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By Jim Mathis

DECIDE WHAT IS IMPORTANT, ELIMINATE THE REST

Having pursued professional photography for most of my adult life, there are many things I have enjoyed about it. Among them are the principles I have encountered that can be easily applied to other areas of everyday life. For instance, the value of clearly recognizing what is important.

As a young person I learned a lot about photography simply by looking at pictures in magazines. I was particularly influenced by *Vogue* and other fashion magazines that all offered strong visual content. As I studied their photos, I discovered that in creating an image with high visual and emotional impact, the most important thing is to eliminate everything from the photo that is not important.

On a recent weekend while sitting in my display booth at a regional art festival, since there was not much activity at that moment I started examining my own photos, seeking to discern what I liked the most about them. I concluded I had learned the lessons well from the fashion magazines – there was not a single thing in any of the pictures I was displaying that was not essential to the photograph. One of the secrets to good photography is getting close enough to eliminate all non-essentials.

My friend Dan reminded me in an email that this is a good metaphor for life. In the quest for achieving a successful life, one of the keys is determining what are the important parts and eliminating everything else. At least, we should strive to push elements of lesser importance into the background.

Photographers have an advantage in being able to blur or darken the background so it does not compete with the subject matter. In everyday life, however, this often takes a lot of effort. And the distinction between what is truly important and things that are less important may not always be easy to discern. For this reason, it helps to make a regular practice of establishing and reviewing our priorities and values.

For instance, some companies place a premium on customer service, reasoning that one way to gain business – and retain it – is to treat customers well, better than competitors would treat

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them. At times this will require doing the right thing for the customer, even if it costs you a sale or cuts into your profit.

If your marriage and family life are of great importance, that will probably influence how you pursue your work – the kind of work you perform, the amount of time you devote to it, and what kind of risks you are willing to take to ensure the business's success.

And if, as a business or professional person, living out your faith consistently is of high importance, this is bound to have an effect on your decisions and actions in many ways. We have cited the passage before, but Colossians 3:23 clearly defines what should be most important for followers of Jesus, even in the workplace: *"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, and not for men.... It is the Lord Christ you are serving"* (Colossians 3:23-24). We go to work to earn a living, to operate our businesses according to high legal and ethical standards, and make a profit, but most of all, the Bible states, we are in the workplace to serve God and represent Him to others.

And speaking about concerns about having our daily needs met, Jesus stated, *"But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well"* (Matthew 6:33).

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Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. How difficult is it to eliminate some of the lesser important or even unimportant things from life that seem to take up a considerable amount of our time and energy? How do you determine what is and what is not really important?

2. What things can you identify in your life now that you think need to be reevaluated in light of the suggestion to eliminate everything that is not important? If you agree with that concept, what steps could you take very soon to begin that process?

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3. It is suggested that our faith and commitment to serving God should be given the greatest importance in our lives. Do you agree? How practical do you think that is for those of us who are pursuing our livelihoods in the challenging and competitive business and professional world today?

4. In terms of our everyday work, what do you think it means to “seek first God’s kingdom and His righteousness”?

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: Matthew 6:21; Ephesians 2:10; Philippians 3:12-14; 2 Timothy 3:16-17, 4:6-8

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