

FOREWORD BY TISH HARRISON WARREN

Jen Pollock Michel



# A Rule

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FOR THE  
REST OF US

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An Ancient Practice for Making the  
Daily Decisions that Shape Faithful Lives



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Daily Decisions that Shape Faithful Lives

**JEN POLLOCK MICHEL**

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To Ryan:

*I am so grateful to be growing old with you.*

*How about another thirty years  
if God grants us that much time?*

It is you, O hidden One, who has given me my heritage, and you determined the place of my birth. It is you who have given me the power to do one kind of work and have withheld the skill to do another. It is you who hold in your hand the threads of this day's life and you alone who know what lies before me to do or to suffer. But because you are my Father, I am not afraid. Because it is your Spirit that stirs within my heart's most secret room, I know that all is well. What I desire for myself I cannot achieve; but whatever you desire in me you can help me to achieve. The good that I want to do, I fail to do, but you can give me the power to do good. . . .

Make this day a day of obedience, a day of spiritual joy and peace. Make this day's work a little part of the work of the kingdom of my Lord Jesus, in whose name these prayers are said. Amen.

—*A Diary of Private Prayer*, John Baillie<sup>1</sup>

## Foreword

Several years ago, I led a series of seminars about spiritual practices in everyday life. I'd begin the class with a simple exercise: a questionnaire about what people did each day. It asked, "What do you typically do the first two hours of the day? The last two? What is one routine in your day or week that brings rest or joy? What is a period in the day when you often feel stressed or rushed?"

I observed again and again that the most common first response was: "I have no idea what I do in a day." This fascinated me. Most of us (myself included) are so hurried, hustling, and distracted that we fail to notice our own lives. We fail to notice the way we spend time and the patterns and habits that shape us. And, before we know it, a week has passed, then a year, then a decade, and we aren't quite sure what we've been up to.

If we do not stop long enough to bring some intentional thought and reflection to how we use our days, they will quickly blaze past us, shapeless, blurry, and unheeded. Annie Dillard famously called a schedule "a net for catching days."<sup>1</sup> In many ways, this sort of "net for time" is what Jen Pollock Michel offers in this book. These pages provide a path and program that can teach us how to notice—how to pay attention to our callings, limitations, loves, and longings. But her work in introducing and leading us into a rule of life offers more, even, than this. A rule of life is more than a schedule; it is a way to

respond to and participate in God's work in us and in the world. It does not only "catch days," it sanctifies them—or rather illuminates the sanctity that already dwells within them, waiting to be found. It is a way to approach each part of our life—time, relationships, work, money, embodiment, worship, obligations, and habits—in light of Christ's renewal of all things.

I have seen a renewed interest in learning about and living by a rule of life among a broad swath of Christians—most of whose lives, like mine, look very little like a monk's. The recovery of this resource from monastic spirituality is needed in our hurried and frantic age when people are yearning for practical ways to be counter-culturally formed in the way of Jesus.

In my own life, I have, at times, sought to live by an intentional, written rule of life, and other times, I have not. On the surface, I'm not one who many might assume would be drawn to the practice of a rule. I value spontaneity to a fault. I love open time and endless options, and I often rebel against a schedule. I have no problem going to sleep with dishes in the sink. I do not make spreadsheets or organize my sock drawer. The popular way to say this positively is that I am a "creative" or a "type B" personality. And, more negatively, that I am a bit of a slacker. All are likely true.

But I have found over the years, as I have learned more about formation and the practice of a rule, that all of us—whether we are conscious of it or not—are living by some sort of inherent rule of life. We all have deeply ingrained patterns in our use of time, in our spending, in our digital habits, in our interactions with friends and family, in how we approach our bodies, our selves, and our neighbors. We are hemmed in and shaped by our vocations, our vows, our limits, our desires, and our choices. The question then isn't if we are living by a rule. It is simply whether we are intentional, thoughtful, faithful, and wise in the formation of our rule. It is whether we

are open to seeking God in what that rule is and ought to be.

A rule of life, then, ought not be understood as a heavy burden or ironclad law. Nor is it yet another way we must improve ourselves and measure up. It is not a “life hack” to moral or spiritual perfection. And it is not only for those who are ultraorganized and driven or for heroic, spiritual strivers. It is a collection of practices that, at its best, is a way for weary and broken people to meet God, in the actual lives we inhabit, and to incrementally grow in faithfulness, perseverance, and hope. It is simply a tool, but as anyone who has ever tried to build something knows, the right tool can make all the difference.

