

Hello! Welcome!

Welcome to the first part of [Cultivating A Rule of Life](#). I'm so glad that you're here. This is a new adventure in some ways, in the platform and technology that I'm using to share this, but a lot of what I will be sharing in the coming three Tuesdays is content that I first received during my certification to become a [Spiritual Director](#) and it's also content that I've been able to share with individuals who are part of Spiritual Direction with me. So, much of what I will share is tested and filtered through that grid of what I've learned in my own personal experience and also from what others I've been companioning have learned.

In the coming three weeks we're going to try to answer the question, "What is the spiritual practice of creating a rule of life?" I love the word "cultivating". Cultivating makes me think of gardening. I think most of us know that, if we're going to participate in gardening, that it's not a "one and done" activity. There are many steps that go into planting a garden and then there's the ongoing maintenance of keeping the garden alive and growing. We also understand, especially those of us who've tried and failed or those of us who have friends and relatives who are skilled at gardening that it's an ever-changing work. Gardeners are cultivating all the time. As they're determined by the weather and by the season and the season of their life and their own needs, the garden changes.

So, I love that word, "cultivating". I think it's a helpful framework when we're talking about a rule of life. I'm a long time, now "sober" to-do list addict. Much of the early years of my life, first as a student, then early in my marriage and as a mom, and then in whatever job I've been in and other endeavors, I often will start from that place of wanting a static to-do list that gives me expectations and formulas and tips and techniques to determine whether I know what I'm doing, whether what I'm doing will be successful and worth doing. I need, or at least I thought I did, the sort of feedback of a to-do list. I want to be able to check things off and say "I'm doing the work and, therefore, I can expect certain results."

I'm sure most of you, like me, have learned along the way that, while there are some benefits to that [way of working], the benefits are limited. For my own journey, I had to go into a long withdrawal of to-do lists, almost to the point of treating it like it had been an addiction and avoiding anything that was instructing me or "tempting" me to begin that frustrating habit again.

Now, I know that many, many, many people thrive and flourish with to-do lists, but I think all of us can share in common that sense of feeling like just because I check things off a list (and, maybe more often, just because I *don't* check things off that list), my identity is not defined by a to-do list or a set of completed goals. These can be helpful tools to accomplish things and to stay on track in projects but I believe, no matter our temperament or our personal style in accomplishing tasks, we share in common a deep, deep need to know the answers to the questions "Am I okay?" "Am I doing the right thing with my life on a daily basis?" "Am I doing the right things on a daily basis to add up to a life of value?"

The questions only compound as we are in relationships with others, whether it's children or spouses or partners, or colleagues - certainly anyone in ministry, teachers. We're also carrying with us this desire to know if what we're doing, offering, teaching, and instructing others to do going to end up producing the right thing?

I don't want to get too fixated on anti-New Year's resolutions or anti- to-do lists, but want to just set them aside for a moment to say that, depending on your personality and your season of life and your experiences, whether or not those strategies work well for you, what I want to speak to and encourage and invite you to consider is the bigger picture, the bigger question of the ways our daily practices add up to a life. The questions that we hold in common: "Am I becoming the person that I really want to become by the end of my life? And for those under my care, am I providing for them the right tools to become who they want to become and what I want for them?"

Before we go further, I want to go into some quiet reflection. I would not be a proper Spiritual Director if I didn't provide some space for silence and reflection so we're going to do that here together.

Let me start with the Scripture that God and some really good people in my life used to become the core of this sense of invitation to look at to-do lists, to look at my desires to do meaningful work, and to have my work and my daily habits matter and count. There was at least a decade where I was in that mode of just avoiding anything that looked or felt like it was inviting me to create a to-do list. The Scripture for today is the passage that has probably been the most helpful for me in being willing and having a sense of freedom to step into a different kind of practice that would meet those bigger questions if my daily habits and practices equaled what was most important in my life. I'm sure that this passage will not be unfamiliar to you and, perhaps, you've even become familiar with it in the Message paraphrase, Matthew 11:28-30.

I'm going to invite you right now to close your eyes and just listen. Listen to the words of this invitation from Jesus without any kind of expectation on yourself to come away with profound insight. Just kind of relaxed listening is what I want to invite you into.

