



GODLY HABITS

7 Spiritual Practices to Grow You as a Disciple of Jesus

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Introduction: Hearts & habits	4
1. Prayer	10
2. Scripture	15
3. Sabbath	19
4. Friendship	24
5. Hospitality	28
6. Generosity	31
7. Technology	34
Conclusion: Putting Together a Rule of Life	38
Appendix 1: Fasting	41
Appendix 2: Simplicity	43
Appendix 3: Further reading and resources	46
Appendix 4: A Blank Planner for a Rule of Life	47

Introduction: Hearts & habits

The heart.

It beats and rests. It flutters and quickens and races. We speak from it when we say what we truly mean, and we listen to it, or at least we are encouraged to listen to it.

It is a complex machine, whose valves open and close 100,000 times a day. It can be attacked from within. It can be broken by others. And we give it away, sometimes too easily, especially when we're young.

What is it about the heart?

We tend to think of the heart as the epicentre of human emotions, from where love and courage are generated, and from which greed and envy and malice and slander originate, even though these find their ultimate expression through other organs, like our eyes or mouths or hands.

The Bible speaks of the heart as the centre of the person in a more complete manner than we normally think. **It's the nucleus of personhood, the seat of human will, and the decision-making centre.** In short, the heart is a bigger deal in Scripture than it is even in culture & medicine.

Just listen to some of the Bible's seminal statements about the heart:

*The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of **the human heart** was only evil all the time. The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled.*
Genesis 6:5

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your **heart** and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your **hearts**.*
Deuteronomy 6:4-6

*The fool says in his **heart**, "There is no God." They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good.*
Psalm 14:1

*To humans belong the plans of **the heart**, but from the Lord comes the proper answer of the tongue.*

All a person's ways seem pure to them, but motives are weighed by the Lord.

Proverbs 16:1, 2

*He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in **the human heart**; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.*

Ecclesiastes 3:11

***The heart** is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?*

Jeremiah 17:9

*You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your **heart**.*

Jeremiah 29:13

*I will give them an undivided **heart** and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a **heart** of flesh.*

Ezekiel 11:19

*Blessed are the pure in **heart**, for they will see God.*

Matthew 5:8

*For where your treasure is, there your **heart** will be also.*

Matthew 6:21

*But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the **heart**, and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.*

Matthew 15:18-20

The Scriptures powerfully remind us that our hearts direct our lives. They also remind us that by themselves, our hearts will not direct us to godly ends. We are to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, and yet God told his prophets of old that he himself needed to write the law on the people's hearts (Jeremiah 31:33). Indeed, God himself would give them a new heart, a heart of flesh (or a meaty heart as a St Matthews' member once said), removing from them a heart of stone.

Jesus optimistically blessed the pure in heart, saying that they will see God, but only a chapter later taught that what we treasure in life (for many of us, it's literally our treasure) reveals what our heart loves. Jeremiah also reminded us that the heart is a deceitful things, startlingly and perhaps poetically stating that it is beyond cure and understanding.

All this is a roundabout way of saying that **any discussion of godly habits or spiritual practices or Christian disciplines needs to be grounded in heart renewal**. Otherwise, they become another checklist that we try to keep, or more likely, yet another benchmark that we will fail.¹ Without a renovated heart, in which God works on our spirits by his Spirit, godly practices can easily become a form of legalism, in which we try really hard to show our devotion to God via dutiful obedience to an agreed set of practices. Without renewed hearts godly habits can quickly become joyless and begrudging duties.

It's true that godly habits lead to godly lives, and that Christian disciplines are what Christian disciples do, but they need to flow out of, rather than replace, a renewed heart. They are a response to the grace of God shown to us in the gospel. They are a whole of life—body, mind, spirit—orientation towards the One who lived among us, died for us, rose triumphantly, and who now reigns over the details of our lives and continues to intercede on our behalf. Godly habits are gospel habits.

But here's the thing: **godly habits flow out of a renewed heart, but godly habits are also agents of renewal themselves.**²

That is, spiritual practices, including the ones we will focus on in this booklet, are one of the most powerful ways in which God's Spirit renovates our spirits. They are tried and tested means or catalysts by which our hearts remain soft to God and his word, and inclined towards loving others. Heart and habits have a self-strengthening relationship. Renewed hearts give birth to godly habits, and godly habits refresh human hearts.

¹ By the way, failure is not actually failure, but a key part of working out which habits work for you. And of course, any failure is a reminder of the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 100th chance, which God's grace offers us to restart and try again.

² As Ray Dreher says, "Right belief is essential, but holding the correct doctrines in your mind does you little good if your heart—the seat of the will—remains unconverted. That requires putting those right beliefs into action through right practice which over time disciplines you for godliness." *The Benedictine Option*, p.52.

This has been tried and tested and found to be true. Not only have they been tried and tested by generations of Jesus' disciples, but by Jesus himself, for these Christian disciplines were his disciplines long before they were ours.

Why habits?

One of the things about habits is that all of us have them, and they do their work in our lives, for good or ill, without us noticing most of the time.

A habit is a behaviour that occurs automatically, over and over, and often unconsciously. As much as 40% of the actions we take on a daily basis are the result of habits, automated as it were, rather than by deliberate choice.³

What this means is that our pattern of habits has a profound influence over our schedules, what we do with our minutes and hours and days. But our minutes and hours and days are not just increments of time, they *are* our lives. You could say that a life is just the largest or longest increment of time. So it follows, and this no exaggeration, that **our habits form our hearts and shape our lives, and they do this automatically and unconsciously.**

Now this begs an important question: who chooses the habits which govern our days, shape our lives and form our hearts? The truth is that just because you don't remember intentionally choosing habits, it does not mean you don't have them, because they mostly just operate in the background of daily activity. If you didn't choose them, who did?

Consider your own life: despite your best intentions, you find yourself routinely rushing and speeding and late; or you know that your first instinct in the morning is still to check your phone for news, email or social media before you do anything else; or your default is still to buy something to ease that ongoing restlessness in your soul; or your customary knee-jerk response to loneliness or anxiety or boredom is to self-medicate by binge-watching streaming TV or YouTube videos, or by going to the fridge, or by searching for porn, or whatever it is for you.

If we don't consciously choose our habits, and yet we all still have them, then someone or something else—the noise of our culture, the remnants of our sinful nature, profit-mongering businesses & programmers, even the devil himself?—has chosen them for us, and what are the chances that

³ Justin Whitmel Earley, *The Common Rule*, p.7.

person or thing has our flourishing and spiritual progress as their top priority?

So we want to be intentional with forming godly habits because we know that habits form us as much as we form habits. We want to be thoughtful in developing spiritual practices because that is the way we can turn our positive efforts (which takes, well, effort) into something that over time takes less effort, but has greater impact in our lives, as they operate in the background of daily life. We want to purposefully adopt Christian disciplines because we are Christ's disciples, and we know that his lifestyle leads to life to the full (John 10:10) even though it can feel limiting at times. And we know that as we do this, humbly and prayerfully, that we are not only exercising our capacity to do good and godly things, we are availing ourselves of a good and godly Power far beyond our capacity, who can do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine.⁴

Seven habits

Enough of the philosophising! What are the 7 godly habits that are the focus of this booklet?

They are, in order of appearance:

- Prayer
- Scripture
- Sabbath
- Friendship
- Hospitality
- Generosity
- Technology

Actually, it's probably more accurate to say that these are 7 areas of habit, rather than being spiritual practices themselves. In each chapter we'll provide a number of specific ways in which you can implement the habit into the ground level reality of your life.

It's also worth saying that these are not the only 7 areas of habit that Christians can adopt. There are others you can have a crack at, especially

⁴ Ephesians 3:20. Dallas Willard, in *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*, defines a spiritual discipline as: an activity of mind and body purposefully undertaken, to bring our personality and total being into effective cooperation with the divine order. They enable us more and more to live in a power that is, strictly speaking, beyond us, deriving from the spiritual realm itself.

if you find that you've incorporated most or all of these 7 into the rhythms of your life already. We have included some extra areas in Appendices 1 and 2. And there's nothing particularly special about having 7 of them, other than the fact that any more than 7 feels like too much to keep in your brain (after all, there are 7 days in a week, 7 *Habits of Highly Effective People*, 7 seas to sail, 7 deadly sins, etc).

Most importantly, we have settled on these 7 areas because we think spiritual practices that centre on prayer, scripture, sabbath, friendship, hospitality, generosity and technology will have the biggest impact on our Christian lives, in the age in which we live, in the culture in which we are immersed. They are not "low-hanging fruit" as such, but we consider that **by implementing Christian disciplines in these 7 areas, you will go further, faster, as a disciple of Jesus** in 21st century, Northern Beaches life.

