

Practicing the Way

Session Seven

Crafting a Rule of Life

When Debbie and I walked through northern Spain earlier this year on the Camino, we crossed a couple of the main Spanish wine growing areas, namely the Rioja and Bierzo areas. As it was April the vines were bare but you could see the extensive vineyards and the trellis's supporting them. You could see how each vine was rooted in the ground and drawing nutrients to grow and how essential the trellis is. You never see a vine growing wild on the ground. It always has a support structure underneath it.

Think of Jesus' teaching from John 15

⁵ 'I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

The soul of a disciple of Jesus is like a branch in the vine and we too need a trellis to grow. In the Christian tradition this is called a rule of life.

Over the last six sessions we have laid out a vision of being an apprentice of Jesus. How to find a fulfilled life following the way of Jesus. Now we seek to turn the vision into a reality. Transformation is possible but it's not inevitable.

It won't just happen. We need a plan.

We all have a plan for the things we most value. Most of us have a plan for our money what we call a budget.

We have a plan for our time what we call our schedule.

Most of us have a plan for our career, or holidays, or diet and exercise routine, but not for our apprenticeship to Jesus.

The question is how do we make a plan for us to be spiritually formed?

A rule of life is a set of practices and seasonal rhythms that intentionally create space for us to be with Jesus, become like Him and do what he did.

It is designed to help us slow down and be intentionally formed by Jesus.

Rule of life can sound off putting to our modern ears. But notice it is rule of life, singular, not rules of life (plural). The original Latin word was 'regula' from which we get the word

regular and regulation as well as rule and ruler. It literally meant a straight piece of wood. Many believe it was a word used for a trellis in a vineyard.

Back to John 15: I am the vine you are the branches....

Early Christian teachers picked up on Jesus' metaphor and followed it to its conclusion. For a vine to bear much fruit what does it need: a trellis or support structure to lift it up off the ground and guide it in the right direction and guard it from disease, and harmful predators. In the same way followers of Jesus need a rule of life to guard and guide us into transformation.

It's a way to schedule, into our daily life, practices and relational rhythms that align our time and our habits to our deepest desires -to be with Jesus and become like him.

The motivation behind the rule is not duty but desire. Think about how athletes discipline themselves with daily exercises or a musician disciplines themselves with daily practice. It is all motivated by a deeper desire to connect their daily disciplines if they want to see them become a deeper reality.

A rule of life as an apprentice of Jesus is made up of daily practices such as beginning your day in prayer and reading scripture. Weekly practices such as keeping sabbath and gathering in community, and monthly practices like serving the poor, witnessing and making time for retreat. It is what we continually do to offer our lives up to God for spiritual transformation.

In the chaos of modern life with all its hurry and digital distraction we need a rule of life to give us order and structure. It's very easy to fall into doomscrolling on your phone, watching TV all day and idling your days away. There are multi billion pound industries set up to tempt you to do that.

A Rule of Life is an ancient idea whose time has come again.

You may love it, or you may hate it. Especially if you are a more spontaneous fun-loving individual or if you come out of a religious legalistic background and are wary of any talk of rules.

Here's the thing: you already have a rule of life whether it is written or unwritten. Conscious or sub conscious, wise or foolish. Based on long term vision or short-term instant gratification. Moving you toward your desired destination or sabotaging your best intentions. Even if you only heard the phrase 'rule of life' three minutes ago – we all have one. It's the way in which we live: our morning routine, a difficult work day, a network of relationships, a budget. The question is not 'do you have a rule of life?' but 'do you know what your rule of life is?' And is it giving you the life you most deeply desire. Is it working for you or against you?

Many of us feel far from God so much of the time. Always in so much hurry. Stuck in our spiritual formation or wounded by our past hurts or dysfunctional patterns in our present. It is not that our rule of life is not working – it is. You and I are being formed for better or for worse by the choice architecture of our lives; all the relationships and environments and decisions that fill our days.

Some suggestions:

01 Start small – it is a temptation to overreach but this is a strategy that is doomed. As a general rule when it comes to the spiritual life start where you are and not where you think you ‘should’ be. We must find God in the contours of our ordinary life. Not the life we used to have, or planned to have, or wished we had. But the life we actually have. So start wherever you are and for most of us that means start small with what psychologists call tiny habits. Small, easy, joyful practices. Yes, an hour in prayer without your phone would be an ideal start to the day, but start with 15 minutes or five minutes or two minutes whatever.

02 Think subtraction, not addition. Take out more than you put in. Less is more. It’s tempting to write your rule as a list of things to do and that’s not all bad. But for most of us it’s just as important to make a list of things we are not going to do. A rule of life is about doing less not more. It’s about ruthless elimination of hurry.

03 Take a balanced approach. You can plot the life of Jesus along four axis points. Alone and in community. Doing, like service, witnessing and feasting - and not doing – solitude, silence, fasting. Naturally you are going to be drawn towards some practices and shy away from others. That’s normal. Just make sure you make a rule that covers all the practices and not just your personal preferences.

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04 Take into account your personality and season of life. Work with your personality not against it. If you are introverted and intellectual, carve out plenty of time to read and reflect. If you are more extroverted and action orientated it is doing more meaningful things with other people. Yes, we need a balance approach and some of us need way more of certain practices than others. Design a rule of life that is congruent with your personality and season of life. Just as our budget and schedule changes to our season of life our rule must as well.

05 There is no formation without repetition. Formation is slow and at times monotonous work. In the moment it can feel like it is not doing anything to us at all. It is - but it is just slow. You think you are just starting the day in prayer or going to church but actually you are becoming a bit more like Jesus. We just have to stay with it and find joy in what we are doing.

06 Do this in community. It is easy to think of crafting a rule of life as something that I do. I write my rule. That is not all bad. To repeat you already have a rule. Anything that can bring more intentionality to your apprenticeship with Jesus is a good thing. But historically a rule of life was for a community. It was designed to hold a community together around shared rhythms of spiritual formation. Like sharing sabbath together and having a meal in community together makes it so much more fun. Or like deciding to fast together and pool the money we would save to give to our food bank or hub. Just so much better in community.

A rule of life is not a formula but its friendship with Jesus. A rule of life is just a way to put friendship with Jesus at the centre of our life. Not off to the side. And we offer all that we are, the good the bad and the ugly up to God in love.

Again, transformation is God's work not ours. We are not in control of our spiritual transformation. God does it God's way at God's pace. Living by a rule is just a way of saying daily 'God here I am. Heal me, hear me, transform me. I love you. Love me into a person of love.'