

11 January 2016
By Jim Mathis

IMPROVED SKILLS MAKE FOR BETTER TOOLS

I remember the day clearly in 1985 when I walked into a popular record store and found its bins of LP (long-playing vinyl) records replaced by rows of CDs (compact disks). That week I bought a new CD player. But I also bought two turntables. Having invested thousands of dollars in wonderful music on LPs being rendered obsolete, I wanted to still be able to enjoy them for many years. As it has turned out, there has not been a time in the last 30 years when I could not have bought a brand new turntable.

At the time it surprised me how many people were selling or even discarding their old LP records and turntables because of the new CDs. I never have understood that kind of thinking. I should have known, however, that many people find more interest in having the latest technology than listening to or owning music in any form.

The same type of thinking has applied to both photography and instrumental music, my other artistic passions. Practically every day somebody asks me what kind of camera I use. For me that seems to be an odd question because I have owned hundreds of cameras of all makes and sizes and have gotten both wonderful and terrible.

Often when I am playing music, fellow musicians who should know better will come up and tell me how good my guitar sounds. I thank them but feel tempted to point out it sounded very badly for the first 15 years I was trying to play it. The instrument has not gotten better with age; I have much gotten better as a musician since then.

One characteristic of modern society – including the business and professional world – is the tendency to put faith in tools rather than skill. As technology and tools improve, many people find themselves thinking the tools are everything. It is the idea that all you need is the proper tool – whether it is a computer, smart phone, multi-media equipment, or screwdriver – and the job will practically do itself.

But the simple fact is musical instruments do not play themselves (well, some do, but even those must be programmed by a human being in what to do and when). Computers do not write books, produce detailed spreadsheets or create multi-media presentations. And cameras

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do not make great pictures on their own. These all require the skills, time, and dedication to excellence of their users.

This is why the Bible puts emphasis on recognizing our talents and gifts and the importance of striving to use them to the full. For instance, **Proverbs 22:29 states, “Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings; he will not serve before obscure men.”** Obviously this was written long before people even imagined computers or many other technological advances, but nevertheless the passage does not say, “Do you see a man with a really good hammer or axe...?”

With all of its benefits, technology can lead to lack of initiative, making us dependent on its advantages rather than our own efforts. To this tendency **Proverbs 12:24 says, “Diligent hands will rule, but laziness ends in slave labor.”** High-quality tools are assets, without question. But they are no substitute for hard work, expertise and the resolve to perform work in the best possible way.

Jim Mathis is the owner of a photography studio in Overland Park, Kansas, specializing in executive, commercial and theatrical portraits, and operates a school of photography. He formerly was executive director of CBMC in Kansas City, Kansas and Kansas City, Missouri.

Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. Are you a person who becomes easily enamored by the latest technological developments? What are your favorite high-tech tools or gadgets?
2. How inclined are you to take an “in with the new, out with the old” attitude toward innovations, whether it is a smart phone, computer, software, household device, or even a newly developed feature for your car? Have you ever looked back and thought, “What was wrong with what I had before?”
3. Can you think of any tools you currently use that seem better or more effective not because they have improved, but because you have become more adept at using them? Give an example if you can.
4. What is the importance of skill in the workplace today, compared to the capabilities of new technology? What do you think is your responsibility for developing and refining your own abilities rather than being dependent solely upon high-tech tools to do the work for you?

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NOTE: 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 10:4, 12:11, 13:4, 14:23, 18:9, 21:5, 26:15, 27:18; Ecclesiastes 1:9-10

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