

### Creating a Rule of Life

"The ancient monastic tradition called a "rule" offers a simple, compelling way to set boundaries. In monastic communities, a rule represents a voluntary commitment to do and not do particular things. It is a decision, made in a time of clarity, that helps guide choices the rest of the time. Rules turn intentions into specific commitments, commitments into actions, actions into habits and habits into a way of life."<sup>1</sup>

"How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives."<sup>2</sup>

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Rules of Life work for individuals as well as communities. A rule of life...

- is a time-tested spiritual tool from the Christian tradition to help people live out their faith
- outlines a way to turn our good spiritual intentions into regular actions, and ultimately, a life well lived
- gives us stability through times of transition (changing life circumstances as well as changing cultural circumstances)
- gives us focus in a world of distractions

### Where Did Rules of Life Come From?

Rules of life in the Christian tradition originated with the rise of monasticism from the desert mothers and fathers in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries. The best known is **the Rule of Benedict**, written around 530-540. The Rule of Benedict has subsequently guided Benedictine and other intentional Christian communities for 1,500 years. It was written for ordinary people, combining theoretical principles (e.g. reflections on classical Christian virtues such as charity, humility, faithfulness) with practical guidelines (e.g. when and how to clean the communal kitchen). In its historical context, it was flexible, moderate, humane, and consciously adapted to its particular time and place -- in other words, liveable!

Though Christian communities over the centuries have necessarily adapted and updated many features, the Rule of Benedict contains much spiritual wisdom and is still widely read today.

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<sup>1</sup> Jedd Medefind, "Here's the Best Thing You Can Do for Your Life in 2017," *Washington Post*, December 30, 2016, sec. Acts of Faith Opinion, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/12/30/heres-the-best-thing-you-can-do-for-your-life-in-2017/>. Accessed June 27, 2018

<sup>2</sup> Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*, 1. ed., 11. print (New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1995).

**What Is – and Isn't -- a Rule of Life?**

A rule of life is a set of guidelines for how we spend our energy and time, in the light of our voluntary and vocational commitments. How does your faith make a difference in your life? In your schedule? In your relationships?

The word "rule" comes from Latin "regula" -- think "regular" -- these are *regular practices* that we voluntarily commit to living out.

<b>What a Rule of Life Is</b>	<b>What a Rule of Life Is Not</b>
Cyclical, rhythmic, seasonal, regular, routine (e.g. maintaining a house, tending a relationship, keeping a garden)	A list of projects or goals with end points (e.g. building a house, completing the terms of a contract, passing a class)
Simple, forgiving, minimal, realistic and <i>achievable during a moderately challenging period</i> (e.g.. make the bed daily, volunteer at the food bank once a month)	Wishful thinking, can't live it out regularly in "real life" (e.g. four hours of daily Bible study, plus my house is a spotless sanctuary)
Based in our God-given aspirations and vocations, but comes down to a set of <i>practices</i> (concrete actions, at regular times)	A set of principles without practices (but your faith, values and principles should shape your rule)
Concrete – when, what, where, how, and with whom?	Abstract – “I’m going to be a great steward of the resources God gave me”
Adaptable - can change as the seasons of your life change	Rigid – check out Mark 2:27
Helps us relax and say "YES!" to life!!	Burdensome and legalistic
Open to feedback from other faithful influences; accountable and available for reality checks	“Just me and Jesus” (...or maybe it’s just me....)
Written down – so we can faithfully practice it, review it, adapt it, and integrate it into our habits, calendars, routines, reminders, plans, a.k.a. our LIVES.	Written upon your heart alone

Above all... a rule of life is, well, *liveable!*

**STARTER KIT for creating your personal Rule of Life\*\*\***

\*\*\*Dear friends in Christ, this handout presents just one way to craft a personal rule of life. See resources pages at the end for other perspectives and approaches.

**Step 1: start with a guiding phrase**, a phrase that reminds you of your big-picture personal commitment to how you live out your Christian faith. In your own words, how do you think of living out your faith, what phrases, what values, help you focus on the kind of person the Spirit is calling you to be? In your mind, how do you think of this? Examples: "being a person of peace," "living out my baptismal calling," "following Jesus," "Spirit-led," ????? Write down words or phrases in the space below that really resonate for you, words that help you focus on what God is calling you to become, how God is calling you to use your life:

*My guiding phrase is:*

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As you work with crafting your rule of life, return to this guiding phrase. Use it as a compass. *Does the activity or commitment you're considering help you to live that guiding phrase out, or does it distract you from living that out?* My guiding phrase is: "to be a person of peace." If a particular practice does not help me to grow as a "person of peace," I try something else.