This is why Michel’s book is such a useful guide. It is, on one hand, as immensely practical as a friend loaning you an Allen wrench. Yet it offers more than a tool. It also offers more than mere information or a “how to” manual on discipleship. It offers wisdom. Drawing from the Scriptures and from the rich resources of the saints over millennia, Michel helps us learn how to live wisely, in the here and now, on an ordinary Wednesday afternoon, in our own particular and improvisational lives.

Michel has a full life as a wife and mother, a friend, a writer, a speaker, a teacher, a daughter, a caretaker, a church member, and more. She navigates these various callings through her own rule of life, and she offers us what she has discovered in her own practice. In doing so, she hands us a well-worn map for our own winding journeys. She is a clear thinker, a deep reader, and a trustworthy guide. Christians today are longing for roots, thirsty for meaning and for deeper nourishment than what a consumerist or culture-warring faith can offer. And voices like Michel are both deeply needed and rare.

“We fulfill our destinies,” wrote the late (and luminous) poet Luci Shaw, “by telling and re-telling the story that weaves together

divine transcendence and earthy human experience.”<sup>2</sup> This is what Jen Pollock Michel does in these pages in deeply constructive, granular, and helpful ways. Not only that, she teaches us, as we embody the context and commitments of our own lives, to take up this task each day, finding the transcendent presence of God in the small work, moments, and rhythms of our own hectic and holy lives—lives that are always worth noticing and living to the full.

—*Tish Harrison Warren*

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## **An Introduction: Why Practice a Rule of Life?**

“We hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love. Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset.”

—*The Rule of Saint Benedict*<sup>1</sup>

I am finishing this book in the less-than-ideal work season that is summer, the season of family vacations and visits from friends. A season when our house fills and empties, fills and empties again. Because my desk sits in the corner of our living room, one shoe-throw away from the front door, I am embroiled in every bit of chaos that is summer.

I write because—well, there is this matter of a deadline. But writing is also vocation, a word that suggests a divine summons or call. I can’t wait for the mood to strike. Instead, relying on grace, I must make faithfulness to God my regular practice, or *rule*.

For a couple of weeks in July, our oldest son is visiting from Toronto as I work on this book. A graduate student in philosophy, Na-

than spent some of his college years distant from God. He wanted to parse his intellectual way through the more gnarled questions of faith. Like many of us, he wanted proof. When he finally grasped that God is, in so many ways, unsearchable, he took Pascale's leap. As he described it to me then, he could finally "surrender to the mystery" revealed in Christ. The prodigal son was home.

During his visit, Nathan works on an essay while I work on this book. He tells me, over lunch and dinner and afternoon iced coffee, that the Stoics' philosophy of equanimity has stirred a recent resurgence of popular interest. I'm intrigued to hear Nathan explain how radically Stoic Jesus sounds in the Sermon on the Mount, urging his followers to practice a version of detachment from their present circumstances. Do not worry! Do not be anxious! Nathan wants to draw a connection between Jesus and Stoic thinkers like Epictetus, a name I keep asking him to repeat.

"But isn't this detachment you're seeing in Jesus's commands only possible because of an active trust in the Father?" I press Nathan for more precision in his argument. I have to think Jesus is commanding more than an emotionally flat response to the trouble of this world and our daily lives. "Isn't trusting the Father the point of this section of Jesus's sermon, when we're told to consider God's care of the birds and the lilies?" We don't worry less simply because we try harder to be detached, I explain.

The conversation sounds theological and heady, I know. Yet behind the scenes, there's a glaring irony in our exchange. While Nathan wants to persuade the readers of his essay of the radical peace offered by Christ to his followers, he is, by his own admission, *anxious*. On the final day of his visit, Nathan tells me that he has again woken up to the whisper of a familiar panic:

*What will I make of this day? Of myself? Of this life?*

On the one hand, my son's questions are deeply human. We are

made in the image of God, and we want to live well. On the other hand, my son is asking these questions during a breezy summer vacation. He's supposed to be sleeping late, to feel indulged that his mother is once again making his dinner. There is absolutely no reason for Nathan to worry, but there it is: a vaguely threatening cloud of anxiety on the horizon, small as a fist.

If we're honest, wherever we live, this is the prevailing weather most days: cloudy, with a chance of worry. Maybe it's one more reason to consider the wisdom of the ancient practice called a rule of life.

### **Do Not Be Anxious**

We have more than a few reasons to wake up to panic these days. It's not just that we've binge-watched, maybe Pornhubbed, our way past a reasonable bedtime. It's not even that, within seconds of waking, as we reach for our phone, the headlines sound the alarm of pending catastrophe: financial crisis, climate crisis, constitutional crisis, mental health crisis, border crisis, affordable housing crisis, and a crisis of gun violence. The breaking news is always bad, and it's always breaking over our heads, first thing in the morning.

