



The Practicing the Way Course

Teaching Notes

Session 07: Crafting a Rule of Life

Intro:

- I love driving through wine country ... and seeing row after row of green ... each vine rooting itself in the earth and reaching up to the sun to grow ...
- I'm struck by how essential the trellis is to the vine; you *never* see a vine growing wild on the ground; it *always* has a support structure underneath it.
- And I can't help but think of Jesus teaching:
 - "I am the vine, you are the branches, if you abide in me, *you* will bear much fruit."
(John 15v5)
- The soul is like a branch in a vine; and we too need a trellis in order to grow ...
- In the Christian tradition, this is called a Rule of Life ...

Set up:

- Over the last six sessions, we've set before you a vision of apprenticeship to Jesus.
- Now we're ready to shift gears and make a plan to turn that vision into a reality.
- Transformation *is* possible.
- But it's not inevitable.
- It won't just "happen."
- We need a plan.
- Pete Scazzero, of Emotionally Healthy Discipleship, has said:
 - "Nurturing a growing spirituality with depth in our present-day culture will require a thoughtful, conscious, intentional plan for our spiritual lives."¹
- We all have a plan for the things we *most value*.
- Most of us have a plan for our money, or what we call a budget; we have a plan for our time, or a schedule; many of us have a plan for our career or summer vacation or our diet or exercise routine.
- But not for our apprenticeship to Jesus.
- I've been around soccer moms with more of a plan for their kid's pathway to professional sports than for their spiritual formation.

- The question is: How do we make a “plan” to be spiritually formed?

Seam: Let me introduce you to the answer the first followers of Jesus came up with. They called it “A Rule of Life” ...

Rule of Life:

- A Rule of Life is a schedule and a set of practices and relational rhythms that create space for us to be with Jesus, become like him, and do as he did.
- It’s an intentional plan to slow down and simplify our life around being spiritually formed by Jesus.
- “Rule of Life” is ancient language, so it can sound strange or even off-putting to our modern ears.
- But notice; it’s *rule* of life (singular), not *rules* for life (plural).
- The original Latin word used by our spiritual ancestors was *regula*, where we get English words like *regular* and *regulation*, as well as *rule* and *ruler*, because it literally means a “straight piece of wood.”
- Some scholars believe it was the word used in the ancient Mediterranean for a trellis in a vineyard.
- In John 15, Jesus gave his most famous teaching on spiritual formation:
 - “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. 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. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.” (John 15v5-8)
- Early Christian teachers picked up on Jesus’ metaphor and followed it to its logical conclusion.
- For a vine to “bear much fruit,” what does it need? A trellis. A support structure, to lift it up off the ground, guide it in the desired direction, and guard it from damage, disease, and dangerous predators.
- In the same way, to “abide in the vine” and “bear much fruit,” apprentices of Jesus need a trellis, a support structure to guard and guide their lives into transformation.

- A Rule of Life is exactly that: a trellis. It's a way to schedule into our daily life practices and relational rhythms that align our time and habits to our deepest desires — to be with Jesus, and become like him.
- The motivation behind a Rule isn't duty; it's *desire*.
- Think of the way an athlete disciplines themselves with daily drills or a musician with daily practice ... it's all in service of a deeper desire ...
- They know, we have to connect our desires to daily disciplines if we want to see them become a reality.
- For apprentices of Jesus, a Rule of Life is made up of:
 - *Daily* practices: like beginning your day in prayer and the reading of Scripture.
 - *Weekly* practices: like keeping Sabbath and gathering with community.
 - And *monthly* practices: like serving the poor and preaching the gospel.
- It's all the practices we intentionally, repeatedly do, to offer our lives up to God for transformation.
- Put another way: A Rule of Life is an intentional plan for our spiritual formation.
- And in the chaos of modern life — with all its hurry and digital distraction and cross-pressures ... we need a Rule more than ever before.
- It is an ancient idea, whose time has come again.

You already have a Rule:

- You may love this concept of a Rule of Life, or you may hate it!
- Especially if you're a more spontaneous and fun-loving personality, *or* if you come out of a legalistic background and are leery of any talk of discipline.
- But here's the thing: *you already have a Rule of Life*.
- Whether it's:
 - Written or unwritten.
 - Conscious or subconscious.
 - 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've never heard the phrase Rule of Life until three minutes ago! You *have* one.
- We all do.
- We have a way in which we live: a morning routine, a typical day, a network of relationships, a budget, things we spend our time on, and so on.
- The question is not: Do you have a Rule of Life?
- It's: 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 a hurry, stuck in our spiritual formation, still living in wounding from our past or dysfunctional patterns in our present.
- The problem isn't that our Rule of Life isn't working; it's that it *is*!
- You and I are being *formed* — for better or for worse! — by the choice architecture of our lives — by *all* the habits and relationships and environments and decisions that fill our days.
- By our Rule of Life.