A few last things to say before we launch into the practices in detail:

- You don't want to think of these practices as primarily individual in nature, though some of them are more individual, like prayer and Scripture and technology. Most of them have **some kind of communal dimension**, and they are all enhanced by practicing them in community (i.e. with discussion, accountability, etc)
- **Habits take time to become habits**. Someone once quipped, "you can't microwave godliness". So give them a go, and when you feel like giving up, continue to give them a go. The longer you lean into habits the less direct effort they take, and the more they work in the background of your life. But progress will likely be lumpy, so persevere.
- **The Conclusion about the Rule of Life is key to the whole process**, so even if you're tempted to skip a chapter or two, don't skip the conclusion. The *Rule of Life* is the way to turn great ideas into doable daily (and weekly) disciplines.

On to the habits!

1. Prayer

Jesus was a productive chap.

He had a bit on his plate, and a fair mission to strive for. Living the perfectly obedient life, dying for the sins of the world and rising from the grave to inaugurate the kingdom of God, are more than I can ever slot onto my CV.

So we modern people find his tendency to duck off to pray at any hour intriguing. In fact, we find it baffling. How could someone with that much to do afford to spend so much time doing nothing but praying. After long days of healing and teaching, or performing miraculous wonders, Jesus retires to pray (Mark 1:35, Mark 6:46). In one case, at the end of a day filled with thousands of hungry people (or perhaps with thousands of hungry people filled), instead of taking a powernap or heading to the bar for cleansing ale, he left the disciples and the crowds and “*went up on a mountainside to pray*”. In Mark 1, very early the morning after healing the whole town, *while it was still dark*, Jesus went to a solitary place to pray. **Here was a person who was truly too busy not to pray.**

We find that baffling. And yet the truly baffling thing is that we know we have an ever present invitation and the same ever ready-to-listen Heavenly Father, and we so rarely do what Jesus did.

Prayer is the perfect habit to begin with. Prayer is the perfect habit to begin your day with. Some have described it as a keystone habit, the one habit or change that unlocks other habits or positive changes or good decisions, the first domino in the line if you will.⁵ This is particularly true if you start your day with prayer.

Think of the alternatives to starting your day with prayer: You start your day with fear or anxiety: “*I have too much to do today, I’ll never get it all done*”, “*I don’t want to face that exam/client/friend/manager/situation*”. Or you start your day with regret: “*I shouldn’t have stayed up so late, eaten or drunk that much, gone to that place, etc*”. Or even, you start your day with your phone, which could involve any combination of regret, fear and anxiety, with the added potential of anger and envy, depending on whether you thumb through news, emails or social media: “*I can’t believe*

⁵ *The Common Rule*, 36.

that happened overnight, what is the world coming to!", "My clients or co-workers have made excessive demands, looks like my day is shot", or "Wow, he/she got a new car/boyfriend/promotion/fancy holiday/fancy breakfast/more likes or followers than me, that's not fair..."

If you think about it, each of those ways to start is telling and re-telling a story to yourself, at the very beginning of the day. And none of those stories will start you off on a Jesus-loving, God-trusting, other person-centred course. Even if you're an optimist, and you jump out of bed each morning, ready to attack the world with renewed vigour, you're still starting the day with a story about yourself that exaggerates your own importance and prevents you from grounding the next 12 hours in the goodness of God and the needs of others.

When we pray we are in a way telling another story to ourselves, or preaching a different (and true) gospel to ourselves. When we pray *first thing* in the morning it does set the course of our day into a different direction, which is why it's considered a keystone habit.

Of course, prayer is way more than a set of words by which we tell ourselves a different story to the one our culture tells. Prayer *is* words, and words form communication, and communication fuels relationship. That is to say, prayer is the language of friendship with and reliance upon God.

You don't need to pray long prayers of long sentences with long words to fuel relationship with God. Actually, you can make a pretty good argument that shorter words express dependence better than lofty ones. When Jesus was teaching about prayer, and he knows more about it than anyone else, he specifically told us to avoid babbling on, mistakenly thinking we will be heard because of our many words (Matthew 6:7). Silence and solitude has power (see below). But even small, repeated words have potential to reframe the day before it begins, as well as to reshape the story of our day when we're in the middle of its flurry and activity, or as we reflect upon the day at its end.

Give it a go#1: Morning, midday, evening prayers (a.k.a. the Daily Office)

Find 2 or 3 times during the day where you can pause for a few minutes for prayer. Make one of them first thing in the morning before you do anything else, even if it's just a short prayer. Make another the last thing you do in the evening. If you can find time in the middle of the day, even

better, though you might have to set an alarm to remind you until it becomes a habit (which is a great way to make our tech work *for* us).

Here's a **sample morning prayer**, which you can say before you even get out of bed because it's easy to memorise,

*Loving Heavenly Father,
Would you be with me this day,
Giving me a loving devotion
To the work you put before me
The people you put around me
And the King you put over me,
The Lord Jesus Christ,
In whose name I pray,
Amen*

And a **sample evening prayer**, which you can say as you get ready for bed at night. This one uses the plural, as you might like to pray it over your household or family,

*Lighten our darkness Lord,
And give us the rest we so desire and need.
In your great mercy defend us from the dangers of the night
So that we might lovingly serve your Son afresh
In Jesus' name,
Amen.*

You could print these on either side of a card you leave next to your bed.

In the middle of the day you could pray something like,

*Lord Jesus,
I was made to join your work in the world.
Please order the rest of my day in love for the people you have given
me to serve.
Amen.*

You could pray your midday prayers with a Christian colleague, classmate or member of your household who's around.

You can include whatever else you'd like to pray, and you can prayer at any hour of the day. And you can always pray or finish your prayers with

the Lord's Prayer, which after all, was the prayer by which Jesus' taught his disciples *how to pray*,

*Our Father in heaven
Hallowed be your name
Your kingdom come
You will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
And forgive us our sins
As we forgive those who sin against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
Now and for ever.
Amen.*

Max says, *"I have come to realise that when it comes to setting aside time to be with God, that needs an intentional plan. When I first started out I used a devotional book called 7 Minutes with God, which just encouraged me that I could do this, I could meet with God. I find that having songs of praise for me to sing is a great thing to do. It's been significant for me to spend time in the Psalms, because there's that sense in the Psalms that you can bring your emotions before God. They operate as a springboard for other prayers. They also give me things to aspire to, and I realise that I'm not there yet, so I can then turn and pray, "Father, can you change my heart so that I'm kind of like that" (what the Psalmist has written)."*

Give it a go#2: Silence and solitude

As the saying goes, *silence is golden*. It's more than golden when it helps us clear out the clutter of the day, and draw us back to God's loving control of the cosmos. Silence helps us to realise that the world can go on without us for 5 minutes, or an hour, or even longer.

Silence usually requires solitude, and at the very least a quiet place. But it provides the space for God to bring things to bear upon our spirits, from his word, or from our interactions during the day that we might not have noticed amidst the distractions and disruptions.

Silence and solitude might lead to prayer, or meditation on a passage or verse of Scripture, but the point is thinking quietly about God.

If you've never tried this before, start by setting aside 5 minutes each day for silence. Find a quiet place (could be your room, or your parked car, office, school library, shower), put your phone somewhere else, and breathe deeply and slowly. Your mind might wander, but bring it back to the presence of God by recalling a verse of Scripture. It may not take long for you to extend your time to 10 minutes or even longer. You might also want to combine silence and solitude with the set prayers of the Daily Office.

Helpful hints:

- Try kneeling. Denzel Washington once said, *"put your shoes way under the bed at night so that you gotta get on your knees in the morning to find them. And while you're down there thank God for grace and mercy and understanding."* You have to love Denzel! Posture makes a difference, and anything is better than lying in bed.
- Don't diss repetition. Habits are about building routines by direct effort until they take less effort and become "automated". Repeating prayers at set times helps build the habit, but even the repeated words and phrases can be your friends when building habits.
- The phone is not your friend. Not for prayer and silence anyway. Leave it in another room, or in a dresser drawer, out of sight and out of sound.
- Pray the Daily Office prayers with your spouse, or children, or housemates. Prayer doesn't have to be a solo venture.
- Pray with others as often as you can. Pray with others at church, say grace at the dinner table, pray over the phone at the end of a conversation, volunteer to pray in your growth group.
- Use the thoughtful prayers of others. If you don't know what to pray for use a collection of prayers like Charles Spurgeon's Morning & Evening Prayers, collects from the Anglican Prayer Book, or Puritan collections
- Or, just start with the set prayers. Do it, then do it again the next day. The Puritans were fond of saying, *"Pray yourself into prayer"*, which was sort of *Just Do It* for their era.

2. Scripture

Israel had a God who spoke.

Into the void to bring forth creation, sure. But perhaps more importantly, and certainly more personally, God spoke to them. Through the flames of a burning bush that oddly didn't burn up. From fiery mountains and tents of meeting. Through priests and judges and kings, via laws and poems and prophecy. As Moses reiterated the Ten Commandments to the generation of Israelites that was about to take possession of the Promised Land, he said,

What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?