Anxiety is real for this—and many other reasons. In the digital age, life must either be performed spectacularly—or miserably failed. The internet affords us infinite information and endless expertise, so it's assumed we can and should be good at everything. Repairing small household appliances, yes—and also, killing it in our careers and in our parenting, in our fitness and fashion, in our bucket list vacations and expertly plucked eyebrows. The standards of the internet age are exhaustingly high—and the spectators, like circling vultures, gather to judge our performance. (Your life can't be extraordinary if it's not publicly witnessed and “liked.”)

These are some of the felt realities of our not-very-brave new

world. According to Tara Isabella Burton, author of *Self-Made*, a historical story has long been underway in this rising tide of anxiety. Our life project, with its existentially raised stakes, signals our arrival into a modern era of “self-creation.” At first, the shift could be taken for the dawn of unrivaled promise. Having left behind a “God-created and God-ordered universe in which we all have specific, pre-ordained parts to play,” we now enjoy greater freedoms.<sup>2</sup> *The world is our oyster!* We can choose where to live, where to work, whom to marry, if and when to have children. The oppression of societal expectation has been thrown off, and the choices are yours and mine alone.

But what we have gained in freedoms, we have lost in reassuring certainties. We don’t know the lines we’re supposed to rehearse in this play. With so many choices set before us now, we no longer confidently understand what the good life is or how to pursue it. We are adrift in opportunities, aimless in purpose. Too much of this good thing called freedom is really too much, especially when each day must be painted with brushstrokes of genius.

Can I fault Nathan for turning up symptomatic in this of all possible worlds?

I don’t know that my son is looking for my advice, but I am a mother, so I offer it anyway.

“Have you thought about memorizing a scripture to call to mind when you first wake up? Psalm 100 is a good one.” As I suggest this to him, I recite what I can remember. *Know that the LORD, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.*

The psalm, I tell Nathan, reminds us of the joy and gladness we find in worship and praise. It right-sizes us in a world that ultimately belongs to God, and it reminds us of God’s steadfast love and faithfulness toward his people. Maybe it’s not the antidote to anxiety

exactly, but it could be a start toward inhabiting a deeper trust in this Father who cares for the birds and the lilies and everyone in-between.

“This could be a kind of rule, you know?” I mean that meditation on this psalm, at the start of each morning, could be one of many intentional habits he endeavors to practice as a follower of Jesus.

I don’t start in on the history of monasticism at this particular moment with Nathan, though I could have reminded him that the most famous of monastic rules is *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, written in the sixth century. The Roman Empire had splintered a hundred years before Benedict was born, and any sense of security and stability was gone. Benedict’s moment, like ours, was a moment of turmoil and precipitous change. I had been drawn to Benedict’s rule in the spring of 2020, when the world was held in the grips of a global pandemic and dangled over a dark and uncertain future, and I had been anxious too.

*The Rule of Saint Benedict*, which still governs small cloistered communities, envisions a stability found in a rooted commitment to love God, love God’s people, and properly love oneself. Though Benedict’s rule wasn’t the first like it, its wisdom has endured longer than others. It imagines vocation as something communal and integrated into daily rhythms of prayer, manual labor, study, and Scripture. The Psalms, in fact, are of particular importance in Benedictine communities, and according to the rule, the monks rise to sing them, that their minds might be in “harmony” with their voices.<sup>3</sup> If they’re following the schedule, Psalm 100 will be sung once a month.

At first, when I mention Psalm 100, Nathan nods, as if he’s agreeing with me. Then he gets a little more honest about the hesitation he has with my advice. “But I don’t just want to patch it up,

you know, with something external. I know that there is something deeper going on here.” Nathan is hesitant to try managing his behavior, especially when he understands the need for grace and a deeper heart change.

At this point, I tell him what he may already have suspected: “You know this conversation is going in the book now, don’t you?”

### **A Rule, as a Regular Practice of Faith**

When I suggested to Nathan that he make it a “rule” to meditate on Psalm 100 every morning upon waking, he knew that my advice was shaped by my own commitment to live according to a rule. This personal rule, which I’ve written and revised over the last six years, looks like a three-hole-punched document at the front of a three-ring binder. It serves to articulate the concrete commitments I’ve prayerfully discerned and decided for this season, as I live in creative, faithful response to God’s loving voice.

