

Putting It Together: A Rule of Life by Marvin Pritchard

Spiritual Transformation is the process of being changed into the likeness of Christ for the sake of others.

1 Timothy 4:7 (NASB)

“But have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women. On the other hand, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness”

2 Corinthians 3:18 (NIV)

“And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”

Our purpose is not:

- To enroll folks in a Bible study
- To form “bands of brothers (sisters) who will walk life’s journey together”
- To help a person solve their major life issues

While these three things may happen, our purpose is different:

Spiritual transformation is the work of the Holy Spirit; we can not transform our selves or anyone else. Our task is to help folks choose a way of life that helps them create the conditions in which spiritual transformation can take place by developing and maintaining a rhythm of spiritual practices that keep them open and available to God.

Ruth Haley Barton says that “many of us try to shove our spiritual transformation into the nooks and crannies of a life that is already unmanageable, rather than being willing to arrange our life for what our heart most wants. We think that somehow we will fall into transformation by accident”. It just doesn’t work that way.

Marjorie Thompson in her book, *Soul Feast*, offers an analogy for us. Certain kinds of plants need support in order to grow properly. Tomatoes need stakes, and beans must attach themselves to suspended strings. Creeping vines like clematis will grow on any structure they can find. Rambling roses take kindly to garden walls, archways and trellises. Without support, these plants would not have the space and sun they need to flourish, and their fruits would rot in contact with the soils. We would be unable to enjoy their beauty and sustenance.

When it comes to spiritual growth, human beings are much like the plants. We need structure and support. Otherwise our spirituality grows only in a confused and disorderly way. Structure gives us the freedom to grow as we were meant to.

In the Christian world the name for this kind of structure that supports our spiritual growth is rule of life. It is also referred to as a personal rule. One text I read suggested that if I feel uncomfortable or anxious about using the word rule, I can use the term rhythm of life.

Without a rule of life very little of what we read and study about spiritual formation and the disciplines would prove to be of any lasting value to us.

So now we want to talk about putting it all together; tying up everything we have learned so far. It is time to make some choices about the spiritual practices we have been learning.

How would one define a rule of life? Very simply, it is a pattern or rhythm of spiritual disciplines that provides structure and direction for growth in holiness.

The Latin term for rule is *regula*. From it we get our words *regular* and *regulate*. A rule is not meant to be restrictive or legalistic. However, it does require a commitment. It is intended to help us establish a rhythm of living. A rule of life gives us a way to enter the lifelong process of personal transformation. Ultimately, a rule will help you love God more.

Barton has suggested that a rule of life seeks to respond to two questions:

- Who do I want to be?
- How do I want to live?

Barton has combined the question to:

- How do I want to live so that I can be who I want to be?

A few things to be mindful about when considering on a rule of life:

- A rule of life is different for everybody. No two individuals will have exactly the same rule of life. We have a lot of latitude in a personal rule of life. A rule of life should be diverse, reflecting the needs and spiritual aspirations of the person.
- A rule of life should take into account your personal circumstances at this point in your life. A personal rule of life can change with the seasons in your life.

Marjorie Thompson in her book, *Soul Feast*, says, “Whatever your circumstances, it is always possible to include some form of spiritual discipline in your daily priorities.

If you want to become and remain physically healthily, you eat sensibly and exercise regularly. If you want to become spiritually healthily and remain replenished, you practice spiritual disciplines regularly.”

Be careful not to become legalistic about your rule of life. If it becomes a legalistic way of earning points with God, it should be scrapped. Barton suggests that, once we have developed a rhythm of spiritual practices, that we should have a great deal of flexibility. This is not a once and for all time decision. A rule of life needs to be realistic in light of the stage or season of our life. We should avoid being rigid and legalistic. This is a rhythm not a law.

Remember, the Spiritual disciplines are a means to an end; they are not the end. Do you recall the definition of spiritual transformation? It is the process of being changed into the likeness of Christ for the sake of others . . . that is the end.

- Don't try to take on too much at once. It is like eating . . . there are lots of foods that are good

for us and each one has unique nourishment to it. We need to resist the temptation to be greedy.

If the rule of life contains too much, albeit good stuff, it can soon turn into drudgery and we won't follow it. The question is: What can I realistically commit to? This is about honoring personal limitations. It is better to commit to a single practice and stick with it than to take on five and quit altogether because you cannot keep up.

□ Barton also suggests that an effective rhythm of spiritual practices will be balanced; a balance of disciplines that come easy to us and disciplines that stretch us.

□ Don't be afraid to experiment with your rule or rhythm. It can easily be changed and revised, but it shouldn't be subject to whims. Give yourself time to settle into your rule of life so that it has time to shape your life.

Ask me not where I live

or what I like to eat . . .

Ask me what I am living for

and what I think is keeping me

from living fully for that.

-Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*

What are you living for?

Resources:

Sacred Rhythms, Ruth Haley Barton

Soul Feast, Marjorie Thompson

Spiritual Disciplines Handbook, Adele Ahlberg Calhoun