

Canada Pastor A's Rule of Life

My Understanding of God's Story (in a nutshell!): The Bible tells the story of God's relentless quest of love to restore shalom, well-being in every dimension of life, to all creation. At the heart of God's plan is Jesus Christ, God incarnate, who came and lived among us, taught us through both word and example, died for us and rose again, in order to reconcile all that is broken, to renew all of life. God longs for everyone to receive and enjoy God's gift of reconciliation through faith in Jesus. God's dream of shalom becomes reality as human beings are reconciled to God, to one another, to themselves and to creation. As we receive God's gift God also sends us, corporately and as individual members of community, to be agents of reconciliation, through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. In this way we enter into and become part of God's story.

We live into this story as we embrace Jesus' way of the cross, laying down our lives in love, with the joy of the resurrection set before us. As we walk the journey of reconciliation, everything that we do is lived out against the backdrop of God's great promise that the dream of shalom will one day become the all encompassing reality. This is our sustaining hope! As the Bible draws to a close it leaves us with this great vision: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true'" (Rev. 21:1-5, NIVUK).

How I Fit into God's Story: Having received God's gift of reconciliation, I am part of God's story. How can I live effectively as an agent of reconciliation and renewal? What Rule of Life will best suit who I am, in my particular context?

This requires awareness of my own identity and situation in life. I am a follower of Jesus. I am a husband, married for 26 years. I am a father of three children. I serve as the pastor of a congregation of about one hundred members, approximately one third of whom come from West Africa. I am a new student in a Doctor of Ministry program. I am a neighbour. I am part of God's creation.

My primary spiritual gift is teaching. I am also a generous person. I tend to be gentle and humble with others. God has given me a charism of love for peace and reconciliation. I enjoy people from other cultures, get along well with them, and have a good, intuitive sense of cultural differences. I have been invited to Liberia four times in the last six years to teach about God's gift of peace to our church partners, in that land recovering from a brutal civil war, and the teaching has always been very warmly received.

At the same time I have weaknesses. Chief among them is self-condemnation. I have grown to realize that my difficulty to love and accept myself influences all of my other relationships, as it

affects my ability to love. It therefore hinders my ability to be an effective agent of peace and reconciliation. Self-condemnation also leads to occasional bursts of despair, which robs me of the hope essential to live a robust life in God's kingdom.

I recognize that I have come to a place where I have hit a wall, where my effectiveness as a servant in God's kingdom can no longer increase until I learn to renounce self-condemnation by opening myself to God's love, and accepting God's identity of me as Beloved.

On account of everything I have written above, I have identified four general areas that I hope to strengthen and grow in through specific practices in my Rule of Life. I list them in order of priority, in the sense that I need to focus attention on steps 1 and 2 in order to be more effective at steps 3 and 4. But I am also aware that paying attention to steps 3 and 4 will assist me in accomplishing steps 1 and 2.

1. Renounce self-condemnation and receive God's love (to be reconciled to myself)
2. Renounce despair and embrace the hope of God's love and God's promises (to be reconciled to the God of hope and love)
3. Put off the paralysis caused by self-condemnation and put on active love for others, for my family, for my church, for my neighbours, for our partners in Liberia (to be reconciled to others, and to be an agent of God's reconciling love)
4. Renounce materialism and live simply (to be reconciled to creation)

As I organize my Rule of Life around the themes of reconciliation/relationship with self, God, others and creation, I am aware that there is overlap and interplay within each area. Prayer, for example, which I list under relationship with God, also affects my relationships with myself, others and creation.

Practices to help me become reconciled to myself: At this point in my life, perhaps the greatest gift I can offer the God of reconciliation is to learn to love myself for God's sake.

- *Do my best to faithfully adhere to this rule:* I recognize that self-condemnation often arises when I lack discipline, so self-discipline will help alleviate this. At the same time I must not make this rule too burdensome, as self-condemnation also arises when I fail.
- *Self Examen:* At the end of each day I will reflect on experiences of desolation and consolation, both to help me better learn what brings about self-condemnation (which may or may not arise from sin) as well as to help me remember those times when I experience God's pleasure or God's love.
- *Reject efforts to distract myself from the pain of self-condemnation or feelings of failure:* I cannot be reconciled to myself if I run away from myself, so I will strive to reject efforts at self-distraction like watching TV, playing computer games, etc... This does not mean I will eliminate all TV or computer games, but I will seek to turn away from them as tools of self-distraction, as well as to limit their use in general.
- *Meditate on Biblical and other texts which speak of God's love:* At the beginning of each Monday (my day with no pastoral responsibilities) I will meditate on Biblical texts which speak of God's love (like the parable of the prodigal), or upon other such texts, like George Herbert's "Love" poem.

- *Reading:* I have always found reading to be life-giving so this is a necessary element for my Rule of Life. For the next three years my reading agenda is basically already laid out due to the heavy reading demands of the Doctor of Ministry program. My goal is to complete all reading and written assignments on time.
- *Diet:* As an act of self-care, I will eat sensibly, in moderate amounts, with a balanced diet. This is an area I tend to do well at, so I will simply seek to keep up the good work.
- *Exercise:* Advancing osteoarthritis in most of my joints, as well as recurring back pain, limits strenuous physical activities, but I am still capable of moderate exercise. I will try to take a walk outside (or ride my bicycle in the summer) at least five days a week, which will be combined with prayer (see “Prayer walks” later in this rule). This will also help me to experience God in creation, which has often been a source of joy for me.

