

A SIMPLE GUIDE TO SIMPLIFYING

By Jim Mathis

Have you noticed that with the ever-increasing complexities of everyday life and work, we are somehow managing to make things more complicated than they need to be? One evening I was at Homer's, a coffee shop I once managed, performing with my band Sky Blue. As usual I used a Fender guitar amplifier that has been in my family for 50 years. I have an older amplifier I often use regularly as well. We are constantly told "newer is better," but using decades-old musical equipment is not unusual. Major touring acts often use 50 or 60-year-old instruments and accessories.

The reason for this is simple: Just because something is the latest in a long line of products, this does not necessarily mean it is better than those that came before it. A drawer in my photography studio holds a number of cell phones or smart phones, none of which is working and all are less than 10 years old. The point is that often, simplicity is superior to complexity.

A guitar amplifier is a fairly straightforward device designed to do one thing well – amplify sounds. A good one can last for generations, performing its function very well. A smart phone, by comparison, has been designed to do hundreds or even thousands of different things, none of them very well. As a result, it will last only until the next model comes out and then become obsolete.

This serves a good metaphor for life. We can choose to do one or two things very well and have an impact that will last for generations. Accomplished musicians rarely draw attention for developing innovative computer programs or selling stock portfolios. They know what they do well and do it.

The alternative is going in many different directions, trying to be all things to all people, and in the process accomplishing little and having little influence on people around us or on society in general. As business and professional people we should strive to identify our strengths, talents and gifts, and aim to excel in those areas. There is little demand for the so-called "jack of all trades, master of none."

A well-known British devotional writer, Oswald Chambers, frequently and wisely stated, "Good is the enemy of the best." In other words, there are countless good things we can become involved in, many things that can occupy our time and energy. But what are the *best* things for us to do, those that we are uniquely equipped – and called – to perform? One of the keys to a successful and significant career is to discern what the best things are and devote oneself to pursuing them, serving others in the process.

A passage from the Bible admonishes, *“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving”* (Colossians 3:23-24). If we believe that, does it not make sense to determine what things we are the best at doing, and then “work at it with all our heart”?

As ambitious people, we have a tendency to add things to our to-do lists when perhaps we should try eliminating things. Am I doing anything that really is a waste of time? Or have I spent a lot of time doing something so meaningless I do not even remember it? Simplify your life and work. Complexity is not always good – in fact, it might be the enemy of the best.

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Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. Do you agree that simplicity is often better than complexity? Why or why not? Give some examples.
2. How do you respond to the complexities of everyday life and work – do they challenge and inspire you, or do they sometimes frustrate you, even wear you down?
3. Writer Oswald Chambers is quoted as saying, “Good is the enemy of the best.” What does that mean to you? Have you sometimes struggled in distinguishing “good” things from the “best” things? Explain your answer.
4. From your perspective, what are the advantages of being a specialist – someone that concentrates on excelling at only one or two things? What, if any, are the advantages of seeking to offer a more diverse range of skills, services or products?

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 15:22, 21:5, 22:29, 24:27; Ecclesiastes 9:10; Ephesians 2:10; Colossians 3:17