So, this is [Matthew 11:28-30](#): "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me. And you'll recover life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me - watch how I do it! Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me, and you'll learn to live freely and lightly. "

Pause for a moment for those words to kind of settle down in your mind and your heart.

I'm going to read this one more time, just slowly and encourage you to keep your eyes closed if that's helpful. And again, we're not trying to do a word study here or any kind of inductive practice. That's for another time. Right now, I'm just inviting you to hear these words as spoken by Jesus, and made plain to us by his Holy Spirit. Just receive the words, receive the invitation.

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me - watch how I do it! Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

For one more moment, I'm going to stay quiet and invite you to answer the question: What was the word or phrase or the sense that you heard or received, that bubbled up to the surface as I read that invitation from Jesus?

And then, one more question while we're in this place: As you think about the word or phrase or the sense that you received listening to the Scripture, why are you here today? Why are you taking the time to listen in on this conversation? Again, if you have a pen handy, go ahead and jot that down or feel free to comment on it or even just kind of prayerfully ponder it in your own mind.

Part of what I didn't understand during all those years of frustration is that, not only is Jesus inviting us to rest, I often would look at this passage and think "Well, that's very nice of you, Jesus, but you know I have all of these reasons why I can't just sit and rest with you". As I've dug deeper within community, I began to recognize that Jesus is inviting us to work *from* a place of rest. My goal in life became to answer the question: How does one do that? How do I take an attitude of rest, an attitude of relying on Jesus to do the heavy lifting into the work and into the tasks that I believe I'm supposed to be doing?

That is where the spiritual practice of a Rule of life became most helpful.

I just want to talk for a moment about the word "rule". A Rule of Life is an ancient practice and I'm going to talk a little bit about its origins here in a second. It's called a "rule". That is the time-tested term. I do know that for many people, for a variety of reasons, including experiences of true oppression, whether in their own life or in the life of their ancestors, "rule" can have a connotation of something harsh and deadly. Remember, as we read in Matthew 11, that Jesus is inviting us into is something that is not harsh, not ill-fitting, not a burden, not heavy. It can seem like an oxymoron to say that a "rule" of life is actually an invitation into freedom and into rest. For this reason, I'll often interchange the word "rhythms" for "rule", evoking the paraphrase that Eugene Peterson used with "unforced rhythms of grace".

There's a variety of reasons for including the word "rhythm" in this exercise. One is the liturgical church calendar. This is another structure that has invited me into freedom within my daily practices and habits. I know that will not be a surprise to you. If you're here, you know that the church calendar has become a very important practice toward growth and wholeness in my life. The church calendar embeds a rhythm of feasting and fasting into our lives as a congregation,

but also into our own personal practices of devotion. Even so, there's a lot of space left over in the church calendar that the word "rhythms" doesn't necessarily speak to in our everyday lives - the habits we practice from the moment we get up in the morning until we fall asleep at night and even during our sleep at night. A "rule" probably speaks to that reality more fully than a "rhythm".

Also, I've heard it said that a "rule" speaks more fully to relationship and as we talk in a moment we'll remember that a Rule of Life, while we may be creating it for personal use, and certainly might be crafting it on our own, maybe in solitude (although there are many communities that do this as a corporate practice), it isn't intended for us to do all by ourselves, for ourselves, and through ourselves. The expectation that we're going to be in relationships is automatically embedded in a Rule of Life.

Before we move into the practicalities, let me give you a brief history. The Rule of Life as a spiritual practice is credited mostly to [Saint Benedict of Nursia](#). He was a fifth-century Christian who later became, and still is, a well-known and celebrated saint. There are Benedictine monasteries all over the world that began from Benedict's experience of searching for answers in fifth-century Italy. He grew up in a life of privilege, became disillusioned, pursued a life of academia, and then quickly discovered that his desire for purpose and community were not being met by the other students that were part of his community who seemed to be inclined toward drunken partying. (Has anything ever changed?!?)

