

Creating A Rule of Life (by Joe Colletti, PhD)

A Rule of Life is a time-honored practice that has helped ordinary people live extraordinary spiritual lives by deepening their spiritual lives through a personal living covenant with God. Within the context of Christian theology and Biblical studies the word covenant principally refers to the solemn promises made between God and the Israelites in the Old Testament and the followers of Christ in the New Testament that are often based upon temporal and spiritual blessings and renewal. Within the context of a Rule of Life the word covenant also refers to solemn promises and spiritual renewal. However, they are between God and the individual and a Rule of Life manifests the kind of solemn and spiritual relationship an individual wants to have with God.

The scriptures are filled with God's desires to develop a personal living covenant with each of us which are expressed prominently in the Psalms. Such verses of scripture are often prefaced with expressions such as "I will" or include "chosen one." For example, God is quoted as saying "I will bless thee" and the individual "I will bless thy name forever and ever." Also, for example, God is quoted as saying "you are my chosen one" and the individual "I am your chosen one." A Rule of Life helps us heed to these scriptures and cultivate a personal living covenant with God.

I. Responding to a Rule of Life

Responding to God's wishes as expressed through scriptures, like those noted above, is the first step towards creating our own Rule of Life. Responding to scripture is more than just reading it. Reading scripture creates a monologue—God speaking to us. Responding to scripture creates a dialogue—us speaking to God—after we hear God speaking to us through scripture. Thus, one scripture that expresses God's desire to develop a living personal covenant with us can be found in Genesis 31. Verse 44 declares "Come now, let's make a covenant, you and I, and let it serve as a witness between us." We can initiate our desire for a living personal covenant simply by saying "yes God, let's make a covenant and let it be a witness between you and I."

The scriptures are filled with ways in which God wants to seal a covenant with us. These ways are often ritualized through acts of figurative writing and binding. Some of the acts of figurative writing are noted in the Book of Hebrews. "This is the covenant that I will make with (you), says the Lord: I will put my laws into your minds, and write them in your hearts, and I will

be your God, and you will be my (servants).¹” These acts of figurative writing are reversed a couple of chapters later whereas God states that “This is the covenant that I will make with (you)” but “will put my laws in their hearts” instead of their minds and “write them on their minds” instead of in their hearts.²

An act of figurative binding can be found in the Book of Deuteronomy. In chapter six we are urged to “love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” We are also implored to keep these words in our hearts, teach them to our sons and daughters, talk about them while in and out of our homes, and when we lie down and rise up. We are further urged to “bind them as a sign on (our) hand,” to be as frontals on (our) forehead,” and to “write them on the doorposts of (our) house and on (our) gates.”³

The scriptures note that God encourages positive responses from us when challenged by acts of figurative writing and binding like the ones written above. One passage of scripture in the Old Testament declares “So remember, you are my servant whom I have chosen! and I am the LORD who made you, who formed you in the womb as my servant, whom I have chosen and You shall say, I am the Lord's, . . . and write on your hand, The Lord's". . .⁴ At times, I am so personally moved by this verse that I want to literally write on my hand “the Lord's.” Another verse notes a positive response from us when challenged by an act of figurative writing. The verse exclaims “I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.”⁵

A Rule of Life helps us further our positive responses to God. The Rule of St. Benedict is perhaps the most influential and enduring Rule of Life within Western civilization. In the prologue, we are advised to share in Christ's passion. The passion of Christ has been understood as the period of intense suffering in the life of Christ from the Garden of Gethsemane to the Crucifixion. Certainly this view is correct. However, the pages of the prologue remind us that there is much more to the passion of Jesus.

Our living covenant with God is rooted in the passion of Christ. The source of Jesus' passion was his intense love for humanity which resulted in his uncompromising commitment to walk a very precise and narrow path to redeem humanity. The scriptures remind us to imitate his love for humanity because such love should be the source of our own passion and

¹ Hebrews 8.10

² Hebrews 10.16

³ Deuteronomy 6.4-9

⁴ Isaiah 44.1; 2; 5

⁵ Psalm 40.8

redemption.⁶ The scriptures also remind us that the life of Christ provides a pattern for living a passionate life. Through Christ we can experience a spiritual birth that results in the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit that leads to a life of continual communion with God.

