

Disciple-Forming Resource

Devoted

Praying Our Way to a Rule of Life

A Week of Prayer Guide
for Individuals and Small Groups



The Evangelical Covenant Church

The resource is also available in Korean and Spanish.

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Department of Christian Formation

The Evangelical Covenant Church

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“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.” —Luke 10:27, TNIV

Read: Matthew 22:34-40; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Matthew 6:33

Reflect

Most of us desire to live a well-ordered life that reflects what we truly believe about ourselves, the world and God. Yet it is not uncommon for us to move through our minutes, days, months and years with one or two areas consuming most of our energy, leaving little time for the things that matter, and causing us to feel off-kilter and depleted. In an attempt to reconcile our beliefs with our lifestyle, we figure out ways to squeeze in church or devotional activities. Yet, we still don't find that sense of well-being and fulfillment we are looking for.

“How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.” (Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*.)

Jesus said the most important commandment was: ***“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.”*** This is a radical call to give God

EVERYTHING. When Jesus called those who would be his disciples, he said: Follow me. Live like I do. Learn from me. See how I relate to the Father. Order your life around this ONE thing and then everything else will be aligned. (See: Matthew 4:19; Luke 9:58; Matthew 11:29; John 15; Matthew 6:33.)

It seems that if we want a *life* in relationship to Jesus, it matters immensely how we spend our *days*.

In the coming week, we will consider how we can be intentional about our life in Christ through a beautiful gift of the Christian tradition—Rule of Life.

Rule of Life is a structure that facilitates spiritual growth.

Practice and Pray

Individual Setting:

- Spend a few moments basking in the love God has for you and the knowledge that God cares about every aspect of your life.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to lead you through this process.
- Ask the Spirit to reveal to you everything you do that nurtures your connection to God. Write it down. Don't leave anything out.
- Add to the list throughout the next few days as other habits or practices are noticed.

Group Setting:

- Read the Scriptures together and talk about what you notice, what disturbs, or draws you.

- Share the list you have begun with your group. Allow them to point out other practices they see in your life.

Prayer: Pray that the Spirit would lead you, as individuals and as a community, into a life of ever-deepening intimacy with God.

Follow

2

Day

So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

—*Luke 5:11, TNIV*

Read: Luke 5:1-11

Reflect

The fishermen were going about their routine when Jesus shook them out of the ordinary and invited them into a new way of being. They'd had an unproductive night and knew their trade well, but something about Jesus compelled them to take his unconventional advice and to go back to the deep and try again. With the miracle of the absurd catch of fish, Jesus gave them a glimpse of the abundance that a life with him would offer. They left everything and followed him. They turned toward lives with Jesus at the center. They became his disciples and found a new Rule of Life.

A Rule of Life is an ancient Christian practice with deep Jewish roots. (The term comes from the Latin word 'regula' which refers to the act of regulating.) ***"A Rule of Life is a pattern of Spiritual practices that provides structure and direction for growth in holiness."*** (Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast*.) In other words, a Rule helps us be intentional about living lives as disciples of Christ, lives moving toward being more and more like Jesus. A good Rule considers the whole person: mind, body,

spirit, and acknowledges the indivisible nature of the three—that Christ desires to be formed in every area of our lives. It incorporates spiritual practices that draw the person into deeper understanding of God and greater experience of God’s love.

Practice and Pray

Individual Setting: Most of us do certain things because we are followers of Christ. We gather to worship each Sunday. We pray before meals. We celebrate Holy Days. We may not even be aware that we are practicing a Rule of Life, but as we order our lives around our commitment to God, that is exactly what we are doing. We can make our Unconscious Rule intentional once we have discovered what we are already doing. What have you noticed about the list you are making? Look for and pray for a balance of mind, body and spirit.

Group Setting: Try an inward practice like imaginative prayer. Ask the Spirit to lead. Slowly read the passage above. Let each word draw you into the story. Imagine you are there. Use all your senses to imagine the setting and the activity that takes place. Can you be there with Jesus? What do you say to him? What does he say to you? Share your experience with your group.

Prayer: Ask God to give you each the grace to more fully live into the call of Jesus on your life.

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing... This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.” —John 15:5, 8, TNIV

Read: John 15:1-14

Reflect

Today as I meditate on this Scripture, it is the peak of fruit season in Northern Michigan. On the kitchen counter sit cartons of raspberries and blueberries, a bowl of sour cherries, a brown bag concealing ripening peaches, just picked. There are tomatoes, red and yellow, on my windowsill next to the zucchini and fresh basil.

It is an exquisite bounty and I consider the intentionality, the tending, that brought it to fruition, the planting, the pruning, the staking, the watering, the waiting and watching. If any of it had been neglected, the fruit would be lost or at least diminished.