Deuteronomy 4:7, 8

To have a God you could pray to with confidence, and to have a God who spoke to his people with instruction and decree was a remarkable thing. It was the singular privilege of the Old Testament people of God. No other nation enjoyed this concession. But as Israel's history unfolded, the people of God got bored with God's words, with disastrous consequences. The cultural narratives and norms of the surrounding nations were far more interesting to them.

In the face of a God who speaks to us, we also find ourselves yawning. It's all so familiar. The headlines flashing in our faces, and the cultural norms softly telling and re-telling their story in a thousand ways every day, seem more urgent and interesting and diverting.

What fools we are. Jesus' right hand man, the Apostle Peter, reminds us that we have the words of the Old Testament prophets made more certain (2 Pet 1:19); made more certain because Jesus has fulfilled all their expectations. Indeed, we have the words of Jesus himself, the greatest prophet of all. And yet, we prefer to tune into the doomsday predictions in the news, binge a whole season of Netflix in 2 evenings, or mindlessly, restlessly and endlessly scroll through social media.⁶

⁶ For those who enjoy social media, Earley advocates planned scrolling and a carefully curated feed over unplanned scrolling. He's concerned about the "flicking thumb motion",

What fools we are because there is a better story to tune into, one in which we are not mere spectators, but active participants. It's the story of a king who gave up all heavenly privilege to live among us, albeit in an oddly different and magnetic way. And then who died for us, in our place, a very un-kinglike thing to do. And then when we thought the story was over, he burst forth from the grave to inaugurate a kingdom that is not of this world. And then, no joke, he invites us into his kingdom and to participate in its construction. It is such a better story than the chaos, numbness or vanity of most of the stories we digest in our unthinking routines and daily habits.

As the Apostle Peter said, we have the words of the prophets made more certain. In the next breath, Peter urges us,

“you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”

He's talking about the story of Scripture, now packaged in a very convenient 1,000 page volume (or if absolutely necessary, downloaded to your device). It's a much better story, and we would do well to pay attention to it. More fool us, if we don't.

Deb says, *“I don't even call it reading the Bible anymore, I call it feeding on the Scripture. I can listen to it, I can read it, I can ask God to bring back into my memory what I've read or memorized in the past. And I would want to say to everybody, feed on the Scripture. If you can do it every day, do it every day. If you can only do it a few times a week, do it a few times a week. However which way it looks, feed on the Scripture. Do it because God wants you to, and do it because God wants to bless you through it. Feed on the Scripture.”*

Give it a go#1: Find a reading plan

There are lots of good reading plans available. Some old school rebels have used printed reading notes like *Every Day with Jesus* or *Scripture Union* reading plans or the *Daily Reading Bible* from Matthias Media. Most of these have some electronic or online versions you can use as well.

Nicky Gumbel (the guy who developed the Alpha Course) has a *Bible in One Year* program for reading through the Bible (there's the full version and an express version, <https://bibleinoneyear.org>).

sagely saying, “the restless thumb often correlates to the restless heart”, *The Common Rule*, 89.

The clever folks at *You Version* (<https://www.youversion.com>) have developed the most downloaded Bible app ever, that has been installed on more than 500 million devices. But they also have reading (and listening) plans available.

But honestly, you don't need to be a super clever person to read the Bible, and every Christian will be blessed by opening their Bibles and reading it for themselves. **Developing your own methodology will serve you better than relying on other people's plans.** A basic method is to work your way through different books of the Bible (start with a gospel, then move to a New Testament letter, then back to an Old Testament book, throw in Psalms to keep it fresh, then repeat). You could give it a twist by reading shorter sections during the week, and slotting in longer sessions on weekends and holidays, in which you read through a whole book.

For each passage, as big or as small as you like, make it sweet like SOAP, where:

- S = Scripture: Read the passage slowly, and write out a sentence or key verse
- O= Observe: What stood out in the passage? What does it tell you about God, the world or humanity?
- A= Apply: Was there a command to obey, a promise to believe, an encouragement to take to heart? How could your life look different in light of this verse or passage?
- P= Pray: You know how to do this because you read the last chapter. But pray specifically, off the back of what you've just read.

Give it a go#2: Write out Scripture

One of the ways to soak yourself in Scripture is to write it out. Writing out a key verse is part of the SOAP method above, but you need not limit yourself to a single verse. Writing out longer pieces of Scripture will help to embed God's word in your mind, which helps you recall it at moments down the track when you most need it. Feel free to be creative with different colours (and sizes and shapes, etc.). The process of writing Scripture is slow and deliberate, and you might even feel like you need to hurry it up. But as John Mark Comer says, "*Hurry is the great enemy of spiritual life*".⁷ So don't worry about hurry, and don't rush the process. Slow and deliberate writing is an ally in this process.

⁷ John Mark Comer, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, p.17.

Give it a go#3: Memorise Scripture

Memorizing Scripture is just an extension of writing out Scripture. Start with a short verse. Write it out, then write it out again. Test yourself until you've memorized the short verse. Then try with a slightly longer verse, and add that to your Bible armoury. Alternate between verses that describe the gospel, and verses that teach us how to live the gospel out. Maybe learn a whole Psalm or two. Some suggestions:

- **Gospel verses:** Mark 10:45, John 3:36, John 14:6, Acts 4:12, Acts 17:24-27, Romans 1:16, Romans 6:23, Romans 10:9, 1 Corinthians 1:18, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Ephesians 2:8-10, Titus 2:11-14, 1 Peter 3:18.
- **Action verses:** 1 Corinthians 15:58, Galatians 5:22-23, Philippians 1:21, Philippians 2:3-4, Philippians 4:4-6, Colossians 3:17, 2 Tim 3:16-17, Hebrews 3:13, Hebrews 12:1-3, James 1:22, 1 Peter 2:11-12, 1 Peter 3:15-16.
- **Psalms:** 1, 19, 23, 46, 51, 103, 121, 139.

Helpful hints:

- Read your Bible before you check your phone, or turn on your TV or fire up your computer. Start your day with a better story, of who's in control and who loves you the most.
- Read from a printed Bible, rather than a Bible app. You'll get to know your way around the Bible much more readily, and it's easy to see the passage you're reading in its context. Plus, you'll look like a modern-retro hipster, which is very important these days.
- Combine your reading with prayer (as above).
- Ease into it. Some of the Bible reading plans require you to read 5 or more chapters every day. That's a lot to begin with, so try starting with smaller chunks and really think about what you're reading. You can add more Scripture and more reading days as you progress.
- If you're trying to memorize Scripture stick printed verses in a few places you'll see throughout the day (on your fridge & bathroom mirror, on the side of your computer monitor, on your TV remote...you get the picture).

3. Sabbath

Surprisingly, the solution to our addiction to busyness is not more time.

Despite what we automatically assume, more time won't make a scrap of difference to our hurried, frazzled existence because we would just add more and more of the same activity that already fills our frenzied hours to any additional hours gifted to us. Think about it for a moment, and you'll realise that's almost certainly what you'd do.

The solution to our busyness and the anxiety and wired exhaustion that accompanies it is not to add more time (which we can't do, in spite of silly things we say like, "I just need to make time for it"). **The solution is to stop. You don't add time or make time, you simply call time. On all the activity, energy, bustle, mania.** Our Hebrew forebears had a word for it: Shabbat, from which we get the term Sabbath, a distinct 24-hour period of rest, but which literally means "to stop".

This of course begs the question of what we stop from? We stop from work, in its many forms. There's an irony in this because it takes a lot of work, or intentionality at least, to sabbath properly. And it may be that you will do activities on your Sabbath that would constitute work for another person in a different situation than you.⁸ But at a conceptual level, by practicing Sabbath we stop working. We remind ourselves that the world will continue without our startlingly brilliant input, because God sustains the world rather than us. We also remember that the absolute basis of the Christian life is not what we can accomplish, but on what God has accomplished for us in Christ. Sabbath is a gospel practice because it imposes into our routines the deep cellular truth that being a disciple of Jesus is always more about what God has done for us, than what we do for him.

