

# Rule or Rhythm?





## — Rule or Rhythm? —

What do you think of when you hear the word “rule”? Do you think of corporate or government paperwork? Do you think of rigid policies written by people who have never lived in the world they are writing about? Or do you think of the restrictions of faith, the “dos and don’ts” of religion?

There is no denying that the word “rule” has a negative reputation. My dad used to say to me “If I didn’t care about you, I wouldn’t even spend time with you.” He usually said this after he had restricted me or had given me some rule to follow. Later in life, I understood that my dad established rules because he deeply cared for me. But he also taught me a completely different way to understand rules.

### **A RULE OF LIFE**

Rather than being simply a set of laws **to stop us**, a “rule of life” is a set of guidelines **to enable us**.

Stephen A. Macchia describes it this way —

*The word “rule” derives from a Latin word, **regula**, which implies not so much a system of rules or laws, but rather a way of regulating or regularizing our lives so that we can stay on the path we have set out for ourselves. A rule is like a trellis which offers support and guidance for a plant, helping it to grow in a certain direction ... In the ancient sense of the term, **regula** or rule meant “guidepost” or “railing,” something to hang onto in the dark, that leads in a given direction, points out the road or gives us support as we climb. <sup>1</sup>*

Many of us have a plan to build a secure financial foundation. We have retirement plans, education plans, career advancement plans, home improvement plans. Why would we think that spiritual growth would be any different? Why would we approach every other area of our lives with careful planning, while our spiritual formation approach remains haphazard and disorganized? Ken Gire describes the random way that many attend to their souls —

*It is, I suppose, possible to speak of the soul without speaking of God, just as it is possible to tour a cathedral without stopping to worship. Most of us, though, have taken that tour. And for most of us, it’s not enough ...*

*The pursuit of soul, if soul is all we're pursuing, is ... a cul-de-sac, and in the end, regardless how invigorating the walk, it doesn't lead beyond the neighborhood of who we are. <sup>2</sup>*

How can the pursuit of soul be a cul-de-sac? Isn't the soul the most important pursuit of all? Actually no. And this is the danger hidden in all the spiritual verbiage. What am I really seeking and what do I actually find when I am pursuing my soul? All I am seeking and finding is myself.

But, the search is not for myself but for God.

*To have found God and still to pursue him is the soul's paradox of love. <sup>3</sup>*

As we seek and find God, we must understand that this is a lifetime venture, that our search never ends. This changes the whole idea of seeking the kingdom first. We will seek and find, but then discover that there is so much more to seek and to find.

Following a spiritual journey that is built around the structure of spiritual disciplines or spiritual practices has often been called a "rule of life." Much like steppingstones along a pathway, a rule of life can function as a pathway of spiritual stepping-stones to guide our growth toward a broader and deeper relationship with our Father God.

The elements that make up a rule of life are as ancient as faith itself. All through scripture we find godly men and women practicing the disciplines of silence and solitude, reading and copying scripture, fasting and praying, serving and celebrating, listening and pondering, just to name a few.

And since the days of scripture, Benedict of Nursia, Augustine of Hippo, Francis of Assisi and hundreds of other writers through the centuries have all used this phrase, "rule of life" to describe the spiritual principles that have provided guidance for their day-to-day life. The "Golden Rule" has sometimes been described as a rule of life.

Following a "rule of life" establishes parameters and brings order. It provides a place for God to do his work of spiritual formation in the lives of men and women deepening their inner life.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh wrote of her own desire for this “order” in **Gift from the Sea**:

*But I want first of all ... to be at peace with myself. I want a singleness of eye, a purity of intention, a central core to my life that will enable me to carry out these obligations and activities as well as I can. I want, in fact — to borrow from the language of the saints — to live “in grace” as much of the time as possible ... By grace I mean an inner harmony, essentially spiritual, which can be translated into outward harmony ... I would like to achieve a state of inner spiritual grace from which I could function and give as I was meant to in the eye of God. <sup>4</sup>*

### **THE DISCIPLINE OF THE DISCIPLINES**

There is a clear link between discipline and following a “rule of life.” But notice what discipline does not mean. Discipline is not simply engaging in many disciplines. Discipline does not describe a rigid, highly organized, minutely scheduled person. In Jesus’ day, the Pharisees were very rigid and organized, but their spirits, their souls, were not open to being shaped by God. I like the distinction John Ortberg makes —

*Spiritual transformation is not a matter of trying harder, but of training wisely. This is what the apostle Paul means when he encourages his young protégé Timothy to “train yourself in godliness.” This thought also lies behind his advice to the church at Corinth: “Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.” ... A disciplined person is someone who can do the right thing at the right time in the right way with the right spirit. <sup>5</sup>*

### **THE ENEMY OF A RULE OF LIFE**

Some time ago when technology was in its exciting honeymoon period, a common belief predicted that a four-day work week was just around the corner. All the time-saving devices and emerging software would relieve us and make life easier. We could accomplish the same amount of work in much less time. It was a nice thought, but it did not take into consideration just how driven is the style of our lives. Rather than take advantage of the opportunity to slow down, we saw in the time saving technologies the ability to work from anywhere and be contacted by anyone, at any time.

