

# Skip Resolutions—Make a Rule of Life

*Take heed, and keep your soul diligently,  
lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen,  
and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life.*

— Deuteronomy 4:9 (RSV)

I used to love making New Year’s resolutions—in fact, I loved making them far more than I enjoyed keeping them. But about eight years ago, I was introduced to the old tradition of creating a Rule of Life, and since then, it has proved to be a much better use of time and energy.

A Rule of Life contains spiritual, relational, and vocational rhythms needed to sustain the life in Christ we’ve been called to, and it doesn’t change much year in and year out. For anyone who is unfamiliar with the Rule or hasn’t created one, January 1 provides the perfect time to establish your own Rule of Life.

This year, skip resolutions—make a Rule of Life instead.

## Why Create a Rule of Life?

[Every Christian has a well-established pattern of living, whether it’s an intentionally developed set of commitments or an unstated set of values and practices,] like praying before meals and going to church twice a month. But many of us aren’t as deliberate with our spiritual

development as we are with our time and priority management at work, and our lives and relationships suffer as a result.

Amid our busy schedules, we're constantly juggling relationships and responsibilities and often feel like we're dropping more balls than we're keeping in the air. When we lack a consistent and thoughtful way of doing life well, we will end up distracted and overwhelmed by life, and our spiritual and emotional growth will plateau. Few of us want to take this approach to life, but it just seems to happen. We wind up:

- *Scattered*: Our schedule is full but doesn't reflect our purpose and priorities.
- *Hurried*: We're busier than we want to be, but don't know what to change.
- *Reactive*: It seems we're never in charge, always responding to demands.
- *Exhausted*: We end each day weary and discouraged, unsure if we've spent it well.

My experience as a pastor has shown me that many of my friends and church members aren't undone by poor theology or a lack of biblical information. Instead, we often fail to grow spiritually because we haven't planned and made space for a deep, abiding fellowship with God.

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The lack of spiritual planning may be rooted in a lukewarm heart toward Christ, but at other times, we genuinely want to go deeper with God but don't know how to make time and space to simply be with him

and gain spiritual strength for each day's challenges.

## **What Is a Rule of Life?**

A Rule of Life is “an intentional, conscious plan to keep God at the center of everything we do. . . . The starting point and foundation of any Rule is a desire to be with God and to love him” (Scazzero, 196).

The Rule is a way to “begin with the end in mind”—to envision a sustainable, thriving walk with the Lord, in his Word, in prayer, in community, in our family, and in our work, then work backward to a set of commitments. It's not about detailed to-do lists that must be maintained. A Rule of Life instead gives you the opportunity to prayerfully discern what roles and responsibilities the Lord has given you, and to organize your life in the manner most conducive to spiritual growth and depth in him.

The Rule of Life has a rich history in Christian tradition. The Rule has been traced back to the early monastic movement in the fourth century, and the most well-known Rule was written by Benedict in the sixth century. The Rule of Saint Benedict has influenced Eastern and Western Christians for roughly 1,500 years, and many Reformers and evangelical patriarchs have practiced similar spiritual routines without the title. Lately, many Christian traditions have returned to the Rule as an antidote to our Western culture's lonely and fragmented lives. (Yes, Christians were doing *12 Rules for Life* way before it was cool.)

## **Five Basic Elements of a Rule**

When helping others create a Rule of Life, I suggest five basic elements: Relationship with God, Personal Life/Health, Relationships, Church, and Work.

The goal of life is to dwell in deep communion with Christ and to be firmly anchored in our union with him. But how and when and where we practice these blessed realities will depend greatly on many factors, including our life stage, work, and physical capacity. If you have multiple jobs or small children, your Rule should reflect those responsibilities. In the words of Clint Eastwood in *Dirty Harry*, “A man’s got to know his limitations.” Here are a few subcategories, and you’ll certainly want to prayerfully think of your own components.