As you might expect, this rule includes both traditional spiritual practices like prayer, Sabbath, corporate worship, Scripture reading and memorization, fellowship, confession, and love for the least. But this personal rule also includes habits of faithfulness for my particular life: weekly budget meetings with my husband, on-the-way discipleship with my teenage sons, administration of my ailing mother’s financial and medical affairs, rhythms of hospitality, regular exercise, and regular sleep.

A rule is a practice of whole-life discipleship.

Years ago, I first began learning about Benedict, not from his rule, but from other sources—books like Joan Chittister’s *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today*. I was attracted to the Benedictine vision of a life built on intimacy with God. I was also especially curious to learn about the Benedictine emphasis on steadfastness, this virtue that seemed in short supply

in my anxious and distracted life.

In her book, Chittister means to address common misunderstandings and misgivings about a rule, such as that it is somehow an inflexible and punishing legalism. “Where ‘rule’ is interpreted to mean controls or laws or demands,” Chittister writes, “the Rule of Benedict does not qualify for that category.”<sup>4</sup> She explains that the Latin word for rule, *regula*, comes closer to describing a “‘guide-post’ or ‘railing,’ something to hang on to in the dark, something that leads in a given direction, something that points out the road, something that gives us support as we climb.”

“The Rule of Benedict, in other words, is more wisdom than law.”

For years, I’d felt I needed just what Chittister described. I needed a prayerful life that yielded a practical wisdom. I needed that wisdom for negotiating the often-conflicting demands of my life: my family, my work, my neighbors, my body. I wanted to people-please less—and say sturdier *noes*. I wanted guardrails for discerning selfish ambitions and avoiding stupid temptations. Ultimately, I wanted to enlarge and fortify my capacity to discern the good and to do it—and I wanted to persevere in that good, even when it felt hard and bruising and exhausting. I knew, as Benedict did, that so much grace would be required for the wisdom I sought to bring all my life into conformity with God’s loving will.

To put it simply, a rule of life is an intentional practice to make our love of God, love of neighbor, and proper love of self *regular* aims in everyday life. As I will define it in this book, a rule can be understood as **the practice of regular habits to sustain creative, faithful response to God’s loving voice.**

*Regular* is one English derivation of the Latin word for rule, *regula*. If there are commonalities among world religions, it might be this: making devotion *regular*. Worship suffers when it is merely oc-

casional. To grow spiritually, we need more regular practice. This is the law of athletics, the law of music, and the law of the human spirit. As the author of *Atomic Habits* puts it, you get what you repeat.<sup>5</sup>

Repetition in the spiritual life doesn't have to be mindless, rote behavior; it can be a means of formation. Ancient Jews prayed at *regular* times of day. They *regularly* traveled to Jerusalem for three annual pilgrimage feasts. Early Christians, too, had *regular* practices to live into and express their love for God and neighbor and proper love of self. They fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays. They blessed their enemies. They refused greed and gave alms instead. The *Didache*, an early Christian "training manual" on the life of Christian faithfulness, urges these and other practices, including *regular* fellowship with other believers. "Every day you should seek out the company of the saints so that you can be helped by their conversation."<sup>6</sup>

To be clear, a rule, as a catalog of the commitments you intend to keep regularly, isn't one more insistent and impossible demand in our already over-saturated lives. It isn't about trying harder and working longer. In fact, as a practice of prayerful discernment, a rule gives us the opportunity to say concerted noes to unnecessary clutter and unreflective busyness. A rule doesn't confuse productivity with faithfulness or imagine discipleship as a hero's journey.

In a rule, you don't have to do it all—because you are not God.

### **Our Modern Hunger**

Benedict's historical example of living well, with clarity and commitment, courage and care, speaks to our yearning today. We don't necessarily want to become monks and nuns; this side of the Reformation, we understand that all can live for the glory of God, whether the cobbler or investment banker, mother or missionary. But with

near infinite choices in everything from breakfast cereal to job opportunities to life partners, we find it hard to choose between alternatives. And when new breakfast cereals and new job opportunities and possibly more attractive life partners become available, we struggle to remain committed to decisions we've previously made. *We fear missing out.*

Certainties about the good life, in our modern conditions, also elude our grasp. Maybe this is why psychologists have sought alternatives to more traditional definitions of what makes life worth living. As *The Washington Post* recently reported, some scientists are now reassuring us we don't have to be happy to have a good life. We don't even need to enjoy a sense of meaning and moral purpose. Perhaps, as Shigehiro Oishi, a psychologist from the University of Chicago has posited, we can instead pursue a "psychologically rich life."

