

Series: THE GOOD LIFE
Title: *Developing a Rule of Life*
By: Darrell Bierman
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Here's a picture many of you will have seen before; it's an iceberg. If you've been consistently come out to this series you know that typically only 10% of an iceberg is visible above water; which, of course leaves 90% of an iceberg invisible – below the surface.

An iceberg is a great image to represent you/me, at least in one regard: 10% of who you are (what you're about) is above the surface – it's the part that everyone else sees. 90% of who you are (what you're about) lies beneath the surface. Much of this 90% is stuff that only you (or those close to you) are aware of.

Now, here's what typically happens. When a person becomes a Christian, they're aware of the fact that some stuff in their lives needs to change. That's the reason why many people become Christians in the first place:

"I want God to help me to become a better person: more loving, less sinful. Plus I want God to remove my guilt over doing x, y, or z."

The good news is, once we accept Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord, God begins to make some of those desired changes within us. God's quick at changing some stuff; say, the first 10% that's visible

beneath the surface; which of course we've very glad about. However, that still leaves 80% of our lives that hasn't been touched. And God wants to touch that stuff too – he wants all of us. But – and this is very important: he's not going to get at that stuff unless you/I are willing to talk about and travel to the darker places of our lives. I say "darker places" because often this entails dealing with emotions that we'd rather not deal with (or facing experiences we'd rather not face).

This series has been your/my invitation to courageously go to those darker places. Now why would we want to do that (anyone)? Because these are the places which have the greatest potential of producing positive transformation in our lives and in our characters.

We stressed 6 central steps on this journey:

1. **The step of better knowing yourself.** Really seek to understand exactly who you are and how you're wired.
2. **Stepping back to your family of origins.** Identify both the healthy things you inherited from your parents and family – as well as the unhealthy things.
3. **Stepping through "the Wall."** The Wall represents a season of pain in your life. This is a time for learning new insights, and for growing closer to God.
4. **The step of enlarging your soul through grief and loss.** Instead of ignoring experiences of grief and loss (instead of 'stuffing it') process them.

5. **The step of building Sabbath into your life.** Literally a Sabbath means is taking one day for rest – each week. If you’re not yet ready to take off an entire day, start by taking 3-4 mini-Sabbath’s throughout your day.
6. **The step of learning to love others well.**

At long last we come to our last step along this journey. But before I tell you what it is, I want to remind you of this: Christianity is *not* a set of intellectual beliefs, but a love relationship with God. Like any relationship, what you put in – is pretty much what you get out. Husbands, if you don’t set aside some quality time, at least once a week, for you and your spouse to have an uninterrupted conversation about what matters most – your relationship will suffer. Moms, if you’re too busy to listen to your children share about their daily joys and struggles – your relationship will suffer. It’s the same in your relationship with God – what you put in is what you get out.

I’ve never met anyone who had a close, vibrant relationship with God wake up one morning and say, “That’s it! I’m through with God! I’m through with this whole Christianity thing: no more church, no more prayers, and no more time reading the Bible!”

Generally, people of faith fall away slowly – over a period of time:

- They fill their schedules too full, or put their priorities on things like money or career or kids, and their practice of daily Bible-reading falls by the wayside.

- Prayers become rushed and impersonal. Eventually, the only time you find yourself praying is when something is terribly wrong (“God, I can’t afford to lose this client!”).
- They’re too busy to attend church regularly. Summer vacation comes along and they fall out of the habit of going to church altogether; oh, except for Christmas and Easter.

Hardly ever will a person with a close, vibrant relationship with God wake up and decide to walk away from the faith. Mostly it happens unconsciously, even imperceptibly. Like this block of ice here [I’ll bring a block of ice to the service and put it in plain view]. If you keep your eye on this block of ice during this service you’ll see very little change (a few drops every minute; nothing major). But if we leave it right here – by tomorrow morning, it’ll have completely melted away.

I’ve seen enough people of faith melt away to last a lifetime. In fact, nothing would make me happier than meeting up with each of you 10, 20 or even 30 years from today and discovering that your faith is stronger than ever.

Now the question you should be asking yourself is, “What can I put into my life today – to ensure that – my faith will last?” “What can I do to ensure that my faith strengthens instead of melts?” “Is there anything I can do to keep from becoming just another casualty?”

I’m glad you asked; because this is where our final step comes in.

7. **The step of developing a “Rule of Life”.**

If that phrase “Rule of Life” is foreign to you – don’t be shocked; and don’t let that word “Rule” disturb you. The word comes from the Greek for “trellis”. A trellis is a tool that enables a grapevine to get off the ground and grow upward, thereby becoming more fruitful and productive. In the same way, a Rule of Life is a trellis that helps us keep in close connection with Christ, thereby becoming more fruitful spiritually.

