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The Logic of Limitations: A Review of The Common Rule

Abstract

"Earley sets forth a rule of life for our distracted world: four daily habits and four weekly habits. Four habits focus on loving God; four habits focus on loving neighbor."

Posting about the book *The Common Rule* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/the-logic-of-limitations-a-review-of-the-common-rule/>

Keywords

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Comments

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in things

June 13, 2019

The Logic of Limitations: A Review of *The Common Rule*

Justin Bailey

Title: *The Common Rule: Habits of Purpose for an Age of Distraction*

Author: Justin Whitmel Earley

Publisher: InterVarsity Press

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I once had a wise pastor tell me that while my twenties would be about learning what I can do, my thirties would be about learning what I cannot do. As I near forty, I find myself often reflecting on his counsel. Here's what I think it means.

To be a creature is to be limited: limited to a body, limited in energy, attention, and time. Choosing a vocation, living in a community, making friends, getting married, having children—all of these things place further limitations on our freedom. But there is a deeper freedom—the freedom to become who we were created to be—that is found not in the absence of limitations, but in embracing the right limitations.

My marriage vows limit me, but they also set me free. My children limit me profoundly, but they have also opened up enormous new space for me to experience love, joy and grace. The Scriptures limit me, but their limitations ultimately give me life.¹

Much of the last decade has revolved around a basic orienting question: what are the right limitations for freedom? What limitations do I need to become who God calls me

to be? The basic search is for a life of integrity, a life that is well-ordered, a life that makes sense.

I confess to experiencing more failure than success in this quest, but I suppose that is part of the learning process too. I've learned that I love making plans, devising new rhythms, and planning habits, but that I also have an incredible capacity for distraction. I pride myself on my productivity, but I also use hard work to avoid the demands of love. I teach spiritual formation to smartphone-addicted undergraduates but often find that my own screens have a tight grip around my heart.

Thus, in Justin Whitmel Earley's *The Common Rule*, I found a kindred spirit. After serving as a missionary in China, Earley returned to the United States to attend law school. He became a successful lawyer, but along the way also became exhausted, anxious, addicted, and on the verge of breakdown. The young missionary, he writes, became converted, formed by his habits instead of his hopes: "... while the house of my life was decorated with Christian content, the architecture of my habits was just like everyone else's" (4). Earley realized that he needed a rule of life, a pattern of habits that would redirect his life towards purpose and love.

Earley's rule was crafted for his personal survival, meant to counteract "the deformed modern liturgies of business and technology." What emerged was a program of "common practice for common people." Indeed, it was encouraging to read a rule designed, not by a monk or minister, but by a mergers and acquisitions lawyer working in the marketplace. Here is a book to read after James K.A. Smith's *You Are What You Love*, or to pair with Andy Crouch's *The Tech-Wise Family* and Cal Newport's *Deep Work*. As a companion to these books, the power of Earley's rule lies not in its novelty or rigor but in its simplicity and accessibility.

Earley sets forth a rule of life for our distracted world: four daily habits and four weekly habits. Four habits focus on loving God; four habits focus on loving neighbor. Four habits focus on resistance; four habits focus on embrace.

The daily habits are:

- Kneeling prayer three times a day (embrace: loving God)
- One meal with others (embrace: loving neighbor)
- Scripture before phone (resistance: loving God)
- One hour with phone off (resistance: loving neighbor)

The weekly habits are:

- Sabbath (embrace: loving God)
- One hour of conversation with a friend (embrace: loving neighbor)
- Fast from something for twenty-four hours (resistance: loving God)
- Curate media to four hours (resistance: loving neighbor)

Like all rules of life, the point is not legalism but focused limitation. Rather than earning God's favor through practiced piety, it aims to open up space for presence and grace. The precise numbers (four hours weekly for media) are not as important as the virtues they represent. Yet I found the specificity of Earley's prescriptions to be incredibly helpful. Instead of a vague aspiration ("watch less Netflix") there is a concrete baseline that requires intentional curation.

Earley includes a chapter explaining the logic of each habit and offering counsel for putting it into practice. An appendix includes accommodations for various groups: skeptics, parents, artists, entrepreneurs, addicts, and those dealing with mental illness. The epilogue is a wonderful reflection on his experience of failure in his desire to live a beautiful life. He concludes: "I realized that failure is not an enemy of formation; it is the liturgy of formation. How we deal with failure says volumes about who we *really* believe we are. Who we *really* believe God is" (162).

Earley has challenged me to keep asking the question about the right limitations. As he shows, the question is not whether we have a rule of life, but whether it is being crafted for us by others who do not have our best interest at heart. The question is not whether we are being formed by our habits but whether our habits reflect who we really want to become.

FOOTNOTES

1. Psalm 119:25