Psychological richness, in this renovated understanding of the good life, describes the lives people lead when they are open to new experiences and grow more willing to change their minds, when they "explore new neighborhoods" and "browse thrift shops or used-bookstores," or "take an improv comedy class."<sup>7</sup> Psychological richness suggests the life-draining dullness of repetition and routine. Novelty itself becomes the answer to any remaining confusion about the meaning of life. *Take a trip!* If joy can't be ours, if we can't enjoy a confident sense of moral purpose, maybe the only thing left to do is appreciate the "richness" that is change itself.

I can't sign on to this vision of the good life. How much change will be sufficient to serve the bottomless hunger we have as humans for knowing we're living well?

Benedict reserved reproof for people like this—monks who wanted a constant change of scenery. They were drifters, he said, never settling down because no monastery could meet their con-

stantly shifting demands. In Benedict's estimation, change couldn't produce a stability of soul. It likely only produced a greater appetite for change.

Anyone can change the scenery, in other words. It's the saints who can abide the humdrum sameness and still bear the fruit of Christ's joy. It's saints who can inhabit the inevitable routines of life—and trust, unwaveringly, that God seeks their good.

Here's the thing: We all have a rule, or a routine way we pattern our lives in time. Humans are creatures of habit. Like Benedict, we might make it our rule, in the everyday rhythms of life, to “open our eyes to the light that comes from God, and our ears to the voice from heaven that every day calls out this charge: *If you hear his voice today, do not harden your hearts.*”<sup>8</sup> As I suggested to Nathan, we could, by intentional choice, decide to begin each day with a recitation of Psalm 100, this anthem of God's wise and loving care of the world.

Or, caught in the riptide of the algorithms, we might practice other habits. We might engage a more knee-jerk response to the anxious world and its aggressive, anxious ways of being. Outrage on Facebook. Doomscrolling the headlines. Severing relationships because they stop “serving” us well. A rule can be formed in the mindless minutes of our days, when we go looking for a hit of distraction. It can be formed in the late-night hours, in the privacy of our hidden life. We all have a rule because the choices and habits of our lives shape who we are and have yet to become.

In Benedict's rule, a rule of life was undertaken because Christ was Lord and every day counted for eternity. “Are you hastening toward your heavenly home? Then with Christ's help, keep this little rule that we have written for beginners.”<sup>9</sup>

## The Plan for This Book

In the pages ahead, I want to lead you through a five-step process to write a personal rule of life. Though this falls considerably short of Benedict's communal ideal, a personal rule calls for an intentionality we might not otherwise practice. It is not a biblical command, to be sure, but it is a practice of wisdom in this moment that is ours. Grounded in prayer, Scripture, honest self-reflection, and the fellowship of the saints, a rule guides us into the *clarity* and *courage* we need for our *commitments* to love God, *care* for others, and properly *care for* ourselves.

Admittedly, there's a lot of ground to cover, as I invite you to keep regular company with God (step 1), name your life's given realities (step 2), examine your desires (step 3), articulate faithful habits (step 4), and regularly review and revise the working document that will become your rule (step 5). I hope to lay the groundwork of careful biblical and theological reasoning that will convince you that a rule of life is a sound discipleship practice. Additionally, I want to give Benedict's own words a hearing, to make his ideas accessible to a contemporary audience. Finally, I have stories to tell, as I hope that you can begin to imagine this practice in the landscape of your real life.

I wonder about the interest in a rule of life that has brought you to this book. I won't assume it is passion for the sixth century and the rule that Saint Benedict wrote to govern his small communities of monks.

Maybe you've come to this book because you want deep and lasting spiritual change. You've tired of your anger, your lust, your greed, your indifference, and you want God to grow lasting fruit for your good and his glory. A rule can support this desire for a holy life, as you articulate the regular ways you will keep company with God

and respond in obedience to his voice. The change might be slower than you intend, but God never fails to finish the work he begins.

Maybe you're simply looking to make life work better than it does today. You understand you must rely on the fountain of all wisdom, Jesus Christ, to instruct you in the ways of blessing, and you want to do this more intentionally. You feel swamped by the news cycle, by the responsibilities of caregiving, even by your own loneliness. You want more peace than anxiety, more love than hostility, more generosity than selfishness, more humility than self-righteousness. A rule of life can lead you to engage in the wise habits and practices of peacemaking, truth-telling, forgiveness, and love that expresses itself not in "word or talk but in deed and in truth."<sup>10</sup> Jesus meant what he said when he assured us that his way, though a cross, is also a means to abundant life.