The work the farmer does is like the work we are invited to do in our own lives, the same kind of tending. Jesus says, “Remain in me.” The question we each need to ask ourselves is, “What enables me to be most fully alive as a child of God or how do I

‘remain’ connected to the Vine?” All the practices and disciplines that draw you into a place of freedom, love, health and generosity make up your Rule of Life. So today, look at your list and notice the practices that nurture your life in Christ. Don’t be surprised if some of those that make the cut are creative pursuits like painting, poetry, gardening, or building. Maybe dancing, running, or hiking in the woods are ways your spirit is nurtured. Don’t censor. Just notice, like the farmer, what you see making your life most fruitful.

Practice and Pray

Individual Setting:

- Today as you go back to your list, mark those practices that bring you closest to the God who loves you and desires relationship with you.
- Notice what is missing. Are there obvious omissions that catch your attention? For example, do you feel no connection between your relationship with God and your social life or with God and your work life?

Group Setting:

- Share your findings with your group.
- Speak to each other about what you notice and allow observations to be made.

Prayer: Pray for the Spirit to illumine life-giving pathways to deeper, more bountiful life in Christ.

Climbing Trees

Day 4

(Zacchaeus) wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. —Luke 19:3-4, TNIV

Read: Luke 19:1-10

Reflect

No two people are alike, and when it comes to our life in Christ and our Rule of Life, our individuality and all that makes us unique should shine. There is no one-size-fits-all program for growing as a friend of God.

Zacchaeus wanted to get a glimpse of Jesus. He had obviously heard about Jesus from others, but he desired a first-hand experience. Zacchaeus knew he wasn't one of the crowd. In fact, he knew he would get lost in the crowd if he put himself there, so he ran ahead of the throng and climbed a tree on the road Jesus was taking.

There are some things we can learn from Zacchaeus. First, he knew himself, his limitations, his strengths, and acted accordingly. The more we know ourselves, how we learn, what opens us to God, what shuts us down or leaves us cold, the more likely we will have a thriving spiritual life that permeates our entire being. Secondly, Zacchaeus decided which tree to

climb based on what he knew of the way Jesus would travel. There may have been a taller tree somewhere else in Jericho, but if it wasn't on the path Jesus was walking, it would do no good to climb it. Similarly, we can learn from historic Christianity those graced paths that God seems to honor, spiritual practices like prayer in its myriad forms, meditation, fasting, silence, lectio divina, or service, and place ourselves there that we might also encounter the God who is seeking us and inviting us home.

“God has given us the Disciplines of the spiritual life as a means of receiving his grace. The Disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so that he can transform us.” (Richard Foster, *The Celebration of Discipline*.)

Practice and Pray

Individual Setting: As you look at your list, what gets you excited? Which tree is begging you to climb? Is there something you KNOW will help you grow in your connection to Jesus? Has God been nudging you in a particular direction? Write it all down.

Group Setting: Discuss the questions above and then talk today about spiritual practices that have been most helpful to you over your lifetime. As a group, choose one that you could try together and do it.

Prayer: Choose one spiritual practice that you could do individually or as a group.

They said, “Rabbi,” (which means “Teacher”), where are you staying?” “Come,” he replied, “and you will see.” — John 1:38b-39, TNIV

Read: John 1:35-42

Reflect

When the two men ask Jesus where he is staying, Jesus doesn't just answer their question with facts, he invites them to go with him to his lodging and hang out. They stay with him for the day and from that point on they give their lives to learn from him and live with him.

That is our invitation too. Jesus invites each of us to “come and see” and to remain with him. How often do we miss that? How often do days slip by because we have neglected to order our days around the chance to be in the presence of God? Those are the days when I forget who I am, days that are lost to compulsion and inattentiveness. In *The Writing Life*, Annie Dillard says a schedule is “...a net for catching days.” I want a net in my life. I want my days to matter, to be fruitful, intimately connected to Jesus and the leading of his Spirit so that my life makes a difference in this world. That tends to happen more readily when I am adhering to my Rule of Life. Practices put me in position to receive something from God. They turn my face again and again to Jesus who invites me to spend my days in his presence, guidance, and love.

Practice and Pray

Individual Setting: Construct a net that will catch your precious days. Draw a grid with four columns. Label the columns with Daily, Weekly, Monthly, Annually. Sort the practices to which you feel drawn into the categories. Perhaps you will commit to **daily** prayer, Scripture reading and keeping a journal. On a **weekly** basis, you might commit to corporate worship and rest, extended prayer and study, sharing a meal with someone who is otherwise alone, and exercise three times a week. Perhaps **monthly** you will commit to seeing a Spiritual Director, meeting with friends who care about your spiritual life, completing a poem or working at a shelter with your family. **Yearly**, you may decide to take an extended retreat or a mission trip. These are examples only. You need to construct a Rule that suits you and then approach it playfully. Live with it for a time, continue to shape it, and work with it until it fits like a soft glove.