Benedict left the world of academia and sought a life of solitude and actually moved into a cave - a narrow, small cave - for the purpose of listening to God. He was disillusioned with all of the other ways he'd tried to seek out a life of love, prayer, and purpose in his life and so he stripped it all away in order to be alone and listen for God's direction. He came out of that time with what we've come to know as the [foundational elements](#) of a Rule of Life. Just a quick aside and without much detail, Saint Augustine, who predates Benedict, has also given us a [rule](#) that we can learn from in an amazingly timely way all of these centuries and millennia later.

Another thing I just want to note for our purposes today: From the work that Benedict created at that time of isolation in the cave and then went on to form his monastic communities, there's a classic book called "Little Rule For Beginners". I haven't read this, but it's on my to-be-read list as a primary source. I've read a lot of follow-up to him, but what I've been told is that Benedict begins "The Little Rule for Beginners" with one word. It's the word he came out of the cave with, essentially. That word is "Listen!"

Now, when I think of creating a to-do list or goals or resolutions or even, on my own instinct, a rule of life, "listen" is not a word that I think of first. I tend to think more of the word "Do!" as in "Here's what I need to do." But, instead, the entire practice of a rule of life begins with an invitation - and, maybe even, an exhortation - to listen.

If we go back to that Matthew 11:28-30, the implication of that passage is that Jesus is *already* at work, God is already at work and was at work with purposes for your life, before anyone knew you. If we listen, if we make space to listen, God will speak to us through the Holy Spirit, through a community of friends, and in our prayers and in other ways that we'll talk about later. God will share with us what God already knows and what God is already at work in our lives. And I would much rather spend my effort - and God does ask us to work and does sometimes ask us to do very hard things - but I would much rather be putting my effort into a hard thing that God is already at work on.

The visual of a yoke in other translations of Matthew 11:28-30 is helpful here. The farm implement, a double yoke, paired with a team of oxen to do heavy-duty work. I'm sure you've heard this but I love, love, love repeating it: Traditionally, a farmer would put an experienced, mature, well-trained ox on one side of the yoke and, on the other side of the yoke, the new, the "rookie" ox, who was needing to learn and be trained and developed. In that way, when we listen for God and listen for the invitations that are being given to us, we're acknowledging that God's already at work in some way in my life and I want to get under the yoke with Jesus where that work is already happening rather than pull on my own, in my own direction for my own agenda.

When Benedict comes out of the cave, he begins communicating his "little rule" with this direction for the rest of us - Listen! He also realizes that God's calling him to a life of humility expressed in two parts: contemplation (a life of prayer) and community (a life of love). I like the simplicity of that, although, of course, living a life of community and contemplation involves a lot of complexity.

If we take from that and from other places where Benedict has said that the main purpose of a rule of life is to live by a rule that "safeguards love, we're stepping into this practice already ahead of the game that I was in the past decades with my to-do lists and my insecurity about myself and my ability to accomplish what I should be accomplishing. We're now walking in this freedom already, this sense of invitation and this sense of spaciousness and a desire to be living from a place of freedom and love.

One more thought about whether using the word "rule" of life is problematic. The actual root of the word "rule" in Latin is "regula" and, though I never would've guessed this had I not read it and heard it from so many places, the etymology is taken from the same place as our word for "trellis". So, if you're picturing a trellis which provides a structure for, let's say, grapevines to grow, the trellis is providing that structure for growth and fruitfulness.

At the same time, anybody who cultivates grapes or tomato plants or whatever you might use a trellis for, will tell you you can't tie the string too tightly. You need to leave space for this growth to happen. So there's this beautiful balance between spaciousness and structure. That, again, goes back to that phrase "unforced rhythms of grace" we find in Matthew 11.

When you're thinking of the word "rule", maybe it'll help to imagine that trellis that's making space but also providing a pathway, a track, for growth.

Another metaphor that's great and maybe next Tuesday we'll talk a little about is Jesus' metaphor of the vine and the branches. In [John 15](#), He describes our relationship with him by saying "Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. In the same way that a branch can't bear grapes by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you can't bear fruit unless you are joined with me."

As you've been listening, do you have the sense of "Yes, I do desire for my life and the work that I do in my life, for my daily practices and habits to add up to meaning and purpose! I do desire to be about the purposes and work Jesus is already doing in my life and I want to participate with Him. I'm intrigued by the idea that He's invited us to do this work from a place of rest."? If that describes you, let's move on to a couple more specifics and then I'm going to leave you with a practice that you can implement right away today, tomorrow, and in the coming weeks.

