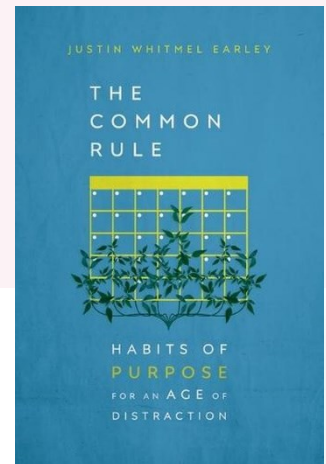




# LEADER'S GUIDE

## THE COMMON RULE BY JUSTIN WHITMEL EARLY



*"Habits form much more than our schedules: they form our hearts."*

**JUSTIN WHITMEL EARLY**

## THEMES

Habits

Spiritual Disciplines

Busyness

Others-focused Living

Guide for Living

## BOOK SUMMARY

The common rule is a different way to live, rejecting the unproductive busyness the world worships and forming healthy life-giving habits which draw us closer to God and one another. When we view our habits as a liturgy, we can become much more aware of our automatic behaviours and intentionally transition into a better way of living for God and our neighbour.

The Common Rule is made up of eight habits, four daily and four weekly, and each habit corresponds with either cultivating your love of God, or love of neighbour. We were made to love and be loved by God, and when we think of our habits as only impacting ourselves, we miss the opportunity to practising habits that bless those around us! "We're made to be happy when we're focusing on others" and many habits in the common rule help us to spend our days for the sake of others, rather than just ourselves.

The Common rule also encourages us to embrace the goodness in the world which God has made and practise resistance. We need the habit of resistance in this broken world because troubles will come, and when our natural unconscious habitual responses are fear, anger, anxiety, and envy, we cannot and do not love our neighbours well. "We are all living according to a specific regimen of habits, and those habits shape most of our life."

Justin's book is a fantastic resource to begin the journey of forming and practising spiritual disciplines and habits of faith. "It's utterly important to learn the right theological truths about God and neighbor, but it's equally necessary to put that theology into practice via rule of life. You can't believe truth without practising truth."



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & TALKING POINTS



1

Q. "We are all living according to a specific regime of habits, and those habits shape most of our life". How we spend our days is how we spend our lives. While reading Justin's book, what did you learn about habits in general and, on a more personal level, your habits?

### TALKING POINTS

"Habits are something we do overtime without thinking about them. They shape our world effortlessly. They form us more than we form them – and that's why they're so powerful" (p36);

- A habit is a settled regular tendency or practice, especially one that is hard to give up or change.
- Habits are both conscious and subconscious decisions and behaviours.
- Habits can be both positive and negative.
- "A Keystone habit is a super-habit. It's the first domino in the line; by changing one habit, we simultaneously change ten other habits" (p36).
- Our personal habits don't just affect us.
- Our habits affect our family, friends, community, relationship with God and service with our spiritual gifts.

2

Q. Discuss the daily habit of 'Kneeling Prayer'. What did you find helpful? Has your prayer life changed?

### TALKING POINTS

'Kneeling Prayer' is the habit of praying in the morning, midday and evening.

"We all desire to somehow shape our chaotic days into lives with meaning. That begins with punctuating our days with words: the words of prayer" (p32):

- Words are powerful, and prayer can shape the world.
- "Just as God framed the world in love, so we can use the words of prayer to frame each part of our day in love" (p33).
- Creating new prayer habits also allows us to make the prayers less about ourselves and more about the world and the people who dwell here.
- Importance of morning prayer - the "common book of groans" (p33) is exchanged for the common book of prayer; Prayer can reform our attitude towards the work the day has ahead of us, whether it's in an office or as a stay-at-home mum.
- Importance of midday prayer – prevents our striving as we realign our hearts, attitudes and behaviours to the will of God.
- Importance of evening prayer – as our exhaustion gives way to temptation or reveals ugliness in our hearts, an evening prayer gives us strength and helps us reflect on our day. Evening prayers also allow us to repent.