### **Relationship with God**

Scripture reading

Prayer

Silence and solitude

Study and reflection

### **Personal Life/Health**

Sleep

Rest and Sabbath

Physical health and fitness

Recreation and hobbies

Money and possessions

### **Relationships**

Friendships

Neighbors and coworkers

Marriage

Children and parenting

Extended family

## **Church**

Participation and worship

Friendships and community

Service and mission

Generosity

## **Work**

Calling/vocation

Current position and responsibilities

Workplace relationships

Education, personal development, and coaching

In each of these five areas of life, I write out one key verse, a vision statement, and four to eight commitments. For example, under Personal Life/Health, I might write:

**Verse:** “Only take heed, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life” (Deut. 4:9).

**Vision:** I am a human being, created in the image of God, with limits and needs; I am a steward of the health and life God has given me, and I honor him by refreshing myself spiritually, physically, and emotionally.

## **Commitments:**

- I sleep an average of eight hours every night (9:30 p.m. to 5:30 a.m.).
- I work no more than 50 hours weekly, including only two

evenings each week.

- I exercise five days each week (Mon—Fri from 4 to 5 p.m.).
- I review our expenses each Friday and discuss our finances with my wife at the end of each month.
- I reflect on my past week and plan the week ahead each Sunday (1 to 3 p.m.).

## **How to Create Your First Rule of Life**

When writing a rule of life for the first time, I recommend a certain way of doing things. Many of these ideas were recommended to me originally by my pastor-friend Brian Howard and spiritual director Rich Plass.

### **1. Plan Ahead**

Ideally, set aside an entire eight- to ten-hour day to focus entirely on writing a Rule of Life.

[Goals are overrated; commitments are underrated.]

The best thing you can do right now, if you're interested in writing a Rule, is to get out your calendar and pick an entire day away for this. If you're married, coordinate with your spouse to trade off days away.

### **2. Get Away**

My family has a small cabin in the woods about an hour away—one of the benefits of moving back home. When I lived in Louisville, I'd spend a day at the nearby Abbey of Gethsemane. You could also spend the day at a public library or park, or even at home if it's not too distracting. Go

somewhere life-giving!

### **3. Be Prepared**

I suggest taking with you only a Bible and a blank notebook. Don't bring your laptop or smartphone. Type up your notes later and resist listening to music, if possible.

### **4. Start with God's Word**

Consider spending the first few hours of your day simply reading through passages of Scripture that help quiet and center your heart.

When re-writing or reviewing my own Rule, I usually read a few dozen Psalms and pick another book of the Bible to read in its entirety.

Also, take some time to pick a key verse for each of your five main categories. You're not in a hurry!

### **5. Pray through Your Five Areas**

Prayerfully reflect on the five main areas of your life, and you may get a good sense of which area to focus your attention. I have found it easy to ignore the area of my life that needs the most attention.

Often, our family finances are the last thing I want to spend time thinking and praying about, but it's an area where my heart is easily moved to sin, and I need to practice regular submission to God with our money and possessions.

### **6. Write Out Your Commitments**

There is a big difference between goals and commitments. A goal is something you want to achieve, such as running a marathon. A commitment is a rhythm of life that puts you in a place to get there, such as running four miles five days a week.

Goals are overrated; commitments are underrated.

When your retreat day is complete, and you are back in the world of technology, translate each of your commitments into your calendar.

## Deep Living

In the words of General George S. Patton, “A good plan violently executed now is better than a perfect plan next week.” You don’t have to get it right. In everything, remember [the purpose of the Rule of Life: to intentionally create time and space to enjoy deep fellowship with God, so that he can reorient and direct your days to increasingly glorify him along the way.]

Since creating my first Rule in 2010, my life circumstances have changed significantly, but my weekly rhythms have been remarkably consistent—morning prayer and reading, Sunday afternoon reflection and planning, two work evenings weekly, Sabbath on Monday, semi-annual retreats, and so on. My roles have shifted, and my responsibilities have increased, but the Rule and its practice have grounded me in a set of commitments and habits that have consistently facilitated peace, joy, and growth.

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Creating and living by a Rule may not be for everyone, but in our busy and fragmented world, it's a helpful, time-honored resource for deep, wise living. In my own congregation and across many others, I long to see believers slowing down, planning prayerfully, and creating space to focus on God, his Word, and his calling on their lives. Imagine a whole church—even a whole movement of churches—stepping into the lives of their neighbors and the burdens of their communities from positions of rest, renewal, and spiritual strength.

This winter, you may want to make resolutions or pick a word for the year. But consider that your life in Christ may be even more substantially transformed by creating and living by a Rule of Life. In the spirit of Ephesians 3:16, may your inner being be strengthened in Christ!