation brought by suffering eventually train us into people who are who we were created to be.

Almost anything can be a spiritual discipline. Adele Calhoun has compiled a list of seventy-five practices and habits known in the church to be effective in their ability to train us into Christlikeness. These include accountability partners, breath prayers, centering prayer, detachment, examen, fixed-hour prayer, gratitude, hospitality, intercession, journaling, liturgical prayer, memorization, practicing the presence, rest, Sabbath, truth-telling, unplugging, *visio divina*, waiting and many others.²¹² You can find her full list at <https://www.chrisaltrock.com/spiritual-practices/>

To these we can add almost anything. For example, Tish Harrison Warren explores the way in which ordinary actions and circumstances can be utilized as spiritual disciplines. She explores how mundane actions like making the bed, brushing your teeth, eating leftovers, checking email, drinking tea, sleeping and many others may be approached as spiritual disciplines.²¹³

The key is intentionality. “Intentionality,” one of my spiritual mentors always said, “is the first spiritual discipline.” Dallas Willard proposes that three letters can summarize any successful approach to pursuing spiritual practices: V - vision, I - intention, and M - means.²¹⁴ We need a *vision* for the person we desire to become. We must know the *means* or steps or practices we must follow to achieve that vision. And, we require a conscious and *intentional* decision to orient our life around that vision and those means. Almost anything done with the intention of loving God and loving people in the way of Christ can become a spiritual discipline that trains us and shapes us over time.

An important step toward intentionality is developing what is called a “rule of life.” The word “rule” means “trellis” (Greek). A trellis enables a grapevine to get off the ground and grow upward, becoming more fruitful. A “rule” of life similarly enables us to grow upward and become more fruitful. It is, at its most basic, the intentional and conscious list of practices and habits we intend to engage in during a season of life to move toward our goal in the spiritual life.

²¹⁰ Dallas Willard *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (HarperOne, 1999), 95.

²¹¹ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission* (HarperOne, 2014), 26.

²¹² Adele Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook Revised and Expanded* (IVP, 2015).

²¹³ Tish Harrison Warren *Liturgy of the Ordinary* (IVP, 2019).

²¹⁴ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, (NavPress, 2012), 82-90.

²¹⁵ It is the pattern of spiritual disciplines that provide structure and direction for our spiritual growth.²¹⁶

How do you select spiritual disciplines that make up your “rule of life”? There are three basic questions that begin to clarify the list for us:²¹⁷

1. What spiritual disciplines do you feel drawn to in this season of life?
2. In what areas of your life do you sense God calling you to stretch or grow?
3. What kind of balance do you need in your life (e.g., between “passive” practices like solitude and “active” practices like “serving,” etc.).

Reflecting on these three issues can help identify certain spiritual practices and habits that are required in this point in your life.

Stephen Macchia urges us to consider the whole breadth of our life when writing a rule of life.²¹⁸ There are at least five factors to consider:

1. *Time* - practices that deepen our walk with God.
2. *Trust* - practices that improve the basic relationships with people in our lives.
3. *Temple* - habits you’ll adopt to be a better steward of your body, mind, soul and spirit (e.g., self-care).
4. *Treasure* - habits you’ll engage in to be a better steward of your resources.
5. *Talent* - spiritual disciplines that enable you to be on mission with God in the world.

Macchia urges people to select practices and habits in each of these five areas.

Another factor in selecting spiritual disciplines for a “rule of life” is to choose those that best fit what Gary Thomas calls your “sacred pathway”--the way you best connect to God.²¹⁹ We explored those in an earlier chapter. You can find disciplines tied to each pathway here:

<https://www.chrisaltrick.com/spiritual-practices/>.

Yet another way to approach crafting a rule is to consider the three basic elements of life with God:²²⁰

1. God *with* us. This is the *relational* aspect of our spirituality. Some spiritual disciplines excel at developing and deepening our awareness of God’s presence, our sense of his love, and the companionship he offers.
2. God *in* us. This is the *transformational* aspect to our spirituality. Some spiritual habits are perfect for partnering with God in the transformation of our character. These are the habits that better enable us to live out the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, etc.
3. God *through* us. This is the *vocational* element to our spirituality. Some spiritual practices focus on the way we join God in carrying out his kingdom mission on the earth.

You might spend some time reflecting on these three areas of your life with God and on

²¹⁵ Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* Updated Edition (Zondervan, 2017), 189-206.

²¹⁶ Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast*. (Westminster John Knox, 1995), 137-146.

²¹⁷ Thomsson.

²¹⁸ Stephen Macchia, *Crafting a Rule of Life* (IVP, 2012).

²¹⁹ Gary Thomas, *Sacred Pathways* (Zondervan, 2010).

²²⁰ Built from material in Glen Scorgie *A Little Guide to Christian Spirituality* (Zondervan, 2007).

identifying some practices and habits that nurture each.

Once chosen, practices and habits may need to be re-evaluated regularly. A practice that bears fruit today, may not in the future, because of changes in your life-stage, health, schedule, etc.

Below is a worksheet combining several of the factors above. You may find it useful as you consider your rule of life.

| Type of Practice | List of Practices | Timing of Practices How often I'll practice them: Daily, Weekly, Monthly, Annually |
|--|---|--|
| <p>God WITH Me Relational Practices that enable me to enjoy and experience <i>God's presence, companionship, and friendship.</i> (Macchia's "time") Loving God Loving Self</p> | <p>1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____ 4. _____ 5. _____</p> | <p>1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____ 4. _____ 5. _____</p> |
| <p>God IN Me Transformational Practices that allow me to partner with God in the <i>transformation of my character.</i> (Macchia's "treasure," "trust," and "temple") Loving God Loving Neighbor Loving Self</p> | <p>1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____ 4. _____ 5. _____</p> | <p>1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____ 4. _____ 5. _____</p> |
| <p>God THROUGH Me Vocational Practices that permit me to <i>participate with God in his purposes in the world.</i> (Macchia's "talent") Loving God Loving Neighbor Loving Self</p> | <p>1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____ 4. _____ 5. _____</p> | <p>1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____ 4. _____ 5. _____</p> |