

We all know stories about people who are middle aged or older who continue to make a huge contribution to the Kingdom of God. If you've been preaching for any length of time, you've probably told some of these stories. I know I've told the story of Corrie ten Boom on several occasions. You're probably familiar with her story through the book [The Hiding Place](#) or maybe from the movie. But for the few of you who have forgotten the details of Corrie's story – she was a very ordinary, obscure Dutch woman until the Nazi occupation of Holland during World War II where suddenly her Christian faith was put to the test. She and her family decided they could either play it safe and ignore the atrocities being visited against their Jewish neighbors, or they could risk their lives and stand up for those who had no voice. They chose to risk their lives and open their home as a hiding place for Jews seeking refuge. When their activity was discovered by the Nazis, Corrie and her sister Betsy were sent to Ravensbruck – a notorious women's death camp while their father was sent to a prison. Corrie lost both her father and her sister at the hands of the Nazis.

Through a providential clerical error, Corrie was released from the concentration camp near the end of the war. She vowed to find some way she could make a difference to

ensure she and her family did not suffer in vain. But she thought to herself, according to her autobiography,

[SLIDE #1] "What can I do? I'm an old maid in my 50s. I have no special talents or connections."

But Corey had a huge faith in God. And God took that old maid and gave her nearly 40 more years of life. He took her to nearly 70 countries, including Germany, to preach God's forgiveness to the very people who had killed her father and her sister.

Let me tell you another story about a man who I doubt any of you have ever heard of. His name is Sal Dimiceli. Sal was an American, a 60 year old real estate broker who lived in a small town in Wisconsin. He decided he wanted to make a difference in his community, so he wrote a weekly news column in the local small town paper that focused on people who were in dire straits in the community. Through his news column and the nonprofit that he started, Sal provides about 500 people a year with food, rent, utilities, and other necessities. Sal said,

[SLIDE #2] "I'm just addicted to helping. I don't have time to go to the movies or play golf. My greatest pleasure in life is helping my fellow Americans."

All of us love stories about people who reach their greatest heights in older years. Colonel Sanders had a difficult time in his early life, but realized he had a talent for cooking. He didn't start Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) until he was 65 years old. Ronald Reagan won his first political office in California when he was 55. Winston Churchill was 66 when he first became Prime Minister and helped save Britain and the rest of the world from the Nazis.

We can find lots of stories in the Bible and in life of older people who made massive contributions. But because we tell these stories so often as pastors, we sometimes create an illusion not just in our hearers' minds, but in our own minds, that if we're inspired enough, if committed enough, if faithful enough, somehow we can delay the aging process and avoid what is absolutely inevitable about aging, which is decline.

I recently read a wonderful book about aging which I would recommend to you. It's titled

[SLIDE #3] From Strength to Strength

It's a NY times best seller. The author, Arthur Brooks, opens with a discussion of the inevitable decline in skills that every human being experiences as we age. The age at which we begin to decline depends on our professions. We certainly see this most obviously with athletes. Brooks notes that those playing sports which require explosive power or sprinting, see their peak performance somewhere between age 20 and 27.

Those who participate in endurance sports see a peak a little bit later, but still they peak as young adults.

There have been studies of scientists. They are most likely to make prize winning scientific discoveries and key inventions before their late 30s. After their late 30s, there is a dramatic decline, and you almost never see any scientific or technological breakthrough by anyone in their 50s or 60s. Doctors reach their peak performance somewhere between 40 and 55. A study of malpractice claims against doctors in the US found that physicians over the age of 65 are 50% more likely than younger doctors who are under the age of 50 to be found liable for malpractice. Skills decline.

Technology companies are generally founded by people between the ages of 20 and 30. Air traffic controllers in the US have a mandatory retirement age of 55. Those who are creatives – musicians, poets, artists – find their careers declining somewhere between ages 35 and 50. Why is that? Do people just run out of energy? Run out of gas?

The issue has to do with the way our brains tend to work. You see, there are two types of intelligence according to the experts. The first type of intelligence is called fluid intelligence. Fluid intelligence enables you to reason, to think flexibly, to solve novel problems. Think of fluid intelligence as raw smarts. Young people score much higher in raw smarts, the ability to innovate, the ability to come up with totally new ideas.

