

GUIDELINES FOR A DISCIPLE'S WAY OF LIFE

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Growth is basic to the Christian journey. Our Faith is not a dead religion, but a living one. A person must be experiencing growth in order to truly know Jesus Christ, for Christ is "life" itself. But as in any living system whether biological or spiritual, there are certain basic requirements: specific needs which must be met in order for there to be both life and growth. When we began to grow physically as children, we needed nurturing, support, guidance, limitation, freedom, and an environment in which to flourish. A "way of life" is all of these things. It is the nurturing environment which encourages growth and life in Christ. In order to live and grow physically we need a balance of essential elements and activities. The same is true in the Christian life. Every Christian must establish a routine which will incorporate all these elements and allow for growth in a balanced way. Every Christian needs to develop a cycle of activity which balances the same elements over and over again.

THE SPIRITUAL PARENT:

Every human being exists because of parentage. This fact is also true in the realm of spiritual birth. Spiritual life cannot exist without there being parentage. A spiritual parent is particularly important in the early phases of Christian growth. The Christian pilgrim needs a spiritual director (or parent) in order to maintain the necessary structure and balance of life. The director acts as a corrective to any state of imbalance, and plays a vital role in helping to maintain needed perspective on the Christian path.

1. Look for a spiritual director, whether laity or clergy, who manifests a real degree of spiritual maturity in his or her life. Ask about this person's spiritual life both directly and from personal references. If you are satisfied that the quality and kind of spiritual life is high, then ask for an interview.

2. Determine whether this person is willing to assume the responsibilities of giving spiritual guidance and direction in your life. If so then work together to form a contract of understanding about the sort of relationship to be developed and the kind of guidance which shall be given.

3. Establish a relationship which is neither so constricting that you become overly dependent, nor so libertarian that you remain undisciplined. Be open and obedient to any thoughtful direction without becoming blindly obedient nor uncritically passive.

4. Whenever possible, establish a pattern of life with the help of a spiritual parent which will enable you to live the balanced Christian life. Ask for guidance and correction in maintaining that pattern sustained over time.

That balance should contain the following elements:

NUTRITION:

There is a proverb which states, "You are what you eat." This statement could easily be made about the Christian life as well. What we become as Christians is determined by the nutrition we receive. So much depends upon nourishment. It is as easy to become undernourished or malnourished spiritually as it is physically. Good nutrition is the regular intake of spiritual food. The spiritual pilgrim must feed on a balanced diet of essential foods.

1. Daily or regular reading of scripture. Certainly the most accessible and easily used method is the Daily Lectionary in the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* available through Episcopal churches and some book stores. Another resource is *A Guide to Prayer* by Job published by The Upper Room. This is available by ordering if not in stock. Begin a systematic program of daily Scripture reading. Ask your spiritual director to help you plan regular Bible Study for yourself, or get involved in a structured study in classes offered through your parish or church. For those interested in high quality systematic study, Bible Study Fellowship is a reliable source of nurture. Inquire about their programs in the Dallas area through Debbie Bird at (h)239-5154 or (w)788-2992.

2. The reading of Scripture in the Daily Lectionary (*Book of Common Prayer*) is designed to be read in the context of worship and prayer through the Daily Offices. The regular recitation of the Daily Offices of Morning and Evening Prayer are an invaluable means of learning to worship. Ideally these should be recited in the fellowship of a community of worshipers. As you establish a disciple's way of life, you may find that you are not able initially to pray both Evening and Morning Prayer each day. A good procedure is to allow flexibility by either saying Morning or Evening prayer each day. You can inquire about group prayer of this type at Episcopal and Catholic churches in your area. In the Richardson area Canyon Creek Presbyterian Church holds morning prayer services regularly.

3. The Christian world is full of a rich literature of spiritual and devotional writings. This treasury of

human experience as men and women have learned to walk with God is so essential to our own spiritual pilgrimages. Find one or several good books that "feed" both your heart and mind; which teach you and instruct you and, at the same time, make you long for more. Read these books slowly. Perhaps a small section from several books each day. One very psychologically astute source that draws from many authors is *The Choice is Always Ours: The Classic Anthology on the Spiritual Way* edited by Phillips, Howes, and Nixon published by Harper Collins. Others might be better for your particular needs. Ask your spiritual director.