3

Q. Do you enjoy meals with others regularly? Discuss the daily habit of 'One Meal with Others'.

### TALKING POINTS

"We are not just hungry bodies, nor machines that simply need fuel. We are hungry souls; we are people who crave the company and delights of the table" (p49):

- "The daily habit of one meal a day with others is a way of moving the table back to the centre of who we are and ordering our day around the kind of people we were created to be: dependant and communal human beings (p40)."
- "In general, our culture puts busy schedules at the centre of life and then tries to fit meals in around them. This is different from putting the table at the centre and prioritizing our schedules around that" (p49).
- We were made to eat regularly with others.
- The need to eat reveals our dependence on God, each other and creation (p50).
- Sharing a meal with others is a way to love our neighbours well and reject careless overconsumption and wastage of food.
- "Because the table is where life happens. It's where a household learns to love (p54).
- "Cultivating the rhythms of the table must not pull us away from the outsider... A redeemed table is one that invites outsiders in" (p57).
- "How we live together may be the greatest sermon we preach" (p58).

## 4

Q. "Use your phone one way, and it fuels the life of love and presence you long for. Use your phone the other way, and it robs you of everything you were made for" (p75). Discuss the daily habit of 'One Hour with Phone Off'.

### TALKING POINTS

"Cultivating the daily habit of turning your phone off for an hour each day is the keystone habit that can change the way you think about your phone and spark new daily routines that usher in a life of presence" (p76):

- 'Presence is the heart of who we are, because presence is at the core of our relationship with God" (p64).
- "When we try and be present everywhere, we end up being present nowhere" (p66).
- "Attention is our precious commodity. Our life is defined by what we pay attention to" (p67).
- "The goal of resisting absence is to give others our presence" (p67).
- Our family, friends and community need our focused attention without unnecessary phone distractions.
- A healthy way to use our phones well, especially in the company of others, is to explain to our child/spouse/friend/colleague why we're looking at our phone, for example, "I'm just writing an important email" (p70).
- "Our phones aren't neutral. We can't use them the right way without habits that protect us from the wrong way. When we do nothing, they tilt us toward absence" (p75).
- Phone usage can be a distraction we revert to because we're too fearful of sitting in our own company and genuinely being okay with silence and knowing who we are (p73).
- Our constant phone usage and compulsion to check our phones are responsible for our inability to be present, do what we ought, and with focused attention.

## 5

Q. Did you implement the daily habit of 'Scripture Before Phone'? If so, what were the benefits?

### TALKING POINTS

"The Common rule habit of Scripture before phone us intended to cultivate the habit of resisting those stories [the ones which we create about ourselves] and embracing the true story [God's story of who we are]" (p82):

- "Moments of waking are powerful moments of formation" (p80).
- Looking inside ourselves, we find both good and evil and warring identities at odds.
- We have many story versions of ourselves; those we'd like to be, who we think we should be, who our spouse wants us to be, who culture urges us to be and so on.
- Realistically, "we become what or who we pay attention to", and the way we genuinely discover our true selves is "by staring at someone else." That someone else should be Jesus.
- We can keep a stable identity of who we are by looking to God and His word to define; we should turn to God before we turn to the world.
- The media prays on our fears and weaknesses, and we can get stuck in a rut of consuming headlines and bad news first thing in the morning.
- "Aligning our identity to the king is radically different. Only when we're secure in our identity as children of the coming King, who will right all wrongs, can we read the news for the sake of our neighbours' needs instead of for the sake of our own inadequacy. Only then are we able to repent, and not just blame another side" (p86).
- "When were Christians first we can finally be good citizens second" (p86).
- Social media can be harmful and a great temptation to compare, envy and for our identity to spiral.
- Social media tips; avoid unplanned scrolling, only go on to post/respond, turn off notifications, don't use social media in bed, and ignore the temper tantrum.
- Three things to consider with scripture reading; season, long study and journaling (p93).

## 6

Q. Do you prioritise deep, authentic and vulnerable conversations with friends about Jesus and life? What were your thoughts on the weekly habit of 'One Hour Conversation with a Friend'?

### TALKING POINTS

"The weekly habit of an hour of conversation is meant to cultivate this kind of life, where you know and are known by those closest to you" (p96):

- "The question 'Is there something you're not telling me?' gets at the heart of friendship, because friendship is being known by someone else and loved anyway" (p96).
- Because God is triune, "we are made in the image of fellowship" (p96).
- The Lord saw that it was not good for man to be alone, so He created Eve (Genesis 2:23).
- Friendships are born the moment "when one person says to another: 'What! You too? I thought I was the only one'" (C. S. Lewis).
- "Vulnerability and time turn people who have a relationship into people who have a friendship" (p98).
- "How do we create a life of friendship when we have neither the courage nor time to talk? The answer is to practise courage and prioritise time" (p100).
- "Here is the power that lies in vulnerable friendships: *together we beat back the darkness by exposing it to the light*" (p103).
- "The true nature of friendship is not to draw shut the outsider out, it is to draw them in" (p107).
- "Friendships light up the darkness" (p108).

