

6. Developing our Rule of Life **(2 Cor. 13 : 5 – 10 & Matt. 14 : 13 - 24)**

Introduction

So here we are at the end of our six week series on ‘The Life you’ve always wanted’. We’ve covered a lot of ground in the previous five weeks and today is really a summing up week asking the all important question, “So what?”. The title for today (and of course the challenge for all of us in our Christian lives is, “Developing our rule of life”.

A Rule of Life

Developing a rule of life is basically about ordering the whole of our lives so that there is space for spiritual growth and that overall there is a healthy balance to our lives. You may have heard the phrase ‘rule of life’ before with regards to monasteries or religious houses. When ever I think of ‘rule of life’ I am reminded of a story about an abbey.

A new monk arrived at the abbey and was told that the rule of life included complete and utter silence. He would, however, be allowed to say two words every ten years. After 10 years of carefully keeping this vow he was summoned before the Abbot and asked if he had anything to say, in two words or less. He replied, “Food sucks.” Ten more years went by and he was again summoned before the Abbot. “Well, do you have anything to say now,” the monk was asked. “Bed hard,” was the answer. After ten more years the Abbot summoned the monk and asked him if he’d like to speak. “I quit!” said the monk. “Well, I’m not surprised,” said the Abbot, “You’ve done nothing but complain since you got here.”

Over the last five weeks Mike and I have suggested some exercises you might like to use to develop and grow in your faith.

Week 1 : We thought that change was more about training than trying. There was that lovely quote from John Ortberg, ‘When real change happens, I don’t just do the things Jesus would have done; I find myself *wanting* to do them. I don’t just go around trying to do right things; I *become* the right person.’

Week 2 : C.S. Lewis said, “Joy is the serious business of heaven” and so we thought about deliberately seeking celebration in life and making time for activities we enjoy and which give us pleasure.

Week 3 : Mike helped you to think about slowing down, deliberately seeking and enjoying slow supermarket and traffic queues. Also using all our senses in life and taking time to notice the world in which we live.

Week 4 : Servanthood. Practicing the ministry of the mundane; serving others in hundreds of small acts of kindness. Loving others by sometimes holding our tongues and bearing with people we find difficult. I am trying to practice this one as much as I can!

Week 5 : Last week we were thinking how we could hear the voice of the Spirit more in our lives. Acting on those ‘godly hunches’ or the words from God we hear through others.

In our series we’ve just looked at these five areas but the book itself covers many other ways that we could change and develop. There’s a chapter on each of the following :

- Prayer
- Confession
- Secrecy (about our ‘thought life’)
- Reflecting on the Scriptures
- Suffering

Let me encourage you to buy the book, read it and incorporate some of the exercises into your own rule of life.

But ... reading about these things (even having a bit of a go) is one thing, but incorporating them into our lifestyle so that we change and grow as a result is another matter. It takes our will and it takes a plan. So back to our rule of life.

Avoiding the Rule

I think some people have a very negative reaction to the word ‘rule’; for many of us it has overtones of ‘boxing us in’ and ‘curbing our freedom’. I wonder if there’s something inbuilt in us which doesn’t want rules in life.

On the first day of university, the Dean addressed the students, pointing out some of the rules: “The female dormitory will be out-of-bounds for all male students, and the male dormitory to the female students. Anybody caught breaking this rule will be fined £20 the first time. Anybody caught breaking this rule the second time will be fined £50. Being caught a third time will cost you £100. Are there any questions?” Then one of the students asked, “How much is it for a season ticket?”

Having a rule of life, instead of weighing us down can actually create space and allow true freedom. Your own rule of life is a tool for growth, not a straightjacket.

Pause for thought

Let’s break for a moment and in pairs share our answer to the following questions,

- Do you have rule of life?
- How balanced is your life?