Family Setting: Think about your family. Are there daily, weekly, or monthly practices you can follow as a family to catch your precious days and draw you closer to God and to each other?

Group Setting: Discuss outward practices that each of you feels drawn to like service, confession, simplicity, or solitude. Tell how the practice has worked in your life or what you hope to receive as you practice it.

Prayer: Ask the Spirit for wisdom to shape, and desire to practice, the Rule to which each person senses God calling him or her.

*“Lord, if it is you...tell me to come to you on the water.” —
Matthew 14:28, TNIV*

Read: Matthew 14:22-33

Reflect

I try to bike daily. I have a short route and a longer one that I alternate. This routine keeps me feeling strong and healthy so I stick with it. About five minutes into my ride each day I pass a steep hill that I never ascend. First of all, it would take me from the lake view that I enjoy. But mostly, I fear it. I have seen others struggling to make their way to the top. I have witnessed plenty who end up ascending on foot. The truth is, I fear that the hill will defeat me, so I avoid it.

But I agreed to one leg of a local triathlon and recently found that the route will require that I pump my way up that dreaded hill. So there was nothing to do but turn away from the comfort of my lake route and push my way up the “mountain.” It was a difficult ascent, my heart raced and I was gasping for air, but I made it to the top. It was not pretty, but I conquered it and now I don’t need to avoid it anymore.

Sometimes in our practice of the spiritual disciplines we need to push ourselves out of what is easy and routine toward a challenge that will allow us to live more faithfully and effectively as God’s own. I love Matthew’s story of Peter doing

just that. He pushed through his fear, got out of the boat and walked on water toward Jesus. He did it! True, he needed to be caught and helped back into the boat, but in the process he communed with Jesus and learned a thing or two about himself. By riding up that hill, I realized a bit more of my own capacity and fitness and opened myself to hundreds of miles of coastal vistas and new adventures if I choose to continue up the road that had been closed to me until now.

Practice and Pray

Individual Setting:

- Where do you need to be challenged?
- Is there a practice in your life that could be expanded causing it to press on the places that need God's grace and touch?
- Prayerfully consider one challenge to add to your Rule.

Group Setting:

- Pray through the passage above, reflecting on words or phrases that speak into your life.
- Discuss your areas of challenge with each other.

Prayer: Pray for individuals and the community to be responsive to God's invitations.

*By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work.
—Genesis 2:2, TNIV*

Read: Genesis 1:31-2:3; Exodus 20:8-11; Matthew 11:28

Reflect

Through my window I can see yellow walnut leaves playfully falling from the trees. It is the end of summer and the trees are already moving toward their autumnal practice of shedding their foliage and fruit and going into a period of dormancy and rest. That rest is essential to the well-being of every aspect of creation. Invisible, yet essential processes take place while a tree is at rest. Vitality is restored, systems are retuned, the tree is stripped of its responsibility to produce, to photosynthesize, to grow and bear. It is part of the creation plan.

Humans once moved in similar seasonal rhythms, planting, harvesting, preserving, celebrating, and resting. Routine of work and rest was orchestrated around the rising and the setting of the sun. But now, thanks to the advances of technology, we can keep our lives lit and moving 24 hours a day. Work need never cease. Rest is optional.

The Genesis story reveals that God worked for six days, exerted power and creativity, and then God rested. He stopped, let go, and knew that it was good. We are commanded to do the

same, to do good work, and then to rest by letting go of all that we control. Our world will not stop turning if we rest. The moon will rise and the sun will appear in the East even if we put our to-do list in a drawer and let calls go to voicemail.

When we observe this joyful gift to humanity, we acknowledge and honor God, we realign ourselves, remember our dependence, and relinquish any illusion that WE are God. The command to rest is an invitation to find life as we orient our lives around the God in whom we live and move and have our being. A good Rule of Life will include rest. It will include play as part of that rest.

Practice and Pray

Individual Setting:

- How often do you cease working? Consider what refreshes you. What helps you connect to God AND brings you refreshment and joy?
- If rest and play are not already part of your Rule, ask the Spirit to reveal what incremental changes you can make to include it starting now.

Group Setting:

- Covenant with each other to make rest part of your Rule of Life and part of your community.
- Commit to periodically asking each other, “How goes your walk with Christ?”

Prayer: Bless the Rules. Ask for God's grace to flow in and through our practice of the spiritual life and that, through our Rule of Life, we might hear God's voice and follow wherever he leads.