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By Jim Mathis

## Developing 'Margin' By Pruning Unfruitful Pursuits

For several years I was a member of two local chambers of commerce. The people I met and the activities we did were all very encouraging and helpful for me personally and for my business. A few years ago I made the difficult decision to drop my memberships in order to have more time for other interests.

For about 35 years I had been involved with a wonderful event called the Overland Park Mayor's Prayer Breakfast. This year I decided to step down and let others continue this great tradition as well.

I have taken steps in other areas of my life to reduce my activities using this general principle to guide my decisions: "You cannot do everything. In fact, you can only do a few things if you want to do them well."

A good metaphor for this approach to everyday living is the pruning that is necessary for some plants to flourish. Examples are grapevines and rose bushes. Sometimes we cut off old dead branches, and other times we need to clip off new growth so the entire vine will become more fruitful.

Applying that principle to human pursuits, we could call that creating "margin." I think of margin as having room to grow. Engineers might call it excess capacity. If we are always running at our maximum, full-speed ahead, sooner or later we are either going to crash, wearing ourselves down to the point of exhaustion and total ineffectiveness, or we are going to be doing a very poor job at everything.

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Speaking to His disciples, Jesus made reference to this when He declared, *“I am the vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful” (John 15:1-2)*. Jesus was talking specifically about spiritual growth, but the principle applies to every area of life, whether we are in the workplace, in our homes with our families, or engaged in activities in our neighborhoods and communities.

No one can be the best at everything. To excel at some things requires being willing to let go of, or at least reduce, our involvement in other things. And sometimes we discover that pursuits we once enjoyed and found useful have served their purpose and it is time to move on to other things. As *Ecclesiastes 3:1-8* tells us, *“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven...a time to plant and a time to uproot...a time to tear down and a time to build...a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them...a time to tear and a time to mend.”*

For those of us who are followers of Jesus Christ, there is another key to being fruitful. He said, *“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5)*. Even if we are engaged in doing good things, unless we are relying on God’s wisdom, strength and direction, we will never produce the results we expect.

As I have been doing this “pruning” in my own life, I have determined that for the near future I want to pursue the “best” things that God has for me. For now, this means I am going to spend more time writing, which requires having the margin in my life to research, asking questions, and of course, thinking. I am in the middle of one book and I am getting together with my co-writing partner to work on another project. I trust these will prove to be endeavors that “bear much fruit.” Are you pursuing the things you believe are most fruitful for you?

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## Reflection/Discussion Question

1. How do you think can a person determine whether he or she is engaged in doing the right things – or taking on too many things at one time?
2. As Mr. Mathis defines it, how much “margin” do you have in your life – or your work? Do you find yourself so heavily involved and committed to many things that you often find yourself worn out and unfulfilled? If so, what steps might you take to create more margin in your life?
3. Have you ever observed – or actually taken part in – pruning of a plant? What was the purpose of that, from what you could see? And what were the results?
4. What do you think Jesus had in mind specifically when He told His followers about the need for each of them to be “pruned”? What does that look like in everyday life? Do you think you are presently being pruned – or have undergone some pruning in the past? Explain your answer.

## NOTE:

If you have a Bible and would like to read more about this subject, consider the following passages:

*Ecclesiastes 9:10; John 5:5-16; Galatians 6:9-10; Ephesians 5:15-18; Colossians 4:5*

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