Seven tips:

- And now we're finally ready to craft a Rule of Life.
- Everything we do is invitational.
- We make recommendations, you make the decisions.
- But if you're ready to take the next step in your apprenticeship to Jesus and make an intentional plan for your spiritual formation, let me offer you a few tips ...

1. Start small

- It's easy to get over-excited and overreach, but this is a strategy doomed to fail.
- When it comes to the spiritual life, as a general rule: *start where you are, not where you "should" be.*
- We must find God inside the contours of ordinary life — not the life we used to have, or plan to have, or wish we had, but the life we *actually* have.

- So, start wherever you are.
- For most of us, that means start small.
- With what psychologists call “tiny habits” — small, easy, joyful practices for life with God.
- Yes, a full hour every morning for prayer before you touch your phone is ideal; but if that’s too big of a leap, start with 15 minutes. Or ten minutes. Or *two* minutes.
- Start there.

2. 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 if not *more* so to make a list of what we’re *not* going to do!
- A Rule of Life is not about doing *more*, but doing *less*!
- It’s about ruthlessly eliminating hurry from your life.

3. Take a balanced approach

- You can plot the practices of Jesus along four axis points:
 - Disciplines you do alone, and those you do in community. And ...
 - Disciplines of *doing*, like worship or feasting or service, and of *not* doing, like solitude, silence, or fasting.
- Naturally, you’re going to be drawn to some practices and shy away from others, that’s totally normal.
- Just make sure you design a Rule that covers the whole range of your formation, not *just* your personality preferences.
- That said ...

4. Take into account your personality and season of life

- Work *with* your personality, not against it.

- If you're more introverted and intellectual, carve out plenty of time to read and reflect; if you're more extroverted and action-oriented, prioritize *doing* meaningful things with other people.
- Yes, we need a balanced approach, but some of us need way more of certain practices than others.
- Design a Rule that is congruent with your personality *and* your season of life.
- Just as our budget and our schedule change through the various seasons of our lives, our Rule must as well.

5. There is no formation without repetition

- Formation is slow and at times monotonous work.
- In the moment, it often doesn't *feel* like it's doing anything to us at all.
- It is. It's just slow.
- But over time, the practices have a cumulative effect upon our spiritual formation.
- It's like Mr. Miyagi and the Karate Kid. In the moment, we just feel like we're waxing Mr. Miyagi's car or pounding nails into the dojo addition, but actually, we're becoming a karate master.
- In the moment, we just feel like we're beginning our day in prayer or practicing Sabbath or going to church, but actually, we're becoming like our Master, Jesus.
- We just have to stay with the process, and find *joy* in our ordinary life with God.
- Finally ...

6. Do this in community

- It's easy to think of crafting a Rule of Life as something I do: "*I write my Rule.*"
- And that's not bad! To repeat, "you already *have* a Rule," so anything that brings more intentionality to your apprenticeship to Jesus is powerful.
- But historically, a Rule of Life was for a *community*.
- It was designed to hold a community together around shared rhythms of spiritual formation.
- And following a Rule in community can change everything.
 - There's something about starting the Sabbath not just by yourself, but with a meal in community, that makes the entire practice far more joyful.

- There's something about fasting on Fridays, and knowing you're doing it with your community and all pooling the money you would have spent on food together to give to a local food bank.
- It's just *better* in community.
- So, as you make a rough draft of your Rule this coming week — *if at all possible* — do it in community.
- You could do it with one friend, or your small group or table community or women's Bible study. Or even with your entire church.
- This will be a lot messier and take a lot longer to figure out; that's okay; it will be worth it.

Conclusion:

- In your Guide is an example Rule of Life from Practicing the Way, that I live by with our community, along with a few other samples from different people in different stages of life.
- But this does not need to feel overwhelming ...
- Again, start *small*: your Rule may start as two or three simple practices: beginning your day by reading a Psalm, getting coffee with a close friend once a week, and spending a few hours each Sunday in Sabbath rest ... That's a beautiful start.
- You can always add practices over time.
- Just take the next step.

Set up for group conversation:

- Speaking of doing this all in community, let's take a few minutes to process this concept of a Rule of Life, and dream together about what this could look like.
- Circle up in your groups, and have a conversation around the following questions:
 1. What makes up your current Rule of Life?
 - As John Mark said, we already have a Rule of Life. What practices and relationships are currently the most central to your regular routine.
 2. As you think about designing a Rule of Life, how would you describe the spiritual needs of your personality and stage of life?
 3. What practices do you want to include in your Rule of Life?