The practice of Sabbath gives us a chance to challenge the story our culture tells us: if you stop you will miss out, if you stop you will fail, if you stop everything will all fall apart. When Jesus says, come to me, all who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest, he's not just offering a drinks break, with some energy bars and hydrolyte drinks to fuel our recovery so we can get back to work quickly. He is really saying, *I can*

⁸ Abraham Heschel said, "A man who works with his mind should sabbath with his hands, and a man who works with his hands should sabbath with his mind", *The Sabbath: It's Meaning for Modern Man*.

relieve you of that burden, that thing by which you impress yourself and others that you are so important; that thing which in practice has become your salvation. With Sabbath we rest from work, but we also rest from the work under the work. **We realize we're not necessary, God keeps the world spinning, God provides for our needs, God is our salvation.**

Unfortunately, as humans we are wont to resist this call to stop working for a whole day. It is notable that God had to command it to his people of old, which as John Mark Comer says, strikes us as about as odd as “commanding ice cream or live music or beach days”.⁹ But if it was necessary to insist upon this enriching spiritual practice to his Old Testament people of Israel, how much more do we need to take hold of the gift of Sabbath in our 24/7, “city that never sleeps”, eternally connected and “on” culture. At least the Israelites were governed by agrarian cycles of sowing and rains and harvest, and even the basic rhythm of night and day. For us, the lights never (need) go off, and we are in stand-by mode at least as much as our devices, we just don’t have the little flashing light to prove it. As Jesus said to the Pharisees, “*Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath*”.¹⁰

To take advantage of the gift of Sabbath, you will need to do more than stop from your 9 to 5, or 8 to 6, or whatever is your daily grind, for Sabbath is not the mere *absence* of paid employment. It is the presence of rest and worship. Indeed, **they are the two essential elements of Sabbath: rest and worship.**

By rest, we mean much more than a day off, because a day off might just mean you trade your paid work for another kind of work, like paying the bills, tidying the house, running the kids around town for 11 different games, and squeezing in more social occasions than a day can rightly hold. Eugene Peterson, who is one of the founding fathers of the modern focus on spiritual disciplines, calls such a day a *bastard Sabbath*, the illegitimate child of the seventh day and Western culture.¹¹ Righto, Eugene! But maybe he needs to be provocative to jolt us out of our self-deception. Sabbath rest is something quite distinctive.

⁹ *Elimination of Hurry*, 169.

¹⁰ Mark 2:27. By the way, the Pharisees get a bad rap for being obsessed with the Sabbath, but our overworked and overstressed generation could perhaps learn a thing or two from their obsession with rest.

¹¹ Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor*.

Firstly, do something *avocational*, that is, not connected to your ordinary employment. If you're a gardener, don't do gardening. If you're in administration, don't send emails. If you're a parent of young kids, just ignore them for one day a week. Just joking, but it might mean that the spouse who does less parenting during the week, might do the heavy parenting lifting for a stretch of the weekend. You might need to lock your computer away to make this work. You might need to tell customers or clients that you will be uncontactable, other than in emergencies, for a stretch of the weekend. You might need to work a little harder or longer during the week to rest well, to do something avocational, to not work. The doing of something avocational ought to be restful. It could involve a walk or run, but probably not a marathon. Being in creation is always a salve for the soul, but not if it's *Man vs Wild*. It could be tinkering with a car, but probably not for 12 hours straight. Or cooking or baking, but perhaps not enough to feed an army.

Secondly, the rest should also be *relational* and *communal*, rather than something which reinforces our 21st century isolation from one another. The Sabbath and Old Testament religious festivals were community affairs, so you want to involve people in your rest. Maybe think about time together as a simple meal, or a trip to the beach, rather than a massive gourmet hullaballo in a house in showroom condition.

Thirdly, and very importantly, in addition to rest Sabbath also involves *worship*. Sabbath is nothing more than rest and worship, but it cannot be reduced to just sleeping in, catching brunch with buddies and playing tennis. This is important and needs highlighting otherwise Sabbath becomes an excuse for worshipping the self, for idolising "me time". When God first gave the Israelites the Sabbath instructions they were to celebrate it "unto the LORD". Thoughtful practice of Sabbath means something more than just jamming in a bi-monthly visit to church between a host of other commitments and activities.

Abraham Heschel, a Polish-American rabbi and author, puts it like this, "*Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else.*"¹²

Abe could do better than "Someone Else", but you get his point. Church, Sabbath worship, is not meant to be another stressful, hurried demand

¹² *The Sabbath: It's Meaning for Modern Man.*

upon our personal schedules. It's a caring for the seed of eternity in our souls, because we belong to God, (and to one another). And it should be restful in itself.

Without doubt, it will make a difference to your experience of Sabbath if you prepare for your service of worship well. That means you have to decide and plan to go to church *before* Sunday. But seeing as we're talking about habits, you've already made the decision to go to church an automatic one, right? So then, plan to wake up early enough, which might mean going to bed early enough, to not be rushing. Get the children's gear organised the night before. Perhaps reading the passage of the day over breakfast, or lunch if you church in the PM. Or praying with your family or housemates if you can before leaving, praying that God would teach you or remind you of something important, and that he might use you to bring encouragement or challenge to another person, in some fashion. Then leaving the house early enough to park the car, walk to church, and arrive before the first song starts.

Give it a go: a portrait of Sabbath

The working week has been demanding, a real battle with clients, competitors, other staff, the boss. You stayed back late on Thursday and Friday afternoons to get everything, well, not everything actually, finished up. Saturday was a bit of a wrestle too, with kids' games in 3 different locations, a challenge for everyone who hasn't developed omnipresence. On Saturday afternoon there's a few chores around the house. You don't mind them too much because you feel better about the place being tidier, and your husband doesn't mind the mowing because it's the only time all week he see the fruit of his labour.

Between the pair of you, the chicken is marinated for dinner, the salad has been prepared, and you just bought ice cream for dessert, because that's everyone's favourite anyway. You had to take a work call but that was a good chance to remind your colleague that you're going to be off-line until Sunday night. And then it just seems like the weekend opens up. It is noisy in the house, but it's happy noise, light noise. Your friends arrive a bit early—who does that—but it's ok because you're ready. And not too fussy. And dinner is slow and relaxed. Everyone helps to clean up; you put the dishes in the dishwasher without rinsing them.

You wake up the next morning feeling refreshed and the day feels open too. Your husband prepares breakky for everyone. Supervises really. You

leave enough time to get ready for church so you're not rushing, because the car park gets fuller the later you are. You normally pray as a family before you get in the car, but you forgot this morning. No matter, you just pray as you walk along Darley Road to prepare yourself to listen, to encourage others, to seek God in prayer, to praise him in song. And lo and behold, that seems to make a difference to your morning. You'll have to attend to some emails in the evening, or check them at least, but after lunch you could hang with friends, read a book, take a nap while the kids are watching a movie, or just lie in the sun on a rug and look at the clouds. You don't even mind firing up the laptop Sunday evening to get ready for the week ahead because you feel rested...

You might think this portrait is aspirational, but the point is that it's not. **It requires intentionality rather than perfection.** Of course, it won't suit everyone, but a family with young children and working parents is among the busiest of examples you could find. If you're in a different situation you might have more time and space, so pick the bits that work for you, and riff off the bits that don't.

Helpful hints:

- Pick a 24 hour period if you can: the most common period that will enable you to both rest and worship is probably Saturday evening to Sunday evening, but that won't work for everyone. If you can't find a whole day, try 2 lengthy periods in which you can incorporate both rest and worship.
- Prepare well. "Preparation Day" was a thing in Bible times; it was the day before the Sabbath (John 19:31). If you need to work a few hours on a Saturday to take all day Sunday off (or whichever day), that's ok. Let colleagues or clients know you'll be offline, try to get the housework, life admin & shopping done in advance, so it's not hanging over your head.
- Develop a routine or rhythm. If you begin your Sabbath in the evening, light a candle and eat a meal with someone else if you can (the simpler the better). Try to go to bed not too late, so you can start the new day with prayer and Scripture. Leave margin to get to social events and your worship service without hurry. Set aside time for reading (either alone or with someone else, even children) or journaling, or practicing solitude or gratitude.
- Learn how to say "no" to some invitations and opportunities. You don't have to say "yes" to everything, and if you grow your no, you might find that you bless your yes (see Appendix 2 for more details).

4. Friendship

Loneliness is the real epidemic of the 21st century.

In Australia we can identify trends like the increase in the percentage of one-person households in Australia over the past century. Though there was no growth in one-person households from the First World War till the end of the Second World War, since the end of the Second World War the percentage of one-person households has increased in Australia by 300%, from 8% (in 1946) to 24% (in 2011, after which time it has levelled out).¹³ In one sense these numbers don't prove all that much; just because you live on your own doesn't mean you're lonely, nor does living with other people mean you've got healthy relationships (marriage, family, friendships, etc.).

But it validates what we sense intuitively. We're more connected than ever, via the internet, social media, etc, but also more isolated. An increase in wealth in general, has not been matched by an increase in personal happiness. In fact, the reverse has been the case. As we discover on Page 2 of the Bible, it is not good for a human to be alone (Genesis 2:15, which is the only place in the creation accounts of Genesis 1 & 2 in which something God has made is described as "not good").

The sad reality of our lives speeding up is that for many of us, our friendships haven't been able to keep pace. And if this is a sad aspect to modern life in general, it is even sadder for Christians. For God is a God of friendship—the loving fellowship of Father, Son and Spirit—such that to be made in his image must in some part involve being created for relationships too. And love for other people is embedded within the commands of Jesus, and his most famous parables (think the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son). It is the most important thing, apart from loving God with all that we have. The early church was famous for friendship; you can only imagine that they would look upon the paucity and shallowness of friendships in the modern Western church with a degree of pity or sympathy.