But fluid intelligence is not the only kind of intelligence. Experts talk about another kind of intelligence called crystalized intelligence. That's the ability to actually use the knowledge that you've learned over the course of your lifetime. Think of crystalized intelligence as being like an enormous library that you've adding books to every year. As you age, you have more books. But you can picture yourself as being like a librarian who might take a little bit longer to find the book on the shelf that you need.

Those of you who are near to my age, have you ever thought to yourself, "I know it's here – it's just taking me a little bit longer to reach for that information." So you may be slower in accessing the information. Have you noticed that? But because the library is growing every year, we not only have more information, but have learned by experience how to use that information.

Let me bring this down for us: when you're young, you have raw smarts. But when you're old, crystalized intelligence means you have what has traditionally been called wisdom. You not only can generate lots of facts, but you know what the facts mean and how to use them.

There really is something about the way that our brains change when confirms Biblical proverbs like Job 12:12.

[SLIDE #4] Is not wisdom found among the aged? Does not long life bring understanding? [Job 12:12, NIV]

I like the way that the New Living Translation puts Proverbs 20:29:

[SLIDE #5] The glory of the young is their strength; the gray hair of experience is the splendor of the old. [Proverbs 20:29, NLT]

But let me just make an aside about wisdom before I move on. I am increasingly persuaded that a key to reaching young postmoderns with the gospel is to focus more attention on wisdom. You see, prior generations were focused upon truth. What is true and what is false? Or we were focused on ethics – what is right and what is wrong. I honestly don't meet any young people who are asking questions about truth or even about ethics. But everywhere I turn, people are crying out for wisdom. And so if you become known as a wise person, someone who could offer good counsel about how to do life well, how to relate to your kids, how to resolve a conflict, how to relate to your parents, the kind of person who could help a young person figure out what they should do with their lives, what university they should choose, how they can manage their money, you'll have

young people coming out of the woodwork! Younger adults tend not to be asking questions about truth or ethics, but about wisdom! And wisdom is the magical power of the old.

You know I talked about inevitable decline, but here's good news for us as pastors. There are some professions where people don't reach their peak until much, much later in life. Professions that depend on crystalized intelligence, professions like pastoring, peak very late. We can actually become better pastors as we age. Now, it is the case that you're not really going to find many older pastors coming up with innovative, creative ways to organize their churches for growth, or ways to reach the next generation. But if someone is looking for a mentor, a coach, a trainer, or someone to give great counsel, the best thing they could do is turn to an older pastor.

Here's a question I'd like to ask this evening: Since it is the case that the aging process cannot be stopped, and at some point, decline is inevitable, how can we intentionally try to age well given the set of things that are under our control? What should we do to age as gracefully as possible?

For years, I haven't liked the picture that comes into people's minds when we talk about striking a healthy work-life balance. A work-life balance to me suggests that, as pastors, we can easily divide our calling from the rest of our lives. But I never found that to be possible. I'm not saying we always are working, but I'm saying that everywhere I go, whether I'm in a church building or getting coffee or sitting on a plane, or hanging out with friends, I'm always a pastor in the same way that I'm always a husband. I can't switch off being a husband just because I'm not with Marlene.

Rather than this sort of binary of work and life, this idea of trying to function like a light switch – on for ministry and off when you go home, I've always found it much wiser to think about developing healthy rhythms, or what some people call creating a rule of life. The healthiest people I know, the people who have aged the best, the people who have become the kinds of old people I aspire to be like, are all people who have developed healthy rhythms in their life – various disciplines, habits, a rule of life that they've practiced and practiced for decades. Left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot.

What are these rhythms? I want to mention 7 rhythms that we must as pastors

develop to age well. You probably know that one of the designed features of the Bible is to group everything around the number 7. But you may not know that the writers of the Hebrew Bible engaged in a word play regarding the Hebrew word for 7 which is "shevah," and the Hebrew word for "complete or full," which is "sevah." Shevah is 7 and sevah is complete or full.

You could spend a lifetime discovering new ways that the bible is organized around the number 7. Genesis 1 is filled with the number 7! Genesis 1:1- contains 7 words in Hebrew. Genesis 1:2 – the multiple of 7, it's 14 words in Hebrew. Genesis 2:1-3 closes out the first creation account is 21 words in Hebrew, three times seven. There are 7 paragraphs in the first creation account in Genesis 1 and the beginning of Genesis 2.