And so, the average person has not recovered time, they are starved for time. Scattered, distracted, overloaded, and tired, few have any kind of workable “rule of life,” beyond forcing as much as possible onto their to-do lists. They are trained to exploit every spare minute they have, and they end each day exhausted. And sadly, they often leave a trail of broken, neglected, and wounded relationships as they quickly and superficially move through each day.

Speed, doing as much as possible in as little time as possible, this is what impresses people today.

But God is not impressed with speed. His preference is to work slowly and carefully in our lives, moving at the speed of our hearts. John 16:12 reports Jesus as saying, *“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now”* (ESV). This is the style of our God. He is attentive to us and teaches us at a pace that we can “bear.”

I will always remember how it hit me when I first heard Randy Harris <sup>6</sup> say —

*“If you are over-extended, you are under-committed.”*

Those of us who pride ourselves on our many accomplishments might try to push back on this statement and say, *“How can we be under-committed when we have given ourselves to so many good things?”* The answer is painfully clear, *“We have given ourselves to so many things that we cannot give much of ourselves to any one of them.”*

Gordon MacDonald <sup>7</sup> explored how Jesus separated out people on the basis of their tendency to be **driven** or their willingness to be **called**. He looked at motives, the source of gratification, and the level of spiritual energy. Jesus’ goal for the Twelve was to change their motives for following him from selfish to selfless, to replace their political gratification with one of sacrificial service, and to deepen the spiritual energy of all of them. He was changing and shaping their very spirit, helping them find a “rule of life” and there was no quick way to accomplish this level of spiritual formation.

### **RULE OR RHYTHM?**

There is no question that following a rule of life has helped many. But I am coming to appreciate the word “rhythm” instead of “rule.” Words often find their meanings in the context of their culture, and sometimes the culture uses a word in such a way that its meaning is altered. I think that the word “rule” is a wonderful, powerful word, but in the context of

spiritual formation, it helps me to place its cousin “rhythm” next to it. Having a “rhythm of life” or a “spiritual rhythm” in my life sounds healthier. There is order in rhythm, but there is nothing rigid about it.

For example, consider the rhythm of the changing seasons — from spring to summer to fall to winter the change is constant and predictable. But rather than feeling rigid, this consistent rhythm is filled with beautiful variety. Or notice how each day ends with the setting of the sun. The rhythm is so unswerving and steady that we plan our day’s work and our evening’s social schedule by its faithful regularity. But this constant sunset is filled with an amazing mixture of colors each evening. Even the predictable rhythms of our coastal tides never send to the shore the same wave twice. Perhaps this is part of the calming, healing effect of quietly watching and listening to the ocean. The experience is both regular and diverse, predictable and surprising, faithful and provocative. Nothing in God’s creation is rigid, but all of it is rhythmic.

And so, to practice the spiritual disciplines in a stiff and rigid manner, to experience silence, solitude, contemplation, simplicity, prayer, or journaling with a strict, inflexible spirit is to miss the rhythm that gives these spiritual disciplines their purpose and their power.

The answer is found in deliberately structuring our lives around God’s rhythms:

- Daily Rhythms
- Annual Rhythms
- Weekly Rhythms
- Larger Rhythms every 5-7 years

Whether you call it a “*rule of life*” or a “*spiritual rhythm*,” giving yourself to the regular practice of these time-tested spiritual disciplines can only bring clarity to the mind, calmness to the soul, and joy to the heart.

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1 Stephen A. Macchia, Crafting a Rule of Life (Downers Grove, IL, 2012), p. 14.

2 Ken Gire, Windows of the Soul (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), p. 11.

3 A. W. Tozer, The Pursuit of God (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1982), p. 15.

4 Anne Morrow Lindbergh, Gift From The Sea (New York: Pantheon Books, 1955, 2005), p. 17-18.

5 John Ortberg, The Life You’ve Always Wanted (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), pgs. 47, 50

6 Religion professor at Abilene Christian University.

7 Gordon MacDonald, Ordering Your Private World (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), p. 29.

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