Maybe you're finding yourself at the start of a new season, laying a new foundation. You've recently come to faith, been married, started a family, begun (or ended) a job, or suffered a consequential life change like a divorce or sudden death. You sense there is more important "deciding" ahead of you, and you hope to inhabit this new season, with its unfamiliar responsibilities, wisely and well. A rule of life can help you reflect intentionally on these new "givens" of life and nudge you to imagine the creativity and courage required to respond faithfully to the loving voice of God, to whom you belong.

Or maybe you're mid-season or midlife. You want to bear the good fruit of Christ's Spirit into your stooped and graying years. You need practices to order your priorities amid life's competing responsibilities. You need habits to sustain zeal and finish well because you feel the undertow of cynicism, apathy, despair, or self-indulgence. You're tempted toward resignation at a stage of life when change feels like the feat of reversing the Chicago River. Are

the patterns fixed? Is the future determined? Sometimes you think so, though you want to trust and believe and practice with a renewed faith that every morning in the Christian life can arrive with new mercies.

Whatever God-given realities or Spirit-breathed desires bring you to this book, I trust Jesus is the one who calls. *Come to me. Learn from me. I am bread and water, resurrection and life.*

As you consider this work, know that the effort will always be iterative. It grows as you grow. It adapts to your learning and even takes you down unseen paths. If there is the possibility of “failure” in practicing a rule, I have figured it is this: to simply refuse to show up every morning to the gift and crisis of human life. Consider this to be your invitation in the pages ahead: to live in and from the love of God for his glory and your joy. What counts, writes the apostle Paul in Galatians, is everyday faith working through love.

“As for all who walk by this *rule*, peace and mercy be upon them.”<sup>11</sup>

STEP 1

**The Taproot of a Rule.  
*Keep Company with God.***



“As we progress in this way of life and in faith,  
we shall run on the path of God’s  
commandments, our hearts overflowing  
with the inexpressible delight of love.”

—*The Rule of Saint Benedict*<sup>1</sup>

## A Practice of Love

Midmorning on a Saturday, my husband Ryan and I are caught red-handed in an argument at our neighborhood bodega. The small coffeeshop-meets-deli-meets-corner-store is crowded, and we have overstayed our welcome at the small round table in the back, near the garbage can.

“Well, hi!” Sarah says brightly. Sarah, an acquaintance from church, bends to confirm it is us as she waits for her latte. Her two young children, each of them with hair the color of flax, peer shyly from behind her legs.

“Hi,” we say, working hard to mirror Sarah’s smile. We have been “discussing” our household budget—*because where your treasure is, your heart will be also*. As believers in Jesus, we can’t avoid talking about money.

In previous years of intensive parenting, a weekend breakfast without any of our five children would have required logistical planning and cash for a babysitter. But seasons change, and habits

change too. Now that we are middle-aged and nearly empty-nested we can make a weekly breakfast date a regular practice, or *rule*.

A weekend breakfast with Ryan is just one example of an intention written in my rule that has become a durable commitment. Unless we're sick or out of town, we choose breakfast—and in choosing breakfast, we choose marriage. When it comes to our weekly breakfast meeting, Ryan and I never overthink the details, because it's a track on repeat. Same time, same place, same table if it's available. I get the breakfast burrito; Ryan gets the egg on a roll with goetta.

The breakfast is less romance, more business. We talk money and calendars, vacations and weekly obligations. Ryan brings his laptop and his “monk manual,” a plastic white three-ring binder that is a self-made knockoff version of the leather one I bought him years ago. I bring my three-ring binder, which is divided into monthly sections, each crammed with nearly illegible journal pages.

At the very front of this notebook is a printed document. It's the rule of life I have written, revised, and been working to practice, in various forms, for the last six years. My rule strengthens a prayerful resolve, even to remain here at the back of our neighborhood bodega, fighting about money. I want to stay committed to Jesus and his lordship over all things.

“Let me not be deaf to your voice, nor suffer the pain of a rebellious soul.”<sup>1</sup>

Here, then, is where we all must begin in a rule of life practice. Not at a table in the local bodega exactly—but with the intention to hear and heed the voice of God in every area of our lives, including finances and fights with our spouses. In the Scriptures, hearing is a word associated with obeying. If we do not attend to the loving voice of God, we cannot live a life of consistent faithfulness.

*Listen* is the very first word of *The Rule of Saint Benedict*. “Speaking and teaching are the master’s task,” Benedict writes. “The disciple is to be silent and listen.”<sup>2</sup>



Before a rule of life ever becomes a *responsibility*, it is first a *response*. As a reminder, I’ve defined a rule as the practice of regular habits that sustain creative, faithful response to God’s loving voice. A rule should not be confused with a long to-do list—but rather received as an invitation to be still and know that God is God.