Very simply, a Rule of Life is an intentional, conscious plan to keep God at the center of everything we do. It’s a plan that you create for yourself (not only is it custom-made; it’s made by you: you choose what to put into your plan – and you choose what to leave out). So **your** plan provides guidelines that help **you** to pay attention and remember God in everything **you** do.

Can you see why a Rule of Life might be important?

Peter Scazzero writes: *“Most Christians are not intentional, but rather functional, like cars on autopilot. Our crammed schedules, endless to-do lists, demanding jobs and families, constant noise, information, bombardment, and anxieties keep us speeding up, not slowing down. We have routines to manage other parts of our lives. For example, each morning we may get up, feed the cat, then make coffee, exercise, get dressed for work, and eat breakfast”* (Emotionally Healthy Spirituality, p. 196). Sadly, very few people have a conscious plan for developing their spiritual lives.

Here’s the reality every believer in this theater needs to face this morning:

- This world is not amenable to your Christian faith.

- This culture is not supportive of your Christian faith.

Without a Rule of Life your present spiritual practices are not enough to keep you afloat in the ocean of the beast, the Babylon of our twenty-first-century world (adapted from EHS, p. 197). Fighting against such a strong current, without the paddle of a Rule of Life, is almost impossible.

Do I sound alarmist? If so, at least I’m in good company:

- Quoting Jesus as recorded in **John 15:19+20b**; here he’s speaking to his followers: *“If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you... If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also...”* In the same talk Jesus also warned his disciples, “In this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33).
- Quoting the Apostle John in **1 John 2:15-17** (Msg): *“Don’t love the world’s ways. Don’t love the world’s goods. Love of the world squeezes out love for [God] the Father. Practically everything that goes on in the world—wanting your own way, wanting everything for yourself, wanting to appear important—has nothing to do with the Father. It just isolates you from him. The world and all its wanting, wanting, wanting is on the way out—but whoever does what God wants is set for eternity.”*

The best way to ensure that your faith is strong tomorrow (or 10 years down the line) is to develop a plan. To plan well, however,

requires we go back to Daniel and early church history to consider the roots of this hidden treasure.

Around 600 B.C. King Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian armies conquered Jerusalem and carried off most of the city's inhabitants as slaves. One of those was a young teenager named Daniel. Cut off from his family, teachers, friends, food, culture, and language, Daniel was brought into the Babylonian court of the king and sent to the best university in the land. He studied a completely foreign and pagan way of viewing the world. Pagan priests and counselors educated him in their wisdom and religion. In Babylon's efforts to assimilate Daniel, they even changed his name to Belteshazzar (after Bel, the chief Babylonian deity).

Babylon had one simple goal: to eliminate Daniel's distinctiveness as a God-follower and absorb him into the values of its culture. But it didn't work.

So how did Daniel resist the enormous power of Babylon?

- He didn't have parents or adult mentors from his own culture and faith to guide and encourage him. He was carried away from his family and home (kidnapped). He was on his own!
- He didn't have the luxury of just getting by. He was under enormous pressure to perform; after all, he was being prepared to serve in the king's palace!

What Daniel did have was a plan, a Rule of Life. He didn't leave the development of his spiritual life to chance. He knew "going to church on Sundays, along with a 10-minute daily quiet time"

wouldn't be enough. He knew what he was up against. While we know little of the specifics, it's clear that he oriented his entire life around loving God. He **renounced** certain activities, such as eating the king's choice food (see Daniel 1), a move that could've cost him his life! And he **engaged** in others, such as the Daily Office (from Daniel 6:10 we learn that he spent personal time in prayer three times a day). Daniel somehow fed himself spiritually and matured into an extraordinary man of God in this extremely hostile environment. He knew resisting the beast of Babylon and thriving required a plan that would enable him to pay attention to God.

The first Christian community in the book of Acts followed a Rule of Life. In Acts 2:42 we discover that its members **devoted** themselves to:

- i. The Apostle's Teaching, to
- ii. Fellowship (Greek; *Sharing*), to
- iii. Breaking of Bread (or celebration of Lord's Supper), and to
- iv. Prayer (cf., Acts 2:42).

So their Rule of Life included 4 things: Study of God's Word; nurturing relationships with other believers; celebration of the Lord's Supper (which we'll be doing momentarily), and Prayer.