Virtually every key word is a multiple of 7. Elohim – God- is mentioned 35 times, 5 times seven. The word for "land" is mentioned 21 times – three times seven. Living creatures are mentioned 7 times. "God saw that it was good" is mentioned 7i times.

The number 7 is everywhere In the Bible. When Solomon builds the temple in 1 Kings 8, he makes 7 petitions to the God of Israel. After he finished the petitions,

they have another feast for 7 days. Then they have a feast for another 7 days.

When God reveals the plans for the tabernacle to Moses on Mt. Sinai, God makes 7 speeches. When the tabernacle is completed, the narrative is punctuated 7 times by the phrase "Moses build the tabernacle just as the Lord commanded."

This is to say nothing of the use of 7 in the gospel of John.

So I want to finish this evening by ticking off 7 practices that have been in my life and in the lives of most people I know why are aging well. Seven things could form a rule of life for us. I know there are churches like Jay Pathak's church in Arvada that actually has their pastors check in on a weekly basis about their rule of life. They fill out a form regarding many of the things I'm going to mention.

When I speak about disciplines, and about 7 rhythms, I'm talking about reality that there's almost nothing of value that's ever acquired without discipline. If you want to become increasingly healthy, you won't be able to do so without intentionality, without determination, without commitment. The things I'm going to list require us to overcome our feelings, overcome our fatigue, overcome our boredom, overcome our distractions, overcome popular opinion and mass marketing. What are the 7 rhythms? The first, of course, is establishing a daily devotional life with God.

[SLIDE #6] The practice of a daily devotional life with God

I'm talking about the discipline of daily prayer, Bible reading, silence, and listening to God and journaling. For the past 50 years, I've done a hundred different things in my daily time. The foundational elements have been reading through the Bible at least once almost every year. I regularly pray through the Psalms or the Great Litany in the Book of Common Prayer, along with journaling my prayers in a prayer journal. I think there's something about the practice of daily devotions which forms in a person the deep spirituality over the course of their lives. We're talking about building below the water line, deepening our souls, not just focusing on appearance.

Deep spirituality is something that you know it, you see it. When I think of deep spirituality, I think of William Booth, the founder along with his wife, Catherine, of the Salvation Army. One of his biographers tells of the day when the general was in his 80s – he was ill and had been to see a physician. It was left to his son, Bramwell, to tell William that he would soon be blind. Let me read to you from his biography.

“You mean that I'm going blind?” “Well, General, I fear that we must contemplate that,” said Bramwell, who along with the family, had always addressed their father by that affectionate name.

There was a pause while Booth thought over what he had been told. And then the father asked the son, "I shall never see your face again?" "No, probably not in this world," was the son's reply. The biographer goes on to write during the next few moments, the veterans' hand crept along the counter pane to take hold of his son's and holding it he said very calmly, "God must know best!" And after another pause, "Bramwell, I have done what I could for God and people with my eyes. Now I shall to what I can for God and people without my eyes." That's what aging well looks like. That's what deep spirituality looks like.

Let me mention a second practice.

[SLIDE #7] The practice of Sabbath

The fourth commandment says in Exodus 20:8-10

[SLIDE #8] Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it Holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work

Sabbath is the one commandment that most of us in the Evangelical tradition believe no longer applies. Or we have a kind of "do it yourself" Sabbath. "Oh, I take a couple hours every evening to watch television and if you multiply that over the course of the week

that's pretty much a Sabbath>" I don't want to get into the question whether the Sabbath is mandatory for us as Christian leaders, but I think it would be wise to ask the question, "why wouldn't we want a Sabbath?" God is saying to us, "take a rest, take a break." Why is the Sabbath a part of the big 10? It says, 'Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy.' What does that mean? It means that one day a week should feel different than the other days. "Being holy" is to be set apart, to be different. The Sabbath is a day for stopping, not working. So in organizing a Sabbath, it should feel different than the rest of your week. Maybe you take a break from looking at or answering your email. Maybe it's a day to have a date with your spouse.