The problem with isolation is not only that we become lonely and sad. **Isolation also means we are way too vulnerable to attack from the evil one and from the heart-hardening potential of the sin in our lives.** Long

¹³ <https://aifs.gov.au/publications/demographics-living-alone>, accessed June 2022.

standing friendships, in which we share our weaknesses, in which our friends can ask us, “is there something you need to tell me?”, and in which we can bear the weaknesses and probe the secrets in others, will be a key weapon in our armoury against the evil one. This is why we think friendship is a *spiritual* discipline, more than just a helpful idea to safeguard your mental health. It is a godly habit as well as a good habit, in which we sharpen each other’s thinking, harden one another’s gospel resolve, and soften one another’s hearts to God word and will for our lives.

Loneliness and isolation don’t need to be the way.

A little creativity, and some healthy discipline can move us out from isolation towards vulnerable, life-giving friendships. Having intentionality in our friendships takes energy and effort and maybe even labour. But in many cases, we can practice the habit of friendship without adding additional events into our schedules. Because we are humans, and humans need to eat, we can practice the discipline of friendship at the same time as we eat, which means for most of us there are 3 opportunities every day to develop friendship.

Mark says, *“the one thing I value in a friend is honesty, direct honesty. Whether you’ve got something in your teeth, or you’re going off track, or if you just need a comforting word.”*

And Hannah says, *“the thing I value the most about friendship itself, is how it helps us to change and grow”.*

Give it a go#1: One meal per day with others

A good start to developing the habit of friendship is to share one meal per day with others. This might seem like an easy ask for families, but with chaotic work schedules, long commutes and oft-changing children’s activities, even a getting a family dinner together might feel like planning a war. Persist with the effort. It might mean you need to tell your boss, colleagues or clients that you’ll be leaving at a certain time in the afternoon, and be offline for a few hours (and can be contactable later in the evening). It could be that you disappoint your children in saying “no” to yet another afternoon activity / training / rehearsal / lesson. It may mean you settle for having dinner later than you would like in order to have more people present.

Go with what works for you.

Single folks might look enviously at families, at the relative ease with which they can develop the habit of sharing at least one meal per day with others. From above we can discern that it's not always as easy as it might seem, but nevertheless singles can be creative by inviting people to join them for breakfast, lunch or dinner. Having a proper sit-down lunch, away from your workstation or computer (or wherever you do your work), with a colleague or classmate is an option that probably doesn't take that much creativity or organisation, but can nevertheless be fruitful. It should be said that families can be creative too, in inviting single people over or out as well, it works both ways.

Trying to organise someone to share a meal with every day can be exhausting for anyone, so even just going to the same café for breakfast or lunch at the same time once per week (or whenever) and getting to know the staff there is one way to make inroads into this spiritual practice.

Give it a go#2: One hour of conversation per week

A second habit to implement is one hour of conversation per week. This is not about being in a growth group (which is a good idea, but a different idea). And it's not about a ministry to lonely or marginalised people (again, another good idea). It's about encouraging friendships. Some suggest that this should be with the same person each week, but a person other than a spouse or housemate.¹⁴ Others think it doesn't have to be the same person every week and that you're better off spreading the love around.

But don't spread it too thin. **The point of one hour of conversation per week is to develop deep friendship (with one or several people), in which you can share your frailties, failures and vulnerabilities.** And in which you experience loving embrace or support in return rather than rejection, even if that love comes in the shape of challenge or correction. You're not going to be able to do that if you're having 48 one-hour conversations per year, but you might be able to do it with 4 people if you have a one-hour conversation with them each month.

Helpful hints:

- Combine the two practices here: have a standing arrangement with the same friend(s) to catch up at the same time each week, or for the same

¹⁴ Of course, you want to set aside intentional, positive time with your spouse and housemate(s) too. But the reason why you should look beyond the people you live with is that your relationship with them is likely to be part of the conversation you need to have with encouraging friends.

meal each week.¹⁵ Or, have a standing arrangement at the same café each week, even if you're meeting different people across different weeks. If someone can't make a standing arrangement one week, that's ok, just regroup for the next week. It's just an exception that proves the rule

- Enlarge the circle: both of the practices mentioned above can be conducted with one other person, but neither of them have to be. Enlarging the circle by including one or two others can enhance gospel friendships rather than limit them. If you have a standing arrangement with 2 or 3 others, if one of you can't make it, you can press ahead anyway.
- Be intentional about conversation: an hour of conversation per week gives you plenty of time to talk about a range of topics, and you'll likely not share your deepest, darkest secrets on week one. But to be intentional you might need to establish ground rules, for example, to promise to share significant triumphs and failings with each other, to commit to confidentiality, etc. You could develop a simple set of questions to ask each other each time, like:
 - How would you describe your relationship to your spouse / family / housemates, and other friends since we last talked?
 - What has your attitude to and conduct at work been like since we last met?
 - What has God been teaching you recently?
 - Is there anything else you need to tell us?
- Have Christian friendships rather than just friendships with Christians. Talk about Jesus things, and don't wait for the other person to bring it up.
- You can never say "I love you" too often, and it need not be schmaltzy. If you love your friends, tell them so.

¹⁵ Julie Beck, senior editor at *The Atlantic*, and author of *The Friendship Files*, says, "the effort of coordinating hangout (or even phone calls) is the biggest barrier to seeing friends. It's much easier when something is baked into my schedule, and all I have to do is show up."

5. Hospitality

Hospitality is not what we think hospitality is.

That is to say, when we think of hospitality we might think of those within the hospitality industry, like waiters, chefs, and bartenders. More often we think of flawless people in immaculate, open plan, indoor-outdoor, architecturally-designed houses, hosting similarly flawless people to lavish spreads of gourmet food, all prepared effortlessly. Not much to live up to, hey!

But that vision bears little relation to what the New Testament envisages when it talks about hospitality. Literally, “hospitable” (*philoxenos*) means love for (*philo-*) stranger (*-xenos*). It is kind of the opposite of xenophobia, which means fear of (*phobia*) stranger (*xenos*). There’s no reference to designer kitchens, or perfect food, placemats & people. Hospitality is an extension of the concept of friendship that we covered in the previous chapter; in fact, in Jesus’ Parable of the Good Samaritan, he stretched the concept of neighbour to include anyone who crosses our path. **Hospitality is more than loving our best chums; it extends that love to others and draws them into the love of Christ.** It is both counter-cultural, and an expression of God’s hospitality towards us.

In the Old Testament the Israelite embrace of stranger was connected to their own experience of being strangers before they entered the Promised Land. Jesus indicated in Matthew 25 that whenever we love the least of his brothers and sisters, we serve him. The Apostle Peter encourages Christians to “offer hospitality without grumbling” (1 Peter 4:9), while the Apostle Paul simply urges Christians to “share with the Lord’s people who are in need”, before directing them to “practice hospitality” (Romans 12:13). The Apostle John instructs Christians, or church leaders at least, to show hospitality to visiting missionaries (3 John 8), but the writer to the Hebrews makes the wild claim that some Christians who have shown hospitality to strangers have actually entertained angels unwittingly (Hebrews 13:2)!

Though there is a special exhortation for church leaders to be hospitable (1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:8), the bulk of New Testament references indicate that **hospitality is not a specialised spiritual gift given to only a few, but is a practice that all Christians can employ.** No doubt that some are better practiced than others, and on occasions we might be the “stranger” or

“neighbour”, but all Christians can build the discipline of love of neighbour and stranger into their weekly routines.

Give it a go#1: On Sundays

An obvious way to practice hospitality on Sundays is to join the welcoming team at church, looking out for newcomers or those who don't seem to have connections, and starting a conversation. But **it is way more important to have a welcoming spirit, even if you're not formally on the welcoming team at church.** Make it an aim to have one decent conversation with someone who looks to be a newcomer or not yet connected before chatting to your best mates.

You can take it further by inviting someone to meet you for a meal, or to sit with you at a church dinner, or to join your group of hoodlums for a burrito or ice-cream after church. Invite other established members of church at the same time so the web of connections grows.

Cath says, “Christian hospitality is distinctive, as it involves inviting people in who you may not know well, whether that’s neighbours or people from church. I’m not trying to be Nigella Lawson; I like to be prepared beforehand so I can give my attention to my guests, which is far more important than me chopping and banging and carrying on in the kitchen. And if people want to contribute I will happily say “yes”. As I’m preparing for people coming over, I’m thinking about who they are, and praying that I will be gracious and welcoming in my own heart and spirit. And I’m just thrilled that I get to do it (hospitality); it’s a beautiful way to live out the gospel, to share the goodness that God has given me.”

