

EIGHTH-GRADE PRINCIPLES FOR ANY STAGE OF LIFE

By Jim Mathis

Recently I had the opportunity to speak on "career day" to a group of eighth graders at a middle school in our area. This might have been the most important thing I did that month, or perhaps all year. Being a professional photographer, I talked to them about possible careers in photography, but also explained to them some larger, more universal issues that can help them later in life.

Here are the points I made. These principles all have strong biblical support, as noted below:

Discover your passions early. Most people know the things they love by the time they are in high school. I told the students to follow that understanding of what they most enjoy doing. That likely is what they were made to do. *"Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might"* (Ecclesiastes 9:10).

Do not let anyone steal your dreams. If you can get through many years of schooling without somebody attempting to squash your dreams, you are more fortunate than most. Many educational systems are designed to teach people to show up on time, do what they are told, and not to make mistakes; that is what society needed in the industrial age. Now the world is changing, however. We need creative people with fresh ideas, passion and desire to make the world a better place. "Not making mistakes" is not a key to success. It is only a mistake if you keep committing the same error over and over, without making any corrections. If we have learned from our mistakes, they were worth making. *"Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him"* (James 1:12).

Strive for excellence. Average is no longer good enough. Concentrate on what you love and strive to be the best at that. The happiest, most successful people are not well-balanced. The key to success is to be the best at something. I reminded the young people about Olympic champion Tony Hawk, the world's greatest skateboarder. There are many things he is not good at, things he has no interest in doing. But for years he has been the most skilled, most daring skateboard performer anywhere in the world. We should strive to do the same in our own areas of passion and expertise. *"And whatever you do in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus"* (Colossians 3:17).

Be a lifelong learner. If today I knew only what I learned in school, including college, I would be a stupid, worthless person. The world always changes, and to be successful we must keep up with this change, adapting and learning as we go. If you have not learned something new today, you will be left behind. Lifelong learning is indispensable today. And one of the keys to this learning is simply to read – and read some more. *"Every prudent man acts out of knowledge, but a fool exposes his folly"* (Proverbs 13:16).

Finally, be a person of integrity. If you lie or cheat, you will never become anything more than a liar and a cheater. People want to do business only with people they trust. They do not want to worry about whether you are being honest or straight-forward with them. And the sad reality is once you lose their trust, in most cases you can never get it back. A reputation for integrity takes a lifetime to build, but a single lapse can destroy it permanently. *"The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity"* (Proverbs 11:3).

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Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. Which of the principles presented by Mr. Mathis seems most meaningful for you?
2. Have you ever had an experience where it seemed someone was attempting to “steal your dreams”? Explain your answer.
3. What, in your opinion, does it mean to strive for excellence? Do you agree with the statement that the happiest, most successful people are *not* well-balanced? Why or why not?
4. Do you consider yourself a lifelong learner? Discuss ways you have attempted to continue learning professionally or personally – or things you or others could start doing to establish a consistent habit of learning.

If you would like to look at or discuss other portions of the Bible that relate to this topic, consider the following brief sampling of passages:

Proverbs 10:9, 13:6, 24:5-6, 25:12, 28:2, 29:18; Colossians 3:23-25