Throughout the ages many men and women of faith have had a Rule of Life that helped them nourish their relationship with God, and maintain their close connection with him – through thick and through thin.

Perhaps the most famous Rule of Life was the one developed by **St. Benedict** in the 6th Century; it's been followed by thousands of men and women up to this present time (you can check it out on line, just Google "Rule of St. Benedict")!

So in the time we have left, I want to give you some tips and guidelines that you can use in developing your own plan.

First, **5 tips for developing your own plan:**

#1. Start simple so you don't overwhelm yourself.

#2. Make sure your Rule of Life is a *want to* versus a *have to*.

#3. Allow for lots of trial and error. If your plan isn't working for you adapt it; get rid of something or introduce something new.

#4. Find a companion (all you LOTR devotees know that Frodo never would've made it to Mordor without Sam). Your journey through life – both spiritually and emotionally – will be more enjoyable (successful) with a companion. &

#5. Don't be too hard on yourself.

Ok, now **8 Guidelines for developing your own plan:**

Think of these like the trunks of trees; each has numerous branches (or specific activities) attached to it. To try to make these more memorable, each guideline starts with an "s":

1. **Scripture:** A good Rule of Life generally has a Scripture component. You determine what you will read; when you will read; how much you will read. For ease you might want

to pick up a 1-year Bible (which breaks the entire Bible down into 365 readings – so that by the end of one year you've read it all. On the other extreme you might want to pick a small portion to read and then journal on. The variations (branches) are unlimited!

2. **Silence:** Professor Dallas Willard points out the beauty of silence when he says, "... [it] will cut us off from the world and leave only us and God" (quoted in EHS, p. 202).
3. **Study:** this may include attending workshops our classes, listening to teachings from people ahead of you spiritually, or reading Christ-centered books (to name a few).
4. **Sabbath:** Incorporate one day a week (or specified briefer periods throughout the day) to rest and reflect on God and his great love for you.
5. **Simplicity:** this week on the John Tesh radio program I discovered that the #1 barrier to happiness is complexity. I quote: "Multiple cars and credit cards don't create happiness – only hassles... So get rid of the clutter and excess" (www.Tesh.com first aired 2/25/2009).
6. **Service:** Would it surprise you to learn that the #3 barrier to happiness is navel-gazing, and that the best way to stop navel-gazing is to get out and serve someone else (ibid)? River City Church is a service-driven organization. We couldn't exist without our servants. If you're not **servicing** yet – there's room for you on the team! Think about it, serving on one of our ministry teams is a great way for you to develop a plan that will keep you connected to God! I

can hook you up: just talk to me after the service (better yet, next time someone serves you at River City – whether it be by handing you a program, or by caring for your kids – ask them how you can join them on the team).

7. **Sport**: Consider this: caring for our bodies can be as spiritual as prayer or worship (cf., EHS, p. 205). What might you want to include in your Rule of Life about exercise? And, last but not least:
8. **Socializing**: I've already pointed out that the early Christians made time to nurture relationships with other believers. What are you doing in this regard? If you're doing less than would be beneficial – let me suggest you join a **Home Group**. My Home Group meets every week – and so that takes the burden off of me to try to proactively set something up with my Christian friends.

Well, we've come to the end of our "Life is Good" series. For all intents and purposes however, this is really just the beginning. Now it's time for each of you (who consider yourselves believers) to develop your own plan – your own Rule of Life. To facilitate that I've included an insert that those of you who are up for the challenge can use once you're on your own latter today.

If you're not yet a believer; if you don't yet consider yourself a follower of Jesus Christ – let me just say this:

- Could it be that you've already begun to develop an unconscious Rule?

- Could it be that you're being her this morning is part of your unconscious Rule?

I pray it is. I pray that eventually the blinders fall away – and you're able to find what you're looking for: an authentic, meaningful relationship with God's Son Jesus Christ.

Why? Because it's the best thing that can happen to a person in this life (see John 10:10). A relationship with Jesus has benefits both for this life – and the life to come.

I'm going to pray for you, and then the band is going to lead us into a song that will prepare us for partaking in the Lord's Supper.

WHAT'S YOUR PLAN???

Prayer:

Father God, a part of me desperately longs to be alone with you. Another part of me wants to run and avoid this at all costs. Thank you for this opportunity to stop today and listen to you. Thank you for continuing to knock at my door – especially when I am too anxious or distant to hear you. Please, I ask you, remove whatever it is that has been preventing me from seeing you. I believe that an authentic relationship with you through your Son Jesus is the best thing that could happen in my life. Lord, help me past my unbelief. Amen.