Give it a go#2: The “Other 6”

But biblical hospitality doesn't have to all happen on a Sunday. Across the other 6 days of the week try to keep social engagements and outings “open” to the possibility of including someone new, and freely invite newcomers to join you. Not everyone can come to everything, but where you can have an open invitation, make open invitations.

As an alternative expression of hospitality than social engagements, make someone a meal. The church has a meal roster ministry you can join to take meals to people in need and new parents. Try looking around your neighbourhood and acquaintances for someone who has a little extra on their plate at the moment and bring them a cooked meal, or a bought meal for that matter, one day this coming week.

If you're really adventurous, plan a neighbourhood party. Help your neighbours connect with each other and find a greater sense of community in your neighbourhood by hosting a BBQ where people can bring a plate and meet and mingle.

Helpful hints

- Ask God to show you people to love whether at church, at your place of work or study, in your local community, etc. Make a list of people who would be encouraged by an offer of hospitality.
- Pray for the people you invite into your home, or out with friends. And pray that God will give you joy in demonstrating his love to others.
- Be kind to strangers whose path you cross during the day. Smile at strangers, say hello to fellow dog-walkers, ask the petrol station attendant about their day.
- Collect simple, inexpensive recipes for meals and desserts, and have 2-3 go-to meals for hosting or delivering. It can be as simple as a BBQ chicken, some bread rolls and salad
- Identify someone who you think embodies biblical hospitality (remember it's more about love than magazine-worthy moments). What can you learn from them?
- Develop a list of standard conversational questions, such as:
 - How long have you lived in the area? And what do you like the most about living here?
 - What do you have in the way of family?
 - What do you get up to during the week?
 - What drew you into the life of St MatthewsMake sure you listen well, and ask follow-up questions. And feel free to share stuff about yourself too, without dominating the conversation.
- If lunch or dinner is at your place, let your guests help in meal preparation and clean-up.
- If you've got children, involve your kids in cooking (or delivering) meals, and explain why you're doing it.

6. Generosity

Whatever “you can’t take it with you” might have once meant, it now means that you ought to spend your money on yourself for as long as you’re healthy enough to enjoy it.

But it’s that screen legend Denzel Washington again, who offers a better spin,

“You’ll never see a U-Haul behind a hearse...I can’t take it with me and neither can you. It’s not how much you have but what you do with what you have.”

It is a well-cited fact that Jesus said more about money than he did about sex, and the New Testament letters give plenty of examples of the good you can do by giving money away, especially to gospel causes. So for starters, in 2 Corinthians 8 & 9 the Apostle Paul shows us how sacrificial giving is acceptable to God (8:11, 12), supplies others’ needs and relieves their hardship (8:14, 15), stirs others to enthusiastically embrace giving (9:2), enhances fellowship (9:14) and ultimately leads to the praise of God (9:12-15).

But it’s what generosity can do in our own hearts that is just as motivating for incorporating it into our set of spiritual disciplines. Remember, **Jesus connected the heart and wealth when he encouraged his disciples to store up for themselves treasures in heaven...** *“for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”* (Matt 6:20-21).

And the Apostle Paul wrote some of the most confronting words in the New Testament when he penned, “if we have food and clothing we will be content with that” (1 Tim 6:6). We naturally find ourselves wanting to add just a few more items to that short list. And we think the Apostle Paul was joking when he said the love of money is the root of all evil, preferring Mark Twain’s summary of the spirit of our age, “the lack of money is the root of all evil”. We are suspicious that Paul was overemoting when he said that an eagerness for money causes some people to wander from the faith, piercing themselves with many griefs (1 Tim 6:10). He was obviously talking about other people, we think, for how could money be that tightly connected to salvation?

The Apostle Paul returns to finish his argument a few verses later, and perhaps intentionally, lands where Jesus landed in Matthew 6,

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age.

1 Timothy 6:17-19

So rich disciples of Jesus like us should not be drawn into the arrogance that so often accompanies wealth, nor to trust in its uncertainty, but to put our hope in God, who ultimately is the one who provides everything. Because **it's not only true that you can't take your money with you; it's also true that it's not really your money in the first place.** It all comes from God. This in turn enables us to be rich in good deeds, because it's not only about signing a cheque to get us off the hook (being generous with your money does not mean you can avoid being generous with your time, effort, and service). Recognising that your money is not really *your* money also helps you to be generous and willing to share, because that builds treasure in heaven.

After all, you can't take it with you, can you?

Pete says, "I have never, ever regretted being generous. I've never looked back and thought "I really wish I hadn't have written that cheque, or given that money away. It was such a mistake". Joy always, always follows the act of generosity.

But I also know that I can't wait for joy to arrive before I'm generous, because it may never arrive. It's like a lot of the Christian life: if you wait for joy before you pray, worship, gather, serve, you'll probably never pray, worship, gather or serve. I have to remind myself that the joy follows the act of being generous."

Give it a go#1: Planned tithing (or better still, giving generously)

Under the Old Testament law, the people of God gave one-tenth of what they had to God and his service. So that seems a handy baseline or starting point. After all, we have received nothing less than new life because of God's gift of his Son. And we have been made heirs with Christ (see Galatians 4:4), meaning that we will inherit the universe along with Jesus. Therefore, if we've been given so much, and will inherit so much, and it's a matter of the heart rather than the law, many of us could give well beyond the 10% mark. For some people in some stages of life, 10% might

be more than they could reasonably afford, but many of us could readily give away 10% and still not be generous.

Here's an idea: give 10% (or more) to your church, i.e. your spiritual home and family. This is nobody else's responsibility other than those who are part of that home and family, and who benefit from being part of it. Then, give some extra to other Christian organisations which do gospel mission and aid; these organisations can draw on a wider pool of people. Then, give some extra to development or relief work, like sponsoring a child through Compassion or World Vision. This is the responsibility of everyone in society, no less for believers in Jesus. By making it thoughtful, sacrificial, regular and frequent (electronic giving is the best for this) you will follow through on your good intentions, give cheerfully, and ensure that needs are met in a planned way.

Give it a go#2: Spontaneous generosity

As well as being thoughtful and planned, you want to be able to be generous in a more reflexive way. So keep a little money in your wallet to give when people ask you for it. Add \$20 or \$50 into a separate account each pay packet; you can call it "other people's emergencies" if you like. It can build and bubble away until someone else needs it.

Helpful hints

- Defer or deny yourself a purchase, and give that money away to someone who needs it more. The denial of self will do you good, and you'll enjoy benefitting someone else.
- Write a list of things for which you're grateful; this will spur you on towards cheerful generosity
- Don't wait just because you're studying or working part-time. Get into the habit of giving even if the amount seems tiny.
- Each year review your giving and see if you can give 1% more than the year before
- Plan a "random act of kindness" for someone each week, pray for them (even though they haven't asked for it) and let them know you've prayed for them, send an SMS daily to thank someone for who they are and what they've done.

7. Technology

Neither St Benedict nor St Augustine considered iPhones in their program of godly habits.

Both ancient godfathers of the spiritual disciplines had a preoccupation with taking the small patterns of daily life and ordering them towards the ultimate goal of human existence, to love God and neighbour. How would they instruct us to pray, read the Scriptures, sit under teaching at church, or rest well on the Sabbath when every chance we get we reach for the dopamine dispenser that is the mobile phone?¹⁶

It's not that Christians are anti-tech. Each generation of Christians has likely embraced one or more technological advances for the greater promotion of the gospel and the glory of God. Think the printing press that put Bibles in the hands of everyday people, or microphones & loudspeakers that enabled Billy Graham to preach to millions, or the internet that enabled ongoing fellowship when we were physically isolated in Covid lockdowns.

So we're not anti-tech, per se. But the smartphone in particular is such a mixed blessing. It allows us to connect across time and space, but it demands our presence and attention petulantly, and takes it from whatever, or whomever, is in front of us. Justin Whitmont Earley said,

*"our life is defined by which of the many cries for our attention we heed. (but) we have to acknowledge that our phones are carefully designed to attract our attention and sell it to advertisers. It doesn't necessarily make them evil capitalistic machines, but it certainly means they aren't neutral in the slightest. And that means we have to do the hard work of governing them, because they will not govern themselves."*¹⁷

This is true whatever our vice of choice. Social media becomes a vain filter for real life, whether we are doing the restless scrolling thing and feeling worse because our friends' carefully curated lives look more exciting or prettier than ours, or if we are the ones weighing up every vista or angle as

¹⁶ *Elimination of Hurry*, 122.

¹⁷ *The Common Rule*, 68. Joshua Becker concurs, "The key is not to throw out all tech, but it would be wise for all of us to reboot, take a step back, and realign tech into its rightful place in our lives. The leaders of technology are not going to stop warring for our focus, our time, and our money."

insta-worthy, or every conversation as quotable or tweetable. It just stops us from being present, attentive, observant, sympathetic. The news cycle lurches from catastrophe to catastrophe, and from outrage to outrage, and we lurch with it, without ever understanding any complex issue properly.