The permanent indwelling of the Spirit is a very precious part of the Christian faith because we gain immediate access to the very presence of God.⁷ As with Christ, the Spirit informs and guides us. Jesus declared his dependence on the presence of God. He noted that every word that he said was given to him by the Father who guided him as to what to say and how to say it⁸ and that his thoughts, words, and actions were given to him by the Father.⁹

Perhaps the most powerful words that were given to Christ by the Father and passed on to us concern God and our neighbors. These words are meant to shape our daily thoughts, words and actions. They are:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and Love your neighbor as yourself.”¹⁰

These are the words that should largely shape our Rule of Life. As a matter of fact, these words bring us back to the ritualized acts of figurative writing and binding noted above. God clearly wants to write and bind these words into our hearts, souls, and mind as the corner stone of a divinely initiated living covenant and developing a Rule of Life provides the opportunity.

II. Developing a Rule of Life

Our Rule of Life should be developed around the command to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, with all our mind, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Also, it should be understood as a “regula” or regulator that helps us assess our spiritual development towards loving God and our neighbors. The notion of a Rule of Life should not sound rigid or severe or be written as such. It should not be compiled as a “lex” or spiritual law that governs our conduct and actions. Our Rule of Life should be developed in light of what we currently do, and will do, to enrich and reshape a loving relationship with God and our neighbors.

⁶ Philippians 2.1-18

⁷ Hebrews 10.19

⁸ John 12.49

⁹ John 14.31

¹⁰ Luke 10.27

Thus, our first primary step towards developing our own individual Rule of Life is to take an inventory of the things that we do to nurture our spiritual lives. This will help us increase our awareness of the many things we do to cultivate our spiritual life. We are often surprised by the many things we already do to nurture our spiritual lives. We may pray, study scripture, read devotional books, watch a sunrise or sunset, and/or volunteer at a community organization.

One way for us to take an inventory is to list the various spiritual activities that we do under the following headings: daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly. Under daily activities we may list praying and/or reading scripture, under weekly activities we may list keeping the Sabbath and/or attending a congregational meeting, under monthly activities we may list volunteering at a community organization and/or watching a sunrise or sunset, and under annual activities we may list retreating at a monastery and/or vacating somewhere away from the daily actions of our every day life.

The next primary step towards developing our own individual Rule of Life is to create an inventory of the things that we would like to do to further nurture our spiritual lives. This web site contains several papers concerning various spiritual practices for consideration for a Rule of Life. These practices focus on several different activities meant to be practiced during different times during the day, week, and year.

III. Living A Rule of Life

Living a Rule of Life should stem from a desire to integrate the daily experiences of our life into our spiritual lives and our spiritual lives into our daily experiences of everyday life through Christian spiritual practices. Christian spiritual practices provide the means and measures to integrate our daily experiences of urban life into our spiritual lives. Thus, our Rule of Life which contains these practices becomes a collective tool for integration.

Integration requires that our spiritual practices be lived out in the very spaces and with the very people that make up our urban world. Places include the streets, sidewalks, alleys, parks and other public areas that make up our cities and neighborhoods. Spaces also include private places like our homes, cars, and personal places of business. People include those individuals that we live, work, and socialize with on an on-going basis. People also include those persons that we pass by on sidewalks, streets, other outdoor spaces, and places of business and entertainment.

Thus, our Rule of Life helps us to further understand how to integrate our daily experiences of everyday life into our spiritual lives and vice versa through our spiritual practices. It helps us cultivate an interactive two-way relationship with God that is nurtured with each passing day. Such daily interaction will reveal to us how each of the spiritual practices within our Rule of Life relates to, and build upon, one another. As a result, we will build upon our relationships with God and our neighbors. Such growth will keep our Rule of Life as a living document and strength our personal covenant with God.