



Rule or Rhythm?

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The average person is starved for time.

Scattered, distracted, overloaded, and tired, few have any kind of workable plan, beyond forcing as much as possible onto their to-do lists. They try to exploit every spare minute they have and end the day exhausted.

Of course, it's easy to talk about the average person. But, what about the average Christian?

In his book, **Windows of the Soul**, Ken Gire has written:

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 self is what most of us have been doing for much of our lives, even our spiritual lives. But the self is a cul-de-sac, and eventually we end up where we started. Footsore and just as frustrated, just as unfulfilled ...

The pursuit of soul, if soul is all we're pursuing, is not much different. It's a longer walk down a nicer street, but the street is still a cul-de-sac, and in the end, regardless how invigorating the walk, it doesn't lead beyond the neighborhood of who we are.

Amidst the busyness of life, few of us have an intentional, long-term plan for consistent, continual spiritual growth — in short, a rule of life.

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 stepping stones 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 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 listening, 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. I am not using this term in a strictly theological sense. By grace I mean an inner harmony, essentially spiritual, which can be translated into outward harmony. I am seeking perhaps what Socrates asked for in the prayer from the Phaedrus when he said, “May the outward and inward man be at one.” 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.

We want, and we need a rule of life to bring direction and order to our day-to-day.

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.

Rhythm
noun [rith -uh m] classical Latin
recurrent themes, flow, pulse, cadence

with beautiful
how each day
setting of the sun.
unswerving and

And so, to practice the spiritual disciplines in a stiff and rigid manner, to experience silence, solitude, contemplation, simplicity, prayer or journaling with an 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 ...
- Weekly Rhythms ...
- Annual Rhythms ...
- Larger Rhythms every 5-7 years ...

Whether you call it a “rule” or a “rhythm,” regularly practicing these time-tested spiritual disciplines can only bring clarity to the mind, calmness to the soul, and joy to the heart.