It's true whatever our *device* of choice, for that matter, by which we access the worldwide web. You can't claim moral highground because you're not permanently attached to your phone, if you're just as tied to email on your laptop, frenetically checking it first thing each morning, or being interminably interrupted by its arrival throughout the day.

It's even true of the *content* we consume via the internet. The never ending loop of TikTok or YouTube videos suck hours out of our day before we even realise it. And it's not like the majority of the stories we binge our way through on Netflix or Disney+ encourage us towards greater love of God and an enhanced concern for our neighbours.

Both the media and the medium fracture our presence and attention and require "meaningful habits of resistance". They will not govern themselves.

Give it a go#1: Turn it off regularly (a few hours a day, a day a week, etc)

Find a time in your day when you can do without your phone (or laptop, or gaming console, or whatever) so you can give yourself to others and God. This could be the first hour of your morning, which you can devote to prayer, Scripture, reading and conversation with others or perhaps two hours around dinner time, so that you can prepare for dinner, engage in table discussions, and give yourself attentively to family members or housemates. You might need to let family members, colleagues and clients know that you'll be offline for a few hours in the evening, or won't be checking things until a certain time in the morning. If things are really urgent you can get back to them after the time is up (but most things won't be that urgent).

Some have even suggested putting your phones and other devices to bed at around the same time as you'd put children to bed, and giving them a sleep-in in the morning. You will likely sleep better if you've been without them for a few hours before bedtime.

And it would be worth trying an electronic Sabbath, or fasting from tech for a 24-hour period. Shut down the computer and put away the remote

control. Make social plans ahead of time so you don't need to be on your phone during the Sabbath period. Explore Sabbath activities that don't require a phone, internet or screen: read, try a board game, or go for a walk. If you do like to relax by watching sport or movies on TV, then set limits (see below), because you're not likely to experience greater rest or worship by binging on Netflix.

Give it a go#2: Curate media to 4 hours per week (or 2 hours, or 7 hours)

Stories shape our idea of what a good life looks like, whether they're 30 second stories on TikTok, multi-season stories on Netflix, video games, or even a favourite book (you might have heard of them). **We don't just watch stories, we become them, but these days we don't choose the stories as much as they choose us,**¹⁸ via algorithms, search suggestions, and so on. So we want to choose the stories we watch and become rather than letting someone else do it, usually for monetary incentives. And we want limit unplanned and undesirable stories from shaping us. We also want to limit the time we sink into endless and mindless media streams.

Setting time limits helps us to do both. The four hour limit might seem arbitrary (some will want less, others might need more), but that provides for a 1 hour session across 4 days per week, which is still substantial and seems a good starting point.

Curating your media consumption forces you to pick the show or clips that you really want to watch (or the game if you're a sports lover, or video game if you're a gamer), to consume it slowly and thoughtfully, and to develop delayed gratification, which is the opposite of binge-watching, and which is a really useful skill across all of life.

You will want to select media that has redemptive features, rather than shows, clips or games which glorify violence, distort the beauty of sex, or idolize a warped version of success. These could be stories that uphold truthfulness, justice and humanity, or which celebrate beauty in creation and culture, or which open our minds to the lives of people different to us. And ultimately, **they should prompt you to turn off the technology, to look up to God in prayer, to go outside into the world and to face outwards towards other people.**

¹⁸ *The Common Rule*, 116.

Helpful hints

- Immerse yourself in the story of Scripture before you turn on any device. Lean into the story of God's love each morning before any other story or script that captures your imagination.
- Read a printed Bible, which will help you get to know your Bible better, and see verses in the immediate context more easily, as well as removing the temptation to flick over to social media or streaming videos on your phone.
- If you put the phone out of reach you're less likely to be tempted. Studies have shown that if you put it out of sight (like in a drawer or another room) your productivity increases, presumably in line with your attentiveness.
- Delete apps that you know are time-wasters; silence notifications, which are the annoying mosquitos of the smartphone world; and unsubscribe from unnecessary email lists.
- If you're at the dinner table place all mobile devices in another part of the room; if you're out to dinner, play a game where whoever picks up their phone also picks up the bill.
- If you have children, make guidelines in this area for them, and most importantly, follow them yourself.
- You might need to think carefully about other media forms, like novels. It is possible to have the same endless/mindless issue with old tech, like books, that many of us have with new tech, like phones, streaming services and video games. But the point applies to old and new tech. We want to be thoughtful about the media we consume in whatever form, the stories we imbibe, and the amount of time we sink into them.

Conclusion: Putting Together a Rule of Life

Godly habits are more than just good ideas, but how do we actually make them a part of our lived experience?

The answer, at least in part, is to develop what the ancients termed “a rule of life”, but they didn’t have in mind harsh, legalistic regulations. The word “rule” is used in the sense of “ruler”, like the wooden thing you used to measure stuff in maths. It referred to a bar of wood, or a trellis or lattice upon which vines could grow. **Think of it as a sort of a scaffold for your time and activity that helps to renew your heart, to grow you as a disciple, and to live for and with Jesus.**

Annie Dillard, a Pulitzer-prize winning author calls the “rule” a schedule, and says of it, *“How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing. A schedule defends from chaos and whim. It is a net for catching days.”*¹⁹

If you are still unsure of rule, trellis or schedule, you could even call it a “rhythm for life”, but let’s stick with rule of life for now. The essence of a rule of life is a commitment to the set of practices you have picked that will open you to the influence of God in your daily routines and weekly rhythms. It might sound a bit mechanistic and unspiritual, but in essence it’s about growing spiritual fruit, under the influence of the Spirit of Christ, as we grow deeper in our knowledge and love of Christ. The rule of life is intentional rather than mechanistic, operating like a trellis or scaffold or schedule as it deliberately slots the chosen godly habits into your day and week.

Of course, this might sound like a burdensome limitation. But the truth is that we are limited beings: we don’t have all the time we’d like, we don’t have all the talents we’d like, or the energy we’d like or the maturity we’d like.²⁰ What is burdensome is to try to do it all, all at once, in denial of our human limitations. In practice, the habits are liberating and the rule of life is freeing. **The habits give you footholds throughout the day, and placemarkers in your week, and once established, they don’t take up mental space or emotional bandwidth because they’re operating in the background.**

¹⁹ Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*.

²⁰ See Paul Tripp, *Lead*, Chapter 3 “Limitations”.

Give it a go: writing a rule of life for yourself

To write a rule of life for yourself:

1. Think through the practices in this booklet that you have tried already. Which ones seem to be the ones that unlock further helpful decisions or practices in your day? These are called **keystone habits**, which you'll remember refers to the one habit or change that unlocks other habits or positive changes. We imagine that Morning, Midday, Evening Prayers is a keystone habit, as is Turning off your phone off and/or Curating your media, and also determined rest and worship from a well-planned Sabbath. Pick 3 or 4 of these keystone habits and start with them.
2. Then pay attention to a few of the other habits that have been meaningful to you in either connecting with God, or being present with friends and neighbours. Slot these into your Rule.
3. Be conscious of things you can readily implement into your schedule, the "easy wins" if you like. For example, you're already coming to church, so now do it thoughtfully. Include practices you can combine, (e.g. dinner together each night without phones, or shouting a friend/neighbour/stranger a meal when you meet together). Be aware of the limitations built in your life, especially if you're caring for little children or ageing parents, or starting up a business, when you might have less flexibility than in other stages of life. Also consider the common interruptions in your weekly patterns.
4. It would be good to start with at least a couple of daily habits and a couple of weekly habits and build from there. But each of the 7 habit areas we've focused on feed into each other, and reinforce each other, so ideally you want to try to incorporate practices from each area into your Rule.
5. Make it easier to remember. Plug things into your calendar, put your morning and evening prayers next to your bed, or on a bookmark in your Bible on your bedside table. Set alarms to remind yourself, have Scripture in oft-seen spaces of your home and workplace, plan hospitality and conversations and Sabbaths a few days in advance
6. Trial and error is your friend, not a failure. So try different things, and don't be discouraged if you fail. It's like a diet or exercise regime; a bad day here or there doesn't mean the whole process is a waste. Over time you will reap wonderful benefits, even with plenty of blips along the

way. Give your Rule a month to begin with, then review it and adjust and adapt as appropriate. If a month seems too long, start with a week. It takes time to form habits, so give yourself grace, and give it another crack.

7. Share it with someone. This is not to boast, but so that they can encourage you to keep going. You could do the same for them.

A Sample Rule of Life

Justin Whitmel Earley, author of *The Common Rule*, has developed a rule of life that includes four daily habits and four weekly habits, each focused on either love of God or love of neighbour. Many will sound familiar by now. His rule of life may help you formulate your own rule, but base yours on your own circumstances.