If we want to make it a regular practice to love God, love our neighbor, and properly love ourselves, we must stay rooted and grounded in the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. God’s love is not simply a one-time rescue at the moment of our conversion. God’s love is also our inexhaustible resource for living every day that follows: in wholehearted trust and confident surrender. We love because he first loved us.<sup>3</sup>

In the Gospels, Jesus modeled the spiritually *responsive* life that became the spiritually *responsible* life: “I can do nothing on my own,” he said.<sup>4</sup> Jesus lived in and from the love of his Father to the very end. In the Garden of Gethsemane, God’s love was a rock and a refuge as Jesus knelt and prayed, wrestling with the call to lay down his life. God’s love—and God’s loving will—was the reason for ultimately submitting to the Father in the most painful moments before his betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion.

Patterning our lives after the life of Jesus, we make it, first and foremost, a rule to live in and from the love of the Father, which makes it possible for us to choose the obedience of a rule. When we find it hard to love difficult people, forgive a friend, honor our par-

ents, stay sexually chaste, tell the truth, and give generously, our first inclination must not be to try harder but to seek the face of God. God's love *for* us and God's love *in* us can free us from our bitterness, our self-hatred, our lust, our pride, our indifference, our fear.

A rule is not spiritual trapeze art, hoping God takes a liking to the show. In a rule, there is nothing to earn and nothing to secure. The work is finished, Jesus said from the cross. Because we cannot earn the love of God, neither can we increase its measure by our obedience or lose its reward by our disobedience.

We are not responsible for securing our identities as God's beloved children. As Benedict wrote in his prologue, we begin the good work of a rule, trusting his grace will perfect it. "In his goodness, he has already counted us as his sons."<sup>5</sup> Though we have spurned the love of God in ways deliberate and unconscious, the gospel tells us that God has loved each of us as his prodigal child.

This very good news makes very little sense in a world of measures and metrics. We are accustomed to transactional relationships. We applaud performance and give merit-based awards. In a rule of life, our formation—in this world of achievement—tempts us to try impressing God—or at least try to get him to forget some of our awfulness. But this kind of spiritual tap-dancing would make our rule a rejection of God's love. God is love, and God loves because he loves. God doesn't need to be cajoled into his own generosity. Your rule will gain you nothing more than the full and free inheritance Jesus has secured on your behalf.

A rule, then, can be freely undertaken because we have been freely loved.

When we live in and from the love of God, we find a more secure footing in this anxious world. Our decisions matter—and don't, at the very same time. We want to live well, but even when we fail in our well-meaning intentions, we're held in the love of God.

This security becomes the taproot of our spiritual health. We can make commitments and fail commitments, learning to trust that our compassionate Father “knows our frame” and “remembers that we are dust.”<sup>6</sup> Love isn’t a cause for laxity—because if I love God, I will do what he commands. But it is also not an occasion for fear. Perfect love drives out anxious spiritual striving.

As Jesus said to his disciples in the gospel of John, it’s here, in the love of God, that you must abide, remain, persevere, endure, and rest if you are to faithfully carry out his mission of love.



Pick up any book on the spiritual disciplines, and you will see all kinds of ways we can live in and from the love of God. Though the love of God is a constant, we can “practice” our awareness of it and enlarge our vision for who God calls us to be through these spiritual habits. Because we are a forgetful people, we need constant reminders of the reality of God’s self-giving love in Christ.

For the purpose of simplicity, I want to challenge you, as you undertake this first step of a rule, to commit to three regular habits: prayer, Scripture, and participation in the life of the local church. It is hard to imagine growing as a Christian without these habits that return us, over and over again, to the reality of God’s love. In Scripture, we learn of God’s loving character. In prayer, we seek the reality of God’s loving presence. In the church, we amplify the truth of God’s love as we worship side-by-side and shoulder-to-shoulder in loud unison.

Maybe this appetite—to be with God, to be with God’s people, to talk to God, to hear him talk to you—is your deep hunger and regular habit. That means you can incorporate the disciplines you’re already practicing into the working document of your rule. Or

maybe you don't yet know this yearning for friendship with God and God's people. That's okay—because you can ask God for this desire. As my pastor said many years ago, you can pray *to want to want to*. This might be the place you begin.

On the one hand, there has never been a day in my life, at least that I can remember, that I haven't believed in the love of God. One of my greatest inheritances was being born into a Christian family and raised by parents who took me faithfully to church, Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday night. We sang songs about the deep, deep love of Jesus and the great faithfulness of God. My story should encourage parents who make the weekly effort to get their kids to church, even when the kids are whiny and tired and more than a little belligerent.