PERSONAL DIALOGUE AND COMMUNICATION THROUGH PRAYER:

One cannot develop normally as a human being without interaction between persons. Again this applies significantly to spiritual growth with the added dimension that this dialogue or communication must not only include human persons on the horizontal level, it must also apply vertically between yourself and God. Dialogue and communication with other people is essential for the building up of your life both socially and spiritually. There are many Christians who think that they can grow without a community of significant Christians to whom they are committed and belong. The result is usually the opposite of growth. They become underdeveloped at best or disfigured and spiritually paralyzed at worst.

1. The most essential relationship you can develop is with the Church, made up of people living and dead, past and present, local and worldwide. In that community you are supported and sustained by a network that extends through both time and space and into eternity. This is where you begin to pray and communicate starting with the most important prayer of the church, the Eucharist (Lord's Supper or Communion). Weekly fellowship and worship with the people of God and with fellow pilgrims is essential for growth.

2. As you begin to live and communicate inside the spiritual organism called the Church, however, remember that the Church is not a "perfect" institution with flawless people, but men and women who are growing and being restored to wholeness just like you. You should not expect the Church to be a "resort" where all the healthy and wealthy go for fun and games, but a kind of hospital for those who recognize their need and are seeking for healing and restoration to wholeness.

3. The development of a regular prayer life is the essential ingredient in establishing dialogue with God. Remember prayer is not about the "correct" usage of words, but about how to establish real communication with God the Father through Jesus Christ the Son. At the beginning it is easy not to know what to "say" and to worry about using the proper sort of language. One of the easiest ways to begin is to use the words of Scripture themselves as prayer. Most of the prayers in the Daily Offices, for example,

are based upon the Scriptures, and they are there for our immediate use. Psalms is a good source of prayers for praying the Scriptures.

4. Finally, learn to listen to God's communication in the whole of your life. People often wonder how God speaks or guides them. Perhaps the best way of "hearing" is to begin to pay attention to the pattern of your life. What is happening to you? What questions are being raised for you? Pay close attention to these sorts of things. Let your whole life be a place where you are being taught. Learn about your spiritual intuition. Perhaps the best way to learn to pay attention to the voice and work of God is to keep a journal of personal entries on the observations you make and the question you have. Keep track both of the circumstances of your life, the lessons you learn and the answers you find. Let them become part of the record of the way you begin to listen and continue your inner dialogue with God. Learn the technique of *Lectio Divina* (hearing the "divine word" intuitively in scripture) from your director. Consider learning the spiritual message of dreams. You will need a director for this also. Learn to perceive God in everyday life using De Caussade's *Abandonment to Divine Providence* or Brother Lawrence's *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Come to know both Spirit and Truth. (John 4:23)

REST, SILENCE, AND ORDER:

Everybody must rest in order to remain sane and balanced. Have you ever noticed in your own natural life as your activities increase and life become more and more hectic that you tend to lose balance and perspective? The same principle also holds true in the Christian life. We need both spiritual "rest", which means periods of withdrawal into a listening silence, and the establishment of a more ordered lifestyle than most people tend to live. We live in a very disordered world where the pace of life seems always to increase and we are swept along in that rushing stream with little time to think or pray or just observe. Someone has said that a driven human being is an enslaved human being. Most of us will have to stop doing half the things we normally do in order to do the other half with the fullness of faith and the power of love which comes from being rooted and grounded in Christ. We must learn to "simplify" our lives.

1. Part of this reordering is taking time to be silent, away from noise and interruption for distinct periods of time. It is only in silence that you can truly learn to listen. Perhaps you are "hooked on noise" and so silence bothers you. You must learn, therefore, how to "listen" in silence and how to "rest" from busyness.

2. Perhaps the best way to begin to establish order and silence is first to set priorities and to be willing to reduce the level of activity so that you will have, at the very least, one hour a week to be in silence. You might spend this alone in your home, or in the quiet places of nature, or perhaps in the Church in the presence of the Reserve Sacrament. Gently still the meaningless chatter of the tongue and the jabber

of the mind. As you are able, add more time for this form of spiritual "rest". Once a year attempt a retreat for a few days. A book that can help you better provide for this is *Ordering Your Private World* by Gordon MacDonald.

3. In all of the silent places of your life, whether they be hours or days, allow the Holy Spirit to weave together the things you are learning, to spotlight the wounds and weaknesses in your life, and to give you His wisdom. It is in rest that what you learn becomes integrated with what you are. Without rest, silence and order you easily become "disintegrated."