A day of rest means not just that we lie around the house. We might take a bike ride, or plant flowers in the garden, or take a long walk in a local park. When it says that God rests, it doesn't mean that He went to sleep. God's rest is resting on His throne. God can now sit and enjoy the order that He brought about in our world. The notion is that we work for 6 days to try to bring some order into our world, and the 7th day, we enjoy the order that was brought. For Jews, it is not about resting on the Sabbath so you can be recharged for the rest of the week. It's exactly the opposite. You work so that you can enjoy the fruit of your labor on the Sabbath.

Recently, I was meditating on Exodus 35. This is a portion of Scripture that takes place on Mt. Sinai. God has given Moses the plans for building the tabernacle, a way for human beings to re-enter the garden of Eden after Genesis 3. How does a sinful human

being get back into the garden? That's what the tabernacle in Exodus was all about - how to get back into the presence of God. God lays out the plans for the tabernacle, for the furnishings, for the priest's garments, and before the people start making everything for the tabernacle, we read this in Exodus 35:1-3

[SLIDE #9] Moses assembled the whole Israelite community and said to them, "These are the things the LORD has commanded you to do: For six days, work is to be done, but the seventh day shall be your holy day, a day of sabbath rest to the LORD. Whoever does any work on it is to be put to death. Do not light a fire in any of your dwellings on the Sabbath Day. [Exodus 35:1-3, NIV]

Why is this Sabbath commandment placed here right before the building of the tabernacle? It struck me that for people who are in ministry, who are building the tabernacle, who are offering sacrifices and prayers, it's easy to believe that people like us don't need a Sabbath. We pastors are always about the business of God – we don't need a Sabbath! Yet this text on the Sabbath is stuck right in the middle of the tabernacle plans and is a repetition of the Sabbath command. Evern you guys, you pastors, worship leaders, and ministry leaders – Sabbath is not just for everyone else but not you! You ministers need a Sabbath! So that's the second of the healthy rhythms I want to bring to your attention – Sabbath. The third is

[SLIDE #10] The practice of friendship

In 1939, the Harvard medical school decided that they would sign up a bunch of men who were then studying at Harvard and followed them over the course of their whole adult lives until they died. They would question them every year along the way about their lifestyles, their habits, their relationships, their work, and their happiness. Even though the original researchers would all be dead and gone in a few decades, new researchers would be able to see how what people did early in life relates to how well or poorly they do later in life.

Three decades later, researchers said that this Harvard study was too limited. They kept the Harvard men who were still alive in the study, but they broadened it out to include 156 disadvantaged youths from another part of Boston. And together, this study has been updated every year for 80 years. It's the longest longitudinal study of human happiness ever performed. They basically are trying to determine this – what makes for a happy life?

They went through all kinds of factors regarding fame and success and wealth. After 80 years of study, they found that the single most important trait for a happy life is healthy relationships. The original researchers said

[SLIDE #11] Happiness is love. Full stop!

He elaborated a little and said, “There are two pillars of happiness. One is love, the other is finding a way of coping with life that does not push love away.” And then for good measure, he quoted Virgil saying, “Love conquers all!” His successor put it this way,

[SLIDE #12] The clearest message we get from the study is this: good relationships keep us happier and healthier. The people who are most satisfied in their relationships at age 50 were the healthiest at age 80.

So what does that mean for you and me? There is a discipline to being intentional regarding building friendships. May I ask you a few personal questions? How many real friends do you currently have? And by real friends, I mean people you talk with about virtually anything and everything that is going on in your life. Apart from your spouse, how many real friends do you have? I would encourage you to make a list. How many real friends do you have? Do you have two real friends? 6? I don't mean people that you thoroughly enjoy but you almost never see because of work schedules, distance, or space. I mean people that you regularly engage. I would encourage you, if there are some folks that you consider to be real friends but you've drifted just because of time, that you be the initiator, that you be intentional and reach out to them again. You be the one who puts energy back in the relationship. The basic rhythms of life would be for you to connect with a real friend several times a month.

Here's the fourth rhythm:

[SLIDE #13] The practice of stewardship over your body.