By the time I was a teenager, though, I presumed on the love of God. I thought I could abide in God's love without obeying his commandments.<sup>7</sup> I counted on the love of God like a golden ticket in my pocket that would take me to heaven when I died. This is a danger in the Christian life, that we can imagine the love of God as something cheap and undemanding.

I stood to learn that the love of God is a burning bush of holy fire. As George MacDonald put it, God loves unto purity.<sup>8</sup> The story of my prodigal return is cliché, though my camp conversion the summer after my sophomore year of high school has now held for more than three decades.

When I was sixteen, God came to me in love, and I heard the voice of Jesus: *What do you want? Where are you headed? Will you follow?* I don't mean that the voice was audible, though I do mean it was personal and real and not to be doubted as loving, even if it didn't flinch from the naked truth of my sin. I remember, after deciding to follow Jesus beside that lake in the summer of 1990, that I was urged by spiritual leaders in my community to make certain

spiritual disciplines a regular habit. Scripture reading. Prayer. Witness. Obedience.

To think of it now, I was asked to practice a rule of faith. More than thirty years later, I can say these were good habits, ones that began to fortify deep roots in the love of God. In high school, I started to pray and read the Scriptures at the beat-up desk my parents moved up from the basement at my request. There may have been initial legalism to the routine; I was afraid I might wiggle from God's loving grasp. But there was also a growing desire to know God and live in and from his love. Thank God for this, because one morning, the door opened, and my mother interrupted me, looking pleased. "You should keep this up," she said, well-meaning. I almost quit on the spot.

There are things you and I must choose (and renounce) if we want to *practice* living in and from the love of God. We can begin choosing (and renouncing) them in our rule. This won't happen accidentally. As Benedict might say, the time won't be given. It must instead be taken.

We can meditate on Psalm 100 when we wake, rather than scrolling the day's headlines. We can read Scripture at the breakfast table with our children, rather than checking Facebook. We can listen to worship music on our commute, rather than listening to one more lifestyle podcast. We can plan coffee with a Christian friend, rather than arranging one more solitary binge of our latest Netflix show. We can show up for church on Sunday and even volunteer in the kids' ministry, despite the exhaustion of a long workweek.

The practices aren't magic. But just as we set a plant by a window, we engage in the spiritual disciplines to allow for more access to light.

My friend Darryl Dash, a pastor in Toronto, writes about a rule of life in his helpful book, *8 Habits for Growth*. He reminds us that

we can't grow a holy, healthy spiritual life rooted in the love of God without support structures. In the Latin, *regula*, or rule, can mean a straight piece of wood, and some have speculated that it is the same word used for a trellis. The trellis, as a support structure for a plant or vine or tree, is a trustworthy picture of the structure of a rule, helping us see that a rule stakes a vision for a life of love and supports long-term upward growth in God. It plants intentions and nurtures follow-through, beginning first in our life with God.

“Some things grow automatically, like weeds and chaos,” Dash writes. “Almost everything else thrives as a result of feeding, care, and intentionality. . . . That’s where a Rule of Life comes in. A Rule of Life is a set of practices that provide direction and growth. It answers questions like: . . . *How can I order my entire life around God and live with a sense of His presence?*”<sup>9</sup>



### **FOR REFLECTION**

If you have hesitations about the three habits I've suggested, how might you begin to overcome them?

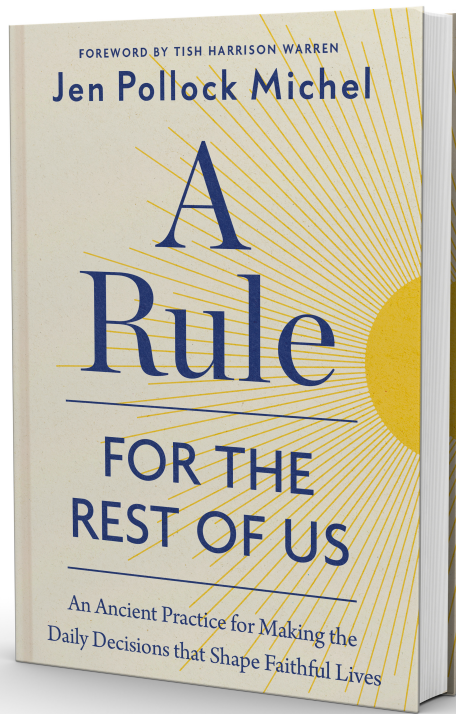
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