4. Who would be important to incorporate in the process of building your Rule of Life?

Tutorial:

Week 7: Rule of Life

- We now come to the exercise this entire course has been building to: crafting a Rule of Life.
- When I was in my 20s, I was working in the corporate world in Japan as what they call a "7-11" man — which meant that my work day went from 7 in the morning until 11 at night. My life felt crazy back then. When I first became a pastor in Vancouver, Canada, I found myself working almost the same hours. I felt like I was constantly treading water.
- Establishing a rule of life — having a life rhythm that supports my relationship with Jesus — has felt like a literal life-line: it's been the most life-giving and transformative practice of my life.
- Ideally, your rule of life will feel like a gift, not an obligation — a "get to," not a "have to."
- If after crafting your rule, your life feels heavier, you likely have a self-constructed routine — not a Holy Spirit-inspired rhythm. If your rule is Spirit inspired, your life will feel supported, lighter, and freer. (Remember, as is true of the Sabbath: the rule is made for you, not you for the rule.)
- In your Guide, please turn to session 7 and consider the template:
- Now, there's no "right" way to do this! There's no one size fits all approach to spiritual formation. Feel free to be creative. Make sure your rule fits the unique person you are ...
- But, you may find it helpful to think about practices and relational rhythms in three categories: Daily, Weekly and Monthly or seasonally.
 1. First, let's look at Daily. What do you want to do — and not do — on a daily basis? For example, you might want to begin your day in silent prayer and by reading Scripture. And you might *not* want to begin your day by looking at news feeds or social media posts on your phone.
 2. Second, Weekly. What do you want to do on a weekly basis? For example, you might want to honor the Sabbath, worship at church, and share a meal with your community.
 3. Third, Monthly or seasonally. What rhythms do you want to work into your life regularly? For instance, you might want to incorporate the practice of a retreat, or a day in solitude, or serving those living in poverty, or sharing hospitality with your neighbors.

- In your Guide, you will find nine practices that we offer training for through Practicing the Way.
- We've introduced a number of them in this course:
- Some of these include:
 - Beginning your day with God: as you practice *solitude*, *prayer*, and *Scripture*.
 - A weekly *Sabbath*: a gift, in our era, we cannot afford to refuse.
 - And next week, we'll end by calling you to a regular touch point with *community*.
- These practices — that you're already doing — are the beginning of a Rule of Life.
- Our hope is that you build on this foundation and continue to refine it over time.
- If you're unable to incorporate all of these practices, seek to live your rule as you can — not as you can't.
- As you write your Rule of Life, tap into your deepest desires — what you most want in your life with God and the kind of person you long to become. Let your God-given desires fuel your actions. Let your vision of life to be with Jesus and to become like Jesus inspire you to practice the Way.
- To support you in this exercise, we have included several sample "rules of life" in the course guide, from different people in different stages of life.
- May God give you wisdom, creativity, joy, and peace as you craft your Rule of Life.

Summary:

- Here's what we covered in this session:
 - Transformation is possible, but it's not inevitable.
 - We need an intentional *plan* for our spiritual formation — what the early Christians called a "Rule of Life."
 - A Rule of Life is a schedule and a set of practices and relational rhythms that create space for us to be with Jesus, become like him, and do as he did.
 - When crafting a Rule for the first time, it's important to start small, and begin with subtraction, not addition.
 - This coming week, our exercise is to design a Rule of Life.

Outro:

- The novelist Annie Dillard famously said:
 - “How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing. A schedule defends from chaos and whim ... It is a peace and a haven set into the wreck of time; it is a lifeboat on which you find yourself, decades later, still living.”²
- A Rule of Life is a way to live with greater intentionality; to line up our *schedule* with the deepest desires of our heart — to be with and become like Jesus.
- But it must be said: following Jesus isn’t a formula, it’s a friendship.
- A Rule of Life is not a regimen of spiritual disciplines by which we habit stack our way to spiritual maturity.
- A Rule is just a way to put friendship with Jesus at the *center* of our lives, not off to the side.
- And through the practices that make up our Rule, we offer up our *whole* life — the good, the bad, and the ugly — *all* that we are — up to God in love.
- Transformation is God’s work, not ours; we’re not in control of any of it. God does it *his* way, at *his* pace.
- Living by a Rule is just a way to say, daily: “God, here I am. Heal me. Free me. Transform me. I love you; love me into a person of love.”

Notes

1. *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* (2006)
2. *The Writing Life* (1989)