Daily habits:

- Kneeling prayer at morning, midday and bedtime
- One meal a day with others (family, housemates)
- One hour a day with phone off and put away
- Reading Scripture before looking at the phone, every morning

Weekly habits:

- One hour of conversation with a friend
- Curate media to four hours per week
- Fast from something for 24 hours (food, phone, etc)
- Practice the Sabbath for 24 hours each week

In Appendix 4 there's a blank schedule where you can start mapping out your rule of life.

Remember, the Rule of Life is a trellis, a schedule, a scaffold, a way to turn good ideas about following Jesus into godly habits that will shape us increasingly into his likeness. The habits are a means to an end—to live a life like Jesus, with Jesus. Just as the point of a trellis is to produce rich and enjoyable wine rather than neat rows of vines, the point of a Rule is to create a scaffold for emotional health and spiritual life, rather than a formulaic schedule. The point is life like Jesus and life with Jesus.

May God bless your godly habits and rule of life so that you know and love him more and more.

Appendix 1: Fasting

Who would go a whole day without food?

Fasting from food has long been a Christian practice, and before that, a Jewish practice. Jesus both fasted himself (Matthew 4:2) and expected that his followers would fast (he said, “when you fast” rather than “if you fast”). But not many disciples of Jesus fast anymore; it’s mostly too inconvenient. And if we do, it’s more likely to be for health reasons than spiritual formation.

Food has a power over us that most of us don’t like to admit. Fasting is an opportunity to lay down an appetite and come face to face with hunger – and the ways that we try to keep it at bay. While research has shown the physical benefits of periodic fasting, abstaining from food can leave us weak, irritable, hangry,²¹ so we would rather not. But fasting is a form of self-denial that helps us begin to recognise the things that control us, and to see how little taste we actually have for sacrifice or time with God.

“More than any other discipline,” writes Richard Foster, another grandfather of modern spiritual disciplines, *“fasting reveals the things that control us.”*²² It also impresses upon us how often we fill our emptiness with food and drink. When we fast those things inside us that we regularly suppress with food and drink start to rise within us. We will blame our pride, anger, bitterness, or whatever it is, on our hunger, but will come to realise that the hunger has just exposed what was always there. This in turn brings us to repentance and a sense that only God can fill us with what we really need—his love and grace and truth.

Fasting is like a physical posture before God, not unlike kneeling to pray. Fasting focuses our mind, body and spirit towards communing with God. When we kneel to pray we are physically expressing our humility and reminding ourselves of our submission before him. When we fast there is a physical expression of our dependence on God, and our bodies remind us that we need him.

Fasting is not a way to manipulate God into doing our will or make us more pious or holy. It’s not a spiritual way to lose weight, but it holds the

²¹ This is a non-technical term that refers to an easily-triggered emotional state that is a combination of hungry and angry.

²² Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*.

potential for us to more intentionally and intensely seek God's will and grace in worship and prayer. By not quickly satiating our hunger with food and drink we come face to face with our reliance upon God's goodness and provision, which is why fasting so naturally leads us to prayer.

Give it a go

If you are new to fasting, begin by fasting for one meal. If you're able, try fasting for up to 24 hours – you may need to work up to this. Your 24 hours could be from after lunch (or dinner) one day up until lunch (or dinner) the next day. Or you could skip breakfast and/or lunch for one day this week. Drink lots of water.

If you're fasting from one meal or one day, use the time you would usually spend preparing and eating your meal to read and pray. Perhaps try a different prayer discipline than the one you normally use. If you are fasting for a longer period, you may experience hunger pangs throughout the day. Use these times to say a small prayer to God, thanking him or asking him to make you aware of his presence.

Don't fast if you are sick, pregnant/breast feeding, or have other medical issues that make fasting from food inadvisable. And you won't make the most of fasting if your fast coincides with a really busy time at work or in family life.

Fasting works best when you fast for a purpose. Although fasting can be a helpful regular habit, it has particular value when it causes us to petition God for a particular need or desire. Rather than wait until a pressing need arises, why not choose a particular need or desire to focus on each time you (regularly) fast.

Appendix 2: Simplicity

I'm looking for some added complexity, said no-one, ever.

Some of the reasons why life is complicated are beyond our control, like illness, unemployment, and catastrophe. But one of the things that is within our control, as far as it comes to simplicity, is our consumption and accumulation of possessions. Our homes are getting bigger, we have somewhere between 200,000 to 300,000 items in them²³, yet many of us still say we need more room,. To put it baldly, we not only have too much stuff in our schedules, we have too much junk in our homes. All of which takes up energy, thought, grey matter, time to purchase, to maintain, to organise. And the problem with that is that we're not able to focus on what really matters, if we've also got to keep thinking about a whole ton of stuff that doesn't really matter.

Our culture says "the more stuff you have, the happier you will be". You add possessions, you add life...But beyond a fairly basic point, possessions don't add life. Too often they subtract from life, taking away our focus on the things that matter the most.

In Luke 9, the Lord Jesus strikes out resolutely towards Jerusalem, that is, towards his suffering and death. When he was rejected by a Samaritan village he dismissed his disciples' desire for vengeance. When two would-be disciples pledged to follow him, he told them that their family entanglements were in the way of following him. And when a man vowed to follow Jesus wherever he went, Jesus replied curtly, "*Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head*". Revenge does not distract Jesus, family drama does not encumber him, material possessions do not outweigh him.

As jarring as it can sound, you have to admit there's a simplicity, a single-mindedness, a focus to his words and life, that really is quite a contrast to our lives, even just the burden our physical possessions seem to place upon us. The sheer weight of them is at odds with the simple way Jesus seems to move lightly through this world. If we want to spend time with Jesus, become like Jesus, and serve Jesus in the world we're going to need to spend less, acquire less, and maintain less.

²³ Allegedly, women will spend about 8 years of their lives shopping and men will spend 153 days looking for misplaced items.

If you have less stuff you discover you have more money, that is, greater financial freedom. You have more time, because you've got less stuff to look after, to clean, to organise. You have less stress, because there's just less clutter that is always in your face, occupying low-level subconscious energy. You'll have more freedom with fewer possessions. You're likely to be more productive and it's likely to be better for our environment. You will have more opportunity to pursue your greatest passions. You will have space for faith, and family, and friends, such that this habit area supports and feeds into the other habit areas in this booklet.

Life can be more simple, but it won't get there by itself.

Give it a go#1: Buy less, own less

Being unburdened by the sheer weight of our physical possessions frees us up to focus on that which really counts. But how do we do it in practice? A few suggestions might include: regularly going for a whole day (perhaps your Sabbath), or two or three days, without buying anything; or repairing rather than replacing something, or even keeping what you have rather than upgrading at the first opportunity. Could you remove the clutter from one room, one wardrobe, one drawer, one desk, giving things away to people who could use them more, upcycling, recycling, or thoughtfully disposing of? Could you guard the front door carefully, ensuring that for every item that comes into your place, one can go out to someone else who would benefit from it?

What about enjoying simple pleasures that require no spending or purchases, like a walk along the beach in preference to going to the mall for therapy or shopping as your entertainment? Could you say no to something you like but don't really need, even if it's on sale? After all, every item is 100% off if you don't buy it. Could you even wait a few days before purchasing it, just to see if it's something you really want rather than an impulse buy?

Give it a go#2: Do less

You can also assess the things and activities that make your life convoluted, and take steps to simplify these things:

- You don't have to undertake every project, or take on every new customer or client.
- Your kids don't have to go to every party they're invited to, and they don't need to play multiple sports across the weekend, which means you spend all your time running them around town.

- When tempted to spontaneously say “yes” to yet another commitment, give yourself time to think it through first (you might need to say, “Can I think about it and get back to you tomorrow, an hour, 10 minutes?”).
- If you have two social invitations on the same night, go to the one you committed to first and stay there, rather than trying to squeeze multiple events into the same evening.
- Look through your calendar for the week/month ahead and mark out some margin or blank space that you don’t fill with engagements.

Appendix 3: Further reading and resources

The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry, John Mark Comer

The Common Rule, Justin Whitman Earley

Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us, Adele Ahlberg Calhoun

The Celebration of Discipline, Richard Foster

The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives, Dallas Willard

Prayer, Timothy Keller

Lead: 12 Gospel Principles for Leadership in the Church, Paul Tripp

True Friendship, Vaughan Roberts

The Gospel Comes with a House Key, Rosaria Champagne Butterfield

Emotionally Healthy Discipleship, Peter Scazzero

The Benedictine Option, Ray Dreher

Disruptive Witness, Alan Noble

The More of Less: Finding the Life You Want Under Everything You Own, Joshua Becker

Appendix 4: A Blank Planner for a Rule of Life

Monthly Planner

Month: _____

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
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<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Goals for the Month:

Reminders/Notes:



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