

Instructions for developing A Personal Rule of Life¹

A Rule of Life is an intentional pattern of spiritual disciplines that provides structure and direction for growth in holiness. A Rule establishes a rhythm for life in which is helpful for being formed by the Spirit, a rhythm that reflects a love for God and respect for how he has made us. The disciplines which we build into our rhythm of life help us to shed the “old self” and allow our “new self” in Christ to be formed. Spiritual disciplines are means of grace by which God can nourish us. Ultimately a Rule should help you to love God more, so if it becomes a legalistic way of earning points with God or impressing others, it should be scrapped. If the traditional, ancient term “rule” concerns you because it sounds legalistic, think of “rule” as a “rhythm of life” or as a “Curriculum in Christlikeness” (Dallas Willard), or as a “Game Plan for Morphing” (John Ortberg).

In order to be life-giving, a Rule must be *realistic!* It is *not an ideal* toward which you are striving to soar. Instead, your initial Rule should be a minimum standard for your life that you do not want to drop below. It’s a realistic level of engaging in the spiritual disciplines for which you can honestly and truly be held accountable.

Rules will vary widely, depending on the character and life situation of a person. Not only will people choose different disciplines but how the disciplines are practiced will also vary. Although every believer should pray, for example, the frequency or length or times or kind of prayer will differ. Thomas à Kempis writes, “All cannot use the same kind of spiritual exercises, but one suits this person, and another that. Different devotions are suited also to the seasons [of life]....”

The Rule which you write should include three things: a self-assessment, an explanation of how you will practice your chosen disciplines, and your form of accountability. First, provide a clear self-assessment that briefly describes your current situation in life—family responsibilities, work schedule, and other life circumstances. Your self-assessment should also reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of your character. Are you blessed, for example, with self-control, a compassionate heart, a bright mind, or a spirit of joy? Which vices do you most struggle with? It might be helpful to evaluate yourself in relation to the 7 deadly sins and their opposites:

Sloth	Fruitfulness (not productivity)
Envy	Love
Greed	Generosity
Pride	Humility
Anger	Gentleness
Lust	Chastity
Gluttony	Self-denial, moderation

If you struggle with anger, for example, keep a journal for a week, noting what you get angry about and why, and rating each incident. Once you’ve identified a weakness, you can do

¹ These instructions quote, paraphrase, and adapt Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast*, chap. 9, and Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, pp. 35-39.

something about it.

In general, talk over your self-assessment with someone who knows you well and ask for that person's candid feedback. Beginning your Rule with an honest self-assessment will push you to develop a rhythm of life which is unique to your personality, circumstances, and needs.

Second, describe the way in which you will practice specific disciplines. Your Rule should include an explanation of why your choices not only fit your situation in life but also how they address areas where you especially need discipline and growth. In other words, describe how your Rule contributes to the goal of your spiritual formation, namely, being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others. Always remember this goal as you develop your Rule.

Making choices about specific disciplines requires prayer and wisdom. As you decide on specific practices (e.g. how and when to pray, serve, practice simplicity, etc.), consider the following questions:

1. What disciplines and specific practices are you attracted to and why you are attracted to them?

There is nothing wrong with choosing spiritual practices because they seem suited to your personality (e.g. an introvert may be drawn to more inward disciplines). You will likely engage in those disciplines with the greatest consistency and satisfaction. They may not, however, be the practices that will stretch you toward the greatest growth or the ones you most need. Still, they are probably a good place to start, especially if you have little spiritual discipline in your life at the moment.

2. Where do you sense that God is calling you to stretch and grow? Where do you want to change?

Ask yourself and God why you resist particular disciplines. Perhaps a strong negative reaction to a practice such as fasting or self-examination may reveal that you are avoiding a part of your life in need of healing. Ask God to show you which disciplines you need in order to address weaknesses in your character.

3. What kind of balance do you need in your life?

Does your Rule exercise your thoughts, actions, and affections (head, hands, and heart)? Does your Rule contain both corporate and individual practices? Both inward and outward disciplines?²

² Don't be confused by the title "Personal Rule of Life." It's a "Personal Rule" (as compared to a communal Rule) because it's drawn up by you, it's about you, and you are the one committing yourself to it. "Personal Rule" does not mean that you only engage in inward disciplines or private disciplines. Your personal Rule should include corporate disciplines (such as worship, confession, celebration, or spiritual direction) and outward disciplines (such as service, simplicity, or chastity).

4. If you could hear your own eulogy, what would you want to hear?
5. Is your Rule realistic for you to commit to?

A Rule is not a bunch of things you must add onto an already busy life. The disciplines you choose should not only be realistic for your life but should also balance, help to prioritize, interweave, and impregnate your entire way of life, better enabling you to take your ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering [Rom. 12:1, *The Message*].

Once you have chosen your spiritual disciplines and explained of your choices, briefly state who will hold you accountable and pray for you as you practice your Rule. For this role, consider a friend, a small group, or a spiritual director. Spouses and other family members should know enough of your Rule to be able to encourage, or at least not interfere needlessly with, your practice. It may be unwise to expect your spouse to be the only person holding you accountable in your spiritual life. The person(s) holding you accountable should also help you to discern when your Rule needs to be re-assessed and adapted.

You are urged to be succinct and make your actual written Rule a ¾ to 1 page document. A highly distilled self-assessment of your character and life situation will be most helpful for identifying strengths, weaknesses, limitations and opportunities. Your chosen spiritual disciplines can be listed in bullet points with a brief explanation of the desires, goals or needs you are hoping to address. Finally, your method of accountability can be very briefly stated and explained. You will be more likely to remember, follow, and periodically revisit/revise a concise Rule of Life. If you want an example of a Rule of Life, ask your Mentoring Group leader to share his/hers.

Sometime during the fall semester of your first year with your Mentoring Group, you will present and discuss your Rule. Based on questions/feedback of your group and what you are learning about spiritual disciplines in 712, you may choose to revise your Rule. You should deposit this initial version of your Rule in your Mentoring Group folio by December 15. Further instructions can be found in ANGEL in the Assignments folder.

In each subsequent semester, Mentoring Groups will revisit each group member's Rule. If you make substantial changes to your Rule, you are encouraged to submit a revised version of your Rule in your folio. Further instructions for submitting a revised version of your Rule can be found in ANGEL in the Assignments folder.

Note: The Personal Rule of Life is an assignment that arises out of presentations and resources provided for students in 712. For additional information, the syllabus for 712 may be viewed in the ANGEL repository. Although students write a Personal Rule of Life for this course it is processed in their Mentoring Groups. The group leader provides a response in ANGEL and indicates to the professor teaching 712 that the student has completed the assignment.