**Step 2: Write down the rule of life you are already living.** Most of us already have commitments to live out our values, our faith; we just haven't written them down. But now we will. We start by writing our current commitments down, and then we can go (and grow) from there. We write down our commitments **in four areas of our lives**: our relationship with God, our relationships with others, our relationship with our selves (body, mind and spirit), and our relationship with creation (both natural and human-made).

**Write down 2-3 things** you already do on a regular basis, to sustain **your personal relationship with God** daily, weekly, seasonally? What's on your calendar? What's your morning routine? Is this something you would do on vacation?

**Write down 2-3 things** you already do on a regular basis, to sustain **your relationships with others** daily, weekly, seasonally? What's on your calendar? Who do you see on your time off? Where do you volunteer?

**Write down 2-3 things** you already do on a regular basis, to sustain **your relationship with your self** daily, weekly, seasonally? What do you do to relax? How do you care for your health? Do you observe any kind of personal Sabbath? What do you look forward to doing?

**Write down 2-3 things** you already do on a regular basis, to sustain **your relationship with creation (the natural world and human-created things)** daily, weekly, seasonally? Got a garden? Do you hike? Do you reduce/re-use/recycle? Do you put your phone on "Do Not Disturb"?

**Step 3: accountability!** This includes things like writing your rule down and reviewing it on a regular basis, and finding others to help you live out this faith practice. *To whom do you listen?* Who can tell you when you're being too hard on yourself? Who can suggest new challenges? Which books, friends, practices, spiritual directors, small groups might help you keep your rule? Write it down here:

**My Rule of Life first draft**

	<b>My relationship with God</b>	<b>My relationship with others</b>	<b>My relationship with my self</b>	<b>My relationship with creation (nature, technology)</b>
<i>Daily</i>				
<i>Weekly</i>				
<i>Seasonally (quarterly, a couple of times a year, annually)</i>				

My guiding phrase is: \_\_\_\_\_

Everything on your rule of life should help you grow toward that phrase.

How I plan to stay accountable in reviewing, adapting, and keeping my rule of life:

\_\_\_\_\_

## **RESOURCES for creating your personal Rule of Life**

Sample Rules of Life<sup>1</sup>:

### **Some Daily Practices of Pope Francis**

- Wake at 4:45 a.m. and spend time in prayer.
- Meditate on the daily reading and write a reflection.
- Take an afternoon nap.
- Hug and be present with each person I encounter.

### **Practices of Martin Luther King Jr. and Protestors (during SCLC protests in Birmingham, Alabama)**

- Observe with friend and foes the ordinary rules of courtesy.
- Perform regular service for others and the world.
- Refrain from violence of fist, tongue and heart.
- Strive to be in good spiritual and bodily health.
- Meditate on the life and teachings of Jesus.
- Remember always the nonviolent movement seeks justice and reconciliation – not victory.
- Walk and talk in the manner of love; for God is love.
- Pray daily to be used by God that all men and women might be free.
- Sacrifice personal wishes that all might be free.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted with permission from *Growing a Rule of Life Facilitator's Guide V.3*, developed by The Society of Saint John the Evangelist, Cambridge, Massachusetts ([www.ssje.org](http://www.ssje.org)) and The Virginia Theological Seminary's Center for the Ministry of Teaching, Alexandria, Virginia, ([www.vts.edu/cmt](http://www.vts.edu/cmt))

The Rules of Life on this page are – well – unliveable:

### **"Aspirational AI"**

To shape my relationship with God I will:

Begin each day with 50 minutes of meditation on the Scriptures. Attend all services at my church.

To shape my relationship with others I will:

Participate in a Men's Bible Study and an additional book group each week. Hold a party for all my office staff once a month at a time to be determined.

To shape my relationship with myself I will:

Exercise for an hour every day and do yoga before going to bed. Learn ancient Hebrew, Latin and Greek in the next year.

To shape my relationship with creation I will:

Give 50% of my income to an environmental charity. Sell my car and walk to work every day- rain or shine.

To help me keep my Rule of Life I will:

Write my Rule of Life from memory on my bathroom mirror every morning.

*\*Note the Rule above is overly ambitious. How so? What could be adapted?*

### **"Vague Val"**

To shape my relationship with God I will:

Pray more.  
Be thankful.

To shape my relationship with others I will:

Practice being polite.  
Focus more on my relationship with my boyfriend.

To shape my relationship with myself I will:

Let things go.  
Take more time for art.