As we work on the Rule of Life, the end result - although, again, remember it's a dynamic, shifting, living document - will include direction for various categories in our life. Different authors and different spiritual practitioners would recommend naming these categories a little bit differently. I have chosen to follow Stephen Macchia's [Crafting A Rule of Life: An Invitation to the Well-Ordered Way](#) by using the categories of *Spiritual, Relational, Physical, Intellectual, Financial, and Missional*. If those words don't spark your interest, I'll share with you next week a couple of other resources and some different language that you can use.

Let's go back to the question of the "why". "Why am I here today and what am I hoping for?" I'm going to invite you to start somewhere that might feel a little bit counterintuitive and that is to prayerfully consider what you're already doing. The reality is that we're already living with pretty deeply embedded habits in our lives. While some may be intentional, and I imagine that those of you who are here probably already have several intentional habits and practices in your life that are bearing fruit. The reality is that every day we're making decisions all day long and many days we're making the same decision often subconsciously that has become our default Rule of Life. I feel that the most important thing to do to get started in order to walk into this in a spacious way is to pay attention to what you're already doing.

What is the Rule of Life that you're already living? This is where I'd invite you this week into a practice of noticing without judgment and many of you have heard me talk about that before. You can listen to me talk about this practice in the [highlights section](#) of my Instagram page. (See the attached pdf for a transcript of the video.)

What are the daily habits and rhythms already part of your life? How do you wake up? What gets you out of bed? What are you thinking and feeling? What are you doing first? What are you doing last?

Take a look at what Tsh Oxenreider at the *Art of Simple* calls the "daily bookends." What are your daily bookends? What do you do when you first wake up? What do you do just before you go to bed?

Be specific and try to avoid a gut response to that question. I want to invite you to become a student of yourself this week. Pay attention without judgment and you will probably come out with a list that is fairly the same from day to day. Once you consider your daily bookends, look at the other natural transitions from day to night, from morning to afternoon. How do those transitions feel? What do you do in response to those natural transitions?

Next, pay special attention to interruptions in your life. When you are interrupted, notice what interrupts you, how do you respond, and what's your normal habit in response to various interruptions in your day?

So, I'm going to invite you to do this: Be specific and be loving and gentle toward yourself. It is okay. You are beloved by God and also by me so this isn't a shame exercise, in the least. This is a growing-in-wisdom-with-ourselves exercise. What are we already doing? What are our default habits?

I'm going to end with that. Next week, then we'll dive in more to the actual writing out of a Rule of Life. There are various ways you can do this artistically. Some people write it like a poem or a story or take photographs or paint it on a canvas. Some people, like me, believe it or not, put it on a spreadsheet. That sounds so unlovely, but it's kind of what works for me.

So, we'll talk about the various ways and the content of what you're building into this Rule of Life. I feel like it's more important to start with what's already happening. This is a really healthy place to start, and the practice of being able to notice your daily actions and habits without judgment toward yourself is a good, good practice. So, hear the invitation to come to Jesus, to learn from Jesus, to find rest even as you're doing these practical steps of noticing your daily habits without judgment.

I'm going to pray for us and then, hopefully, we'll just go back into our day feeling encouraged and not weighed down.

Jesus, we do thank you that you obeyed the Father. That you accomplished all of the work that your Father had for you and so you have earned our trust that you can help us do the same. We're so, so grateful that You invite us in a way that feels spacious and freeing and life-giving and marked by love rather than by regulation or legalistic kinds of flagellation and any of those old ways of being that aren't who you are and not what you have in mind for us. So, even now as we go back into our day, as we go into whatever tasks are at hand, whatever interruptions or unexpected things are ahead of us, as we even go to sleep at some point tonight, would you remind in really tangible ways for each one who's here, each one who's listening, of your love and your invitation for them. And

then help us to be able to direct that same gaze at ourselves as we pay attention to our daily habits, as we notice without judgment the ways that we're already operating under a rule of life that we're sometimes not even aware of. I thank you for hearing us and for being with us and I pray this in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Goodbye, friends. Let me know if you have any questions. Thanks for being here. I really appreciate you. We'll see you again next week!