Practices to help me relate to God: I have been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, but I need to deepen this relationship, to strengthen my hope in God’s promises, my ability to receive God’s love, as well as my overall obedience to the way of Jesus, the way of the cross, the way of laying down my life for others.

- *Fixed Hour Prayer:* I will begin each day with prayer, as I arrive at my church office, around the hour of 9 AM. This will include both praise and intercession for the day ahead, for my family and for my congregation. At lunch time I will have a 15 minute session of centering prayer to help me re-focus on God’s presence for the work of the afternoon.
- *Prayer Walks Combined with Breath Prayers:* Weather permitting I will take a prayer walk either before the work day begins, or at lunchtime (around the church block) or on weekends around my home. As noted in my Exercise section, I will try to walk five days a week. On these prayer walks I will practice simple breath prayers of my own creation such as: “God of hope” (to be said as I breathe in), “I wait for you” (to be said as I breathe out); “Loving Jesus” (breathe in) “thank you for the cross” (breathe out). Such prayers will remind me of the broad scope of God’s promises of renewal and help me to rest into those promises, and they will also help me reflect on God’s love.
- *Bible Reading:* I will combine my morning prayer time at my office with Bible reading. This Bible reading will have nothing to do with sermon preparation. It will be devotional, along the style of lectio divina.
- *Sabbath:* I will keep my Mondays free from church related work, and other work I find draining, as a means both to express and to grow in my trust in God. Realistically I do not think I can avoid doing some work for my Doctor of Ministry program on some Mondays, but the reading is work I enjoy, so I will walk gently with myself in this regard.
- *Solitude:* At least once a year I will take a 2-4 day personal retreat alone with God. This is a practice I currently engage in and benefit from.
- *Discernment:* I will seek to discern God’s voice through prayer, Scripture and the reading of books, nature, people and events.
- *Obedience:* By God’s grace I will seek to obey whatever I discern God is saying to me, even if it comes at a cost. The journey of reconciliation is not without suffering.

Practices which express love for others, and help me live as an agent of reconciliation:

- *Approach toward others:* I will strive to see everyone I meet as a person created in God's image, and as a person for whom Christ died, and therefore treat everyone I encounter with reverence and respect. One way to help me do this is to imagine a cross between myself and the other person, to see them in light of the cross.
- *Non-Violence:* I commit myself to non-violence (physically, verbally and emotionally) in all of my relationships. This extends even to those I may consider my enemies.
- *Forgiveness:* With the help of God's grace I will move toward those who hurt me, or toward those whom I have hurt, in order to initiate reconciliation, both to extend and receive forgiveness.
- *Generosity:* I will tithe my income. I will be generous with my time and energy. I do not want to live for myself, but for God and others, while exercising appropriate self-care.
- *As a husband:* I will love my wife by honouring all of my marriage vows. I will honour and not criticize her before others. I will continue to wash and put away the dishes on a daily basis, as well as offering or agreeing to help in other ways. I will strive to be a good listener. I will take more initiative in suggesting things for the two of us to do together. I will pray for Joanne regularly.
- *As a father:* I will strive to have a meaningful conversation with each of my three adult children at least once a month, which is raising the bar above where it is now. I will pray for my children regularly.
- *As a pastor:* I will fulfill my pastoral duties faithfully. I will pray for my congregation regularly. I will love them and make myself available to them. This fall I will establish a discipleship class for the young people I baptized in June. I will take the next step in helping lead the church toward God's missional vision for us. I will seek to help lead our church towards becoming a more discerning congregation. I will continue to teach and help reconcile broken relationships. I will make myself available for outside teaching engagements, both in Africa and at home, prioritizing those that relate to peace and reconciliation, as well as those which involve invitations from other cultural groups.
- *Work habit:* When I am in my office, I renounce the reading of internet news, which has been a time-wasting habit and a source of self-condemnation. It also eats into visitation time.
- *As a neighbour:* I will deliberately be alert for ways to show care and concern to my neighbours at home as well as the neighbours around my church. This begins with a cheerful greeting and a smile. In the winter I will help my neighbours on either side to shovel their sidewalks and in the summer to mow the area of lawn that lies between our houses. I also want to pray for my neighbours.
- *Openness to evangelism:* As I grow in my ability to receive God's love, I need to reflect on the need of others to be reconciled to the God of love. When I pray for my neighbours I will pray for opportunities to share God's love in word and in action.

Practices with respect to creation: God asks us to be good stewards of God's creation. As we seek to be reconciled to creation we demonstrate love both for God and for the people with whom we share this world.

- *Experience of Creation:* My love for creation is sustained as I spend time outdoors. I will strive to take regular walks, to bicycle in the summer, and during vacation times to explore more of God's world, both locally and farther afield.
- *Gardening:* Gardening is a way both to spend time outdoors and to participate in the life of creation. Although my yard is small, I will seek to keep it neat and tidy, including the lawn, the flower beds, the potted plants and the raspberry canes.
- *Simple Living:* I want to consume a minimal amount of the earth's resources by living simply, buying only what I and my family need, rather than what the world says we should have. I will be open to buying second-hand items.
- *Fair Trade:* My wife and I currently buy fair trade coffee, and we will continue this practice. We will consider other fair trade products as they become available.
- *Recycling:* I will continue my present habit of recycling all materials that the city accepts.

Accountability:

- *Read and Review:* In order to help keep myself accountable to this Rule of Life, I will read through it on a monthly basis for the first year, while considering minor revisions. At the end of the first year I will do a larger review.
- *Spiritual Director:* For further accountability I will forward this Rule of Life to my spiritual director.