The reality is that many people already have a personal rule of life and they don’t even know it. Our word rule comes from the Latin ‘*regula*’ meaning something done regularly. A ‘rule’ then is simply a

way of purposefully or intentionally bringing God into our life in a regular way. Coming to church on Sundays or midweek is a rule. Daily prayer or Bible reading is a rule. Going to house group is a rule. Saying grace at meals is a rule.

So some tips for developing a rule and keeping going what we may have been discovering these past five weeks.

1. Be Intentional

John Ortberg says this of a ‘rule of life’. He says, “*Jesus’ followers are those who intentionally arrange their lives around the goal of spiritual transformation – the development of a **well-ordered heart.***”

Consider *how* you might rearrange your day to regularly bring God into your life. Spiritual growth cannot be totally orchestrated or controlled but neither is it going to happen by chance; we need to intentionally train for growth, to put a kind of support structure into place.

As you all know I’m no gardener but I do know that runner beans need a trellis or a wigwam to grow up - we also need a support to help us grow. We need a **plan** for transformation. For Jesus’ disciples their plan was simply to follow the Master and copy him.

Jesus most definitely had a rule of life; as we read the Gospels we see that his was a life of balance between work, ministry, prayer, solitude and leisure. In our reading from Matthew 14 we read that Jesus withdrew to a solitary place for some alone time. He’d just heard that his cousin John had been killed; he need time with God to take this in. The solitude didn’t last for long but it was enough for him to be recharged in order to minister and to perform the miracle of the loaves and fishes. But again, straight afterwards, he needed more alone time. Can you see the pattern? Prayer - Ministry. Action - Relaxation. People - Solitude. There was a balance. A rule.

At one point, as I have been preparing this, I wished that the Bible had spelled out exactly the nature of Jesus' rule so that we could copy it. Thankfully I didn't dwell for too long on this - just because something was right for Jesus in the first century doesn't necessarily mean that it is exactly right for us. We might need to discern a principle or an attitude that Jesus had to be able to transfer the idea to our own time and to our own lives. Similarly what is right for the person sitting next to you this morning may not be right for you; your personalities are different, your circumstances are different – in a nutshell your lives are different.

Having said that – I think we need to be intentional; we need our own plan.

2. Keep it Simple

Whatever our 'rule' or training plan looks like for us it doesn't have to be elaborate – in fact the simpler it is the more likely it is to be useful. Why not take some time this week to write down on a single sheet of paper what your rule of life is going to be.

John Ortberg suggests that in order to do this we need to ask some basic questions, such as :

- How and when do I pray?
- How can I use my money which draws me closer to God?
- How can I approach paid employment (or retirement activity) so that the character of Jesus is formed in me?
- How am I involved in the Christian community? (worship, fellowship, mission, evangelism, etc.)
- How can I be involved in the lives of friends, family, colleagues which will enrich them and me?

If you remember nothing else about this morning perhaps giving yourself half an hour this week to think about those five questions might be time well spent.

Pope John 23rd was only pope for just over four years from 1958 but he had a profound impact on the church in the twentieth century; he called the second Vatican Council in 1962 which saw great reforms in the Roman Catholic Church. Pope John developed a simple rule of life when he was quite young and found it to be transforming throughout his life. The rule was basically this:

- Spending fifteen minutes in silent prayer the first thing in the morning.
- Spending fifteen minutes in reading spiritual literature.
- Before bed, spending a few moments examining his conscience and making a confession to God; then identifying the issues he wanted to pray about in the morning.
- Setting aside specific times for prayer, study, recreation, and sleep.
- Making a habit of turning his mind to God in prayer throughout the day.

Not complicated but intentional.

Conclusion

Just to finish. This Monday Mike and I were at the Cathedral and during the service we were called remember and celebrate the ministry and faith of John and Charles Wesley. It reminded me that John Wesley used to urge Methodists to go on toward perfection, to grow deep in their love of God and love of one another. In other words to be intentional in their relationship with God.

As we develop a rule for life may that be our own goal as disciples of Jesus Christ.