The Apostle Paul told Timothy:

[SLIDE #14] Bodily training is of some value. [1 Timothy 4:8, NIV]

You know the basics. I'm not going to take a lot of time with this. Avoid fad diets, and eat most of your meals at home as opposed to a restaurant which serves too much and is too unhealthy. If you have to read most of the ingredients on a package, you probably shouldn't be eating it very often. There was a recent study that was done in the British Journal of sports medicine. Researchers found that either while doing aerobic exercises or strength training was associated with a lower risk of dying, doing one to three hours a week of aerobic exercise and also doing 2 weekly strength training sessions was associated with an even lower mortality risk. So exercise aerobically and do some resistance training.

There are two keys to exercise. #1, do something that you enjoy doing. It could be swimming, jogging, walking briskly, taking you dance class, or biking. Find something that you enjoy, otherwise you won't do it! And secondly, do it with someone else. I've been going to the gym for over 40 years and for a good part of that time, I had a

workout buddy. Throwing weight around isn't particularly interesting, but going with a good friend made it more than enjoyable.

Here's the fifth rhythm:

[SLIDE #15] The practice of paying attention to your finances

One of the saddest things I've observed are pastors who have lost vision for the church. They are worn out, they no longer really want to pastor. But they're hanging on because they cannot afford to stop pastoring. Their churches are declining, they are attracting very few younger people. They're doing way more funerals than baby dedications or baptisms. But because of finances, they can't let go. They can't hand the baton off to the next generation.

One of the best things Marlene and I ever did was get a great financial advisor years ago. Just as you would not pretend to be a physician and diagnose your own health issues and prescribe your own medicine, just as you wouldn't write your own contracts, or your own will, the vast majority of us pastors know very little about financial investing or retirement planning. Those are actually real skills. I always recommend to people, "ask around for a great financial advisor." Get recommendations from people who know about these things. As much as possible, you don't want to be one of those folks who are doing ministry beyond the grace that you have for it. Pay attention to your finances!

Here is rhythm number 6:

[SLIDE #16] The practice of setting boundaries.

I remember early on in ministry, I so desperately wanted to be the perfect pastor. I wanted to prove to everyone that I was available to them. Marlene and I used to have someone over to our home every Sunday after church. This was after I preached three times and was trying to care for a growing congregation and a young family. So we used to invite over to our home new couples because we found that if new families had a connection to us, they would join the church. Well, one Sunday afternoon we invited over a couple who came about 12:30 or 1:00 PM. No exaggeration, the woman talked non-stop for the next 4 hours. She poured out story after story of church heart and how different Vineyard Columbus was, how loving we were, are different Marlene and I were. I listened attentively. At about the four hour mark, Marlene got up from the table and said, "I need to check on the kids." She went upstairs to check on the children. I sat for another hour being a good pastor and listening. When she took a breath, I stood up and said, "we need to finish up here." She continued to talk for the next 15 minutes or so as I gently ushered them to the door.

That was a breaking point! Marlene and I were utterly exhausted. I needed to do some self-examination regarding what was wrong with me – why couldn't I set any boundaries? Yes, we're always pastors, but that doesn't mean we can't keep a regular

schedule. It doesn't mean we're firemen responding to every alarm. Yes, I'm always a pastor, but that doesn't mean I can't set a meeting for one hour and keep the meeting at one hour. The bottom line is, "let yourself be a pastor and let God be God."

Here is the seventh and final discipline we need to practice if we want to age well:

[SLIDE #17] The practice of cultivating our marriage

Popular culture tells us that the key to marital happiness is romantic passion. But every study says that's not the case. The secret of marital happiness is not falling in love. It's staying in love! When we talk about staying in love, we're talking about what therapists call companionate love. Companionate love means that you learn not only to love your spouse but to like them.

Marlene is my one and only romantic love, but she's also my best friend. Best friends love spending time together. When couples are friends, they can gently tease each other, they have fun together, they love to talk. We talk about our devotions, about politics, and history. She loves American football so we watch games together. But all this takes cultivation and discipline. One of the practices Marlene and I had for our whole ministries is to have a date every week. We would take long walks together, go out for coffee, go to a bookstore, ride bikes, and very often we stop each other from

talking about church and the problems associated with church. We explore other things – books we are reading, plans we had for traveling, dreams we had for our kids, pain we're experiencing in various relationships.

Aging is inescapable. But we can – to the extent that it depends on us – age well. We can intentionally cultivate disciplines, rhythms, a rule of life which will sustain us by grace as we age.
