

Session 5 – Strengthening Our Stewardship

A Rule of Life

It's never an easy thing to know where to start in building up one's spiritual life; so often we just take the plunge and try some of the prayers or techniques which we have heard or read about; and, once we have plunged, we realise that we have not looked where we are going and have jumped into extremely deep water, in which we cannot swim, and find it all too much. At last we struggle to the shore, and know that it's all too much, and give up. Let me use another analogy.

Having led a somewhat sedentary life, I might well suddenly get the ambition to run a marathon. I might go out and get a few books about running, or even books by runners. I might buy the latest running shoes, the most fashionable vest and shorts. I put them on and look at myself in a mirror; not a pretty sight! But, I've got everything that marathon runners have, and if they can do it so can I! So, off I go, jogging hard down the drive at the start of 26 miles. Within about 200 yards, I have collapsed by the side of the road, unable to move or breathe, feeling extremely ill. Why?? What have I done wrong? I am wearing the right clothes; I've read the books; my body is made up of the same basic items as any top athlete; so why can I not run a marathon?

The answer is, I hope, obvious. My mind may be set to run a marathon; my body may be designed to do it; but I have to actually train in order to get my body into any condition to run 26 miles. If my heart is really set on such a run, then I have to start at the beginning, training my body, becoming disciplined, working my way slowly up to the goal. The process is not without pain, not without frustration, not without failure; but, if I am determined, then I will succeed.

Thus it is with the spiritual life. So often we expect immediate results: feelings of perpetual joy and holiness; God talking to us and telling us what to do; our lives changing for the better. But, although I believe that prayer and spirituality are natural to humans, we have to be prepared to train, to learn and, above all, be *disciplined*. (The notion of discipline can be very negative to some people, yet the word originates from the Latin *disciplina*, meaning 'teaching' or 'learning': a disciple is one who learns.)

It is here that a Rule of Life comes in, as a way of measuring our training in the spiritual life. Such a Rule is not a new thing, nor is it confined only to Christianity; within Christianity the concept of a Rule is best known within the various monastic traditions, but in fact it is a useful tool for everyone.

First of all, let's look at what the word 'Rule' actually means, as for many people it means the same as 'Law' (as in School Rules), making a Rule of Life a form of pious legalism.

'Rule' comes from the Latin word *regula*, which basically means 'rule, pattern, model, example and measure'; it is from this word that we get the word *ruler*, a measuring device. (The Greek for the same word is *Kanon*; thus the 'Canons of Scripture' are those books which have been measured against a standard, and not found wanting.) The meaning is important: ultimately the idea of a Rule is that it is something to be measured up to in order to judge how we are doing. And the idea of *pattern* is also important: most of us have some sort of pattern in our lives; things can become a lot simpler if we do the same things at the same time each day – getting up, eating, working, whatever. Most of the time we probably don't even notice, it is so much a part of our lives. But, the pattern can be broken; when I am on holiday, I get up later, I eat when I want, and generally enjoy a break from the pattern.

So, living by a Rule is a way of life, a pattern; it's like being a regular (there's that word again!) soldier rather than a volunteer, who fights only when he feels like it. A Rule is not a series of little laws: it is rather our orderly way of existence, which has as its opposite not liberty but chaos.

Indeed, a Rule is actually opposed to legalism. A legalist would say that once you have broken a so-called law, then you have failed and might as well give up. A Rule recognises weakness and failure.

The Rule is merely a means to an end; the end being that we might get nearer to God, and serve Him more effectively.

It does this in a number of ways:

- It involves discipline, the giving up of time and effort for God. It conditions us, so that the ultimate hope is that our religious life is not second nature, but our *only* nature.
- It helps us to assess our spiritual growth, to see how, and indeed whether, we have grown; this goes back to the original meaning, *measure*.
- It helps to set objectives and goals; there is no point running a race or fighting a battle without an objective, and the same applies to the spiritual battle. A Rule can help us set realistic goals; realistic both in the sense of doing what we are able, and also in the sense of not doing too much: I would not set aside five hours a day for prayer, because I know that I would fail; ten minutes may be a bit more realistic.
- We can make a Rule to suit ourselves; our own time limitations, circumstances, etc. Don't begin by trying to follow the Rule of Benedict, for example, because you will probably not succeed!

So, how should a Rule of Life be built up, and what should be in it? Life is set within time, and therefore it is within time that we should develop our spiritual life, looking at days, weeks, months and years. One way of organising this is to use a timetable, an example of which is given below. To many, this may seem a little childish, but when you are starting at the beginning you have to be prepared to learn the basics; once you have mastered a technique, then you are free to experiment with it. Such a timetable helps give some sort of structure according to time and also according to 'spiritual' activity.

	PERSONAL	CORPORATE	FAMILY	LIFE
DAILY				
WEEKLY				
MONTHLY				
YEARLY				

The headings are, of course, flexible; but they should reflect the totality of life, so that spirituality becomes a full part of ourselves.

Some suggestions are as follows:

Daily

- Daily personal prayer & meditation – possibly using Morning / Evening Prayer.
- Daily Bible reading – following a pattern like the Lectionary.
- Angelus / Midday Prayer.
- Daily self-examination.

Weekly

- Communion (possibly even more than just on Sunday!)
- Reading a 'spiritual' book.
- Meeting with other members of the family of God.
- Stewardship.
- Doing something for others – visiting / charity work, etc.

Monthly

- A Fast.
- Spiritual Direction.
- Confession.

Yearly

- Special observance of Lent & Advent.

- Retreat.
- Review of the Rule.

These are merely suggestions, and also some could take place more or less than suggested.

One good exercise is to fill in the timetable with what you do already; you might be surprised one way or the other! Then try to fill it in with what you should aim for – and do it honestly – not too much, but not too little either. And then try it!

Most of the above refers to our use of time; but a Rule of Life can, and should, go a lot further than that. Richard Foster, in his book *'Celebration of Discipline'*, talks about what he calls Outward Disciplines – which concern other ways in which we live. He gives the example of clothes:

“Most people have no need for more clothes. They buy more not because they need clothes, but because they want to keep up with the fashions. Hang the fashions. Buy only what you need. Wear your clothes until they are worn out. Stop trying to impress people with your clothes and impress them with your life.”

He goes on to suggest other Outward Disciplines:

- Reject anything which is an addiction.
- Develop a habit of giving things away.
- Learn to enjoy things without owning them.
- Reject anything that will breed the oppression of others.

Spirituality must be a part of all of our lives, and building a Rule is mostly about Stewardship, both of time and what we have. The 'Timetable Rule' allows us to structure our time; we must also structure what we do with all we have. We have been lent a lot; one day we shall have to account for how we used it.