## 7

Q. Do you think you have a healthy relationship with media? Do you agree that media should be limited? Discuss the weekly habit of 'Curate Media to Four Hours'.

## TALKING POINTS

"Resisting the constant stream of addictive media with an hour limit means we are forced to curate what we watch. Curating stories means that we seek stories that uphold beauty, that teach us to love justice, and that turn us to the community" (p125):

- "We become the stories we consume" (p113).
- We don't simply watch stories; we live in one. The greatest story is how God is saving us.
- "The content of the story is not only our concern; the medium is equally *if not more* formative. The *way* we watch is as important as *what* we watch" (p116).
- "Curation implies a sense of the good... I suggest we have a vision for good stories, and we curate accordingly" (p117).
- "Every good story tries to tell us what's wrong with the world" (p120) and cultivates our love for justice.
- "Curating beautiful stories means we live in a slightly more beautiful world" (p124).
- "Curating stories is not just about reallocating your time. It's also about reminding yourself that there is one true story. It's about retraining yourself to see that any good story will reflect the one true story in some fundamental way" (p124).

## 8

Q. We often associate fasting with food. However, it's becoming more common for Christians to fast from social media or other distractions. Have you ever fasted? Share what you found interesting about the weekly habit 'Fast from Something for Twenty -Four hours'.

## TALKING POINTS

"We were made to feast. Not in order to become full, but because we are full. We are to celebrate that fullness by feasting. Feasting to fill the emptiness is not feasting; it is coping" (p128):

- "We try to eat to fill our emptiness" (p129).
- "Fasting is a way to resist the original sin of trying to eat our way to happiness and to force ourselves to look to God for our fullness" (p129).
- "To fast is to lean into the truth of the world: we are empty without God" (p129).
- Prayers at mealtimes during fasting fill us in a way food can't; it fills our souls.
- "When we fast, we become more attuned to the stubborn reality of the world's suffering" (p136).
- "Even when the prayers aren't answered, in the space that fasting opens up, we find something else: Christ" (p138).
- "Fasting, as a practice, is a way to enter into Jesus' life. He was a homeless, hungry minority. He was a refugee and an outcast. He was actually – not just metaphorically – poor. He lived among violence. He died violently. To follow Jesus is not just to believe in his life; it is to follow him into his lifestyle" (p138).
- Three Considerations; Communal fasting, Prayer and Multiple Days.

## 9

Q. In the chapter 'Weekly Habit 4: Sabbath', Justin talks about his "life hacks". Can you relate to these hacks? How have you incorporated 'Sabbath' into your life since reading this book?

## TALKING POINTS

"The weekly practice of sabbath teaches us that God sustains the world and that we don't" (p156):

- It is countercultural for us to embrace our limitations.

- "Sabbath is a gospel practise because it reminds us that the world doesn't hang on what we can accomplish, but rather on what God has accomplished for us" (p156).
- Getting Started: Pick a twenty-four-hour period, figure out what you'll be doing and not doing, and do the sabbath communally.
- Electronic Sabbaths; turning off screens.

# 10

Q. "The Common Rule is a different way to live." What aspects of the Common Rule have you embraced since reading this book? How have these habits enabled you to love God and your neighbour better and live more beautifully? Discuss.

## TALKING POINTS

"No habits can be pursued for the purpose of success or productivity or a new and better you. They *must* be done for the vision of beauty. If the goal is self-help, failure will destroy you. But if the goal is beauty, failure makes that goal shine all the more brightly. So get up and keep walking" (p162).

- "I believe that paying attention to the work of habit is similar. It is best thought of as giving attention to the art of habit. It isn't about trying to live right; it's about curating a life. It is the art of living beautifully" (p163).
- "The vision – of a whole and coherent life – is the goal of a life curated by habit" (p163).
- "The connection between the ordinary and the extraordinary is through very small habits" (p164).



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