SPIRITUAL WORK:

Without work, without a goal, our lives seem pointless, as though we are "wasting valuable time." To develop spiritually we also need goals toward which to move and work. The very symbol of the Church as Christ's own Body indicates that both it and we exist for a very serious purpose. Purpose, goal, and work are words that have significance on two levels at once: our own inner work and the extension of that work in the exterior world.

1. First, God has His own goal for you and that is to bring you into greater and greater fellowship with Himself, to make you more and more like His Son. So His inner "work" is to conform you to the image of Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. As the Spirit causes you to see yourself as God sees you, you will begin to see what needs to be done and begin to actively work with the Holy Spirit. It is in this inner seeing into the work that must be done that you can

receive valuable assistance from your spiritual director. Together, it is important to identify those areas and to keep track of them through the journal that you are keeping. With the help of your spiritual director set certain goals for change in your life, and cooperate with the Holy Spirit in the work He is already doing inside of you.

2. The second aspect of your spiritual work is to share with Christ in His own ministry to the world through His Body the Church. As a member of that Body you have a baptismal mandate to fulfill; you have an apostolic ministry which can only be completed through what you allow the Spirit of Christ to accomplish through you. This means both that you are to be willing to share your spiritual life with others both inside and outside the Body of Christ, and to become an instrument for the Presence of Christ in this world.

3. Ask God to show you what one thing that you can give to others from His life within you. You may be a good listener when people are in need, you may have the gift of comfort and help or of financial support. You may be able to counsel or to teach. Whatever it is, become aware how you seem to be used to help and assist others over and over again. Keep track of those ways in your journal, and as you discover a pattern, actively seek to develop the skills and gifts you have and to become more proficient in those areas. Learn about spiritual gifts. There are gift inventories that can help you discern yours and books on the topic. Get involved. We often learn best what our gifts are by getting out there and trying different things.

Questions and Answers about the Disciple's Way (Rule) of Life

1. Think of examples of ways we use a structure to nurture relationships in our lives:

The Way (or Rule) of Life is just this--a structure.

2. Is a Way (or Rule) of Life one more thing I need to do?

The rule of life can be a structure which enables us to be truly present to God rather than a structure for accomplishing certain things.

Thus, reading the Scriptures is a matter of coming before Him to hear His words as He speaks them to our hearts; going to church is a matter of being in God's Presence to the extent we are able. worshipping, self-giving; and praying is giving ourselves over to His presence with emptiness and honesty... and so forth.

3. What is a rule of life?

A. It is a plan of life providing a set pattern or daily schedule. Since the third century Christians have recognized the utility of a rule of life

B. A rule of life is to help anyone striving for a closer union with God to create a setting of constancy of purpose and to safeguard against frantic, dissipating activity.

C. As a means, never an end, the rule of life assists concentration on the goal of closer union with God. It is adaptable to the demands of charity and prudence.

4. List some of the points which I think might be part of my rule of life:
Consider if some of these are self-imposed "oughts" to which I am not really called.

5. List anything which seems to be a barrier in my relationship with God or which seems to be preventing a closer relationship?

WORKSHEET FOR A RULE OF LIFE

Make an outline of a revised Rule of Life that reflects you and your own personal uniqueness based upon the following categories, concepts and questions. Use the following points and questions to help guide you in building of a Rule of Life.

Spiritual Parent

1. Do you have spiritual parents?
2. Who are your teachers?
3. Are you satisfied with your spiritual director?
4. If you don't have a spiritual director, where do you turn for parenting?.

Nutrition

1. List your current sources of nutrition (spiritual food).
2. What do you need to add or take away to achieve nutritional balance?
3. How do you receive spiritual food from the Scriptures? What is your method of intake?

Communication and Dialogue

1. Do you have a regular prayer life?
2. What are your normal prayer forms?
3. What changes do you need to make to increase your personal communication and dialogue with God and the Christian community?.
4. Do you need to be involved in a small group of spiritual friends?

Rest - Silence - Order

1. Do you detect that you have a balanced and manageable schedule in your spiritual life and in daily life?
2. How do you insure there is space for silence and listening in your life?
3. Reflect on your life style (balances and imbalances) and what changes need to be made to bring it into better balance.

Spiritual Work

1. Are you aware of your gifts? What are they?
2. Are there any that lie dormant?
3. How do you use your spiritual gifts?
4. In what areas and directions might the Spirit be leading you?
5. Reflect on being a "lay apostle." How are you functioning as a priest to your world? Who are your parishioners? How do you mediate Christ's presence to them?
6. Those with addiction issues should make a 12 Step Program a part of their life discipline