To shape my relationship with creation I will:

Use less stuff.  
Ride my bike more.

To help me keep my Rule of Life I will:

Look at it from time to time.

*\*Note: The Rule above is overly vague. How so? What could be adapted?*

The Rules of Life below are good examples: they are clear and reasonable, and could probably be kept even in busy seasons of the year.

**"Jane L. Doe's" Rule of Life**

To shape my relationship with God I will:

Take a moment to count my blessings before I eat lunch.  
Spend 10-15 minutes each evening in prayer.

To shape my relationship with others I will:

Sing to my children at night.  
Surprise a family member, friend, or colleague with a note of appreciation each month.

To shape my relationship with myself I will:

Join the church's choir this September.  
Reduce the time I spend online to under an hour a day.

To shape my relationship with creation I will:

Install a water-saving device in the toilet before the year is out.  
Go on a 15-minute walk in the woods by my home each morning before work.

To help me keep my Rule of Life I will:

Review it each morning and thank God for having had the chance to write it!

**"John Q. Doe's" Rule of Life**

To shape my relationship with God I will:

Pray by myself for 30-45 minutes twice a week.  
Read and reflect on all four gospels over the course of the year.

To shape my relationship with others I will:

Volunteer at the homeless shelter twice a month. Take my wife out to dinner once a month.

To shape my relationship with myself I will:

Not do any office work on Sundays.  
Take time daily (15 minutes) for silent reflection.

To shape my relationship with creation I will:

Participate each season in my community's wetland cleanup. Bike or walk to work 2 times a week.

To help me keep my Rule of Life I will:

Meet with a friend once a month to share our progress and to support one another.



## Reflections

"Your way of acting should be different from the world's way. The love of Christ must come before all else." -- St. Benedict (480-587 A.D.)

"Over the years I've also struggled with the amount of structure to build into a rule. People I respect deeply have detailed rules with set times for prayer, established types of prayer and so on. They tell me that if they don't get up at 6:30 each morning and take a half hour of prayer time that they will never get to it during the day. But that doesn't work for me. It makes my spiritual life into something to add to my to-do list, and it becomes a chore and not a blessing. Over the years I have found that my rule for prayer needs to be more open-ended. I am committed to praying daily, but how and when I do that varies from day-to-day." – Debra Farrington, *Living Faith Day by Day*

Romans 12:1,2 : "So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to- work, and walking-around life—**and place it before God as an offering.** Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him." -- *The Message*

## Explore Further

### **Books**

- *Crafting a Rule of Life* by Steve Macchia -- methodical approach influenced by corporate culture and evangelical Christianity – if you prefer organizing your thinking with lists, grids, and mission statements, this might be helpful
- *At Home in the World: A Rule of Life for the Rest of Us* by Margaret Guenther -- personal essays by an Episcopal priest, spiritual director and theologian on evolving a rule of life; includes question prompts for reflection – if you prefer organizing your thinking by journaling and freewriting, this might be helpful
- *The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century* and *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today*, both by Joan Chittister. Not directly related to creating a personal rule of life (Chittister is a Benedictine nun), but filled with thought-provoking insights on how this deeply rooted communal Christian tradition both challenges and informs modern secular culture

### **Online resources**

- "Growing a Rule of Life" online resources and videos, from the Society of St. John the Evangelist: <https://www.ssje.org/growrule/>
- A short daily reading from the ancient Rule of Benedict, with reflections bringing the principles into the modern day, by Joan Chittister  
<https://www.eriebenedictines.org/daily-rule>

- <https://ruleoflife.com/> -- site related to Macchia's book *Crafting a Rule of Life* above -- has varied examples (some are drawings!) of personal rules of life on this page:  
<https://ruleoflife.com/myrule/>
- Northumbria Community: <https://www.northumbriacommunity.org/who-we-are/our-rule-of-life/what-is-a-rule-of-life/>
- George Washington's rules of civility  
<https://www.history.org/Almanack/life/manners/rules2.cfm>
- Benjamin Franklin's "Plan of Conduct" which he practiced all his life (a.k.a. "13 virtues")  
[http://www.ftrain.com/franklin\\_improving\\_self.html](http://www.ftrain.com/franklin_improving_self.html)
- Jake Knapp, "Six years with a distraction-free iPhone" <https://maketime.blog/article/six-years-with-a-distraction-free-iphone/> Tame your smartphone. (It worked on my Android phone, too!) Scroll to the bottom of the webpage to see how he did this. Scroll back to the top of the page to see why.