Ray studied the math problems diligently. He enjoyed math; in fact, math was his favorite of all subjects. He did well in it, too. But then, he supposed that was the expected thing when one had a favorite subject. He meant to keep that straight A+ on his report card. With math, it was an easy thing to do; keep the A+, that is.

He closed the math book then opened his English-Lit book to the assignment, groaning inwardly as he did so. Why did a fellow have to take that? he wondered, for the umpteenth time. English-Lit seemed more appropriate for girls, he felt. But boys . . . Ugh! If he had a problem with
anything, it was in English-Lit. He made a sensible enough grade; a good grade, to be sure, but he surely worked for what he made. He felt he really and truly earned that A that stood rigidly-proud on his report card.

"Hey, Ray, how about coming over to the house tonight?" Tony Radkey whispered from across the aisle.

Ray glanced quickly at Tony. He was about to answer when he saw Mr. Martin's stern gaze focused on both Tony and himself. Instantly, he glued his eyes to the English-Lit assignment.

"I hope each of you is prepared and ready for the upcoming exams," Mr. Martin remarked casual-like but with a hint of a threat to the next whisperer. "I expect you to review all that we have covered in this last six-week period."

Silence reigned in the room; each head was bent over an opened book. Mr. Martin's tests were something else. Some of the students felt he tried to see just how hard and difficult he could actually make his tests; others declared he tried to trip one up by using what they phrased as a "round-about approach," instead of a direct and pointed question. He was a strict disciplinarian, demanding -- and getting -- order in his class. Ray held the man in awe and respect, not finding it difficult to abide by and adhere to his rules since he was brought up in a Christian home where the rules were much the same as those held and laid down by the teacher.

"I want the science projects finished and completed and on my desk day after tomorrow," Mr. Martin announced. "The papers must be on my desk first thing in the morning of that day. I think you will have to admit that I have been fair in giving you ample time to get these assignments done. And if you were diligent about the order and worked consistently on the projects given, you will be ready to turn them in."

Ray felt relieved to know that his papers were, even now, ready to be turned in. But again, he liked science, so it was easy for him to work on that subject, or those subjects which he liked and get each done in record time or, at the least, on time. But English-Lit . . .

He remembered something his mother had told him once, and he had honestly tried -- hard, too -- to apply it. But where English and/or English-Lit
entered the picture it wasn't an easy thing to do. His mother had reminded him, kindly, of the tremendous importance of English, and of knowing and understanding and applying it in life; not merely for the sake of getting a good grade but because of its constant and perpetual value to his proper usage of it all through life.

"You love math," she had said to him that day. "And you excel in math. And science too. And numerous other subjects. In a way, you remind me of what the scripture has to say about those members, or parts, of our body to which we pay little or no attention whatever but without which our body just could not function properly and adequately. I never realized just how valuable and important my thumb was to me -- and to my right hand -- until I fractured my wrist, Ray, and, for months, couldn't bend or use that thumb, due to arthritis having set into the thumb -- from the wrist fracture.

"I couldn't open jar lids, couldn't hold a pen to write, had great difficulty in getting my hair combed and put up in the morning, and had excruciating pain trying to get myself dressed properly, and make the beds. I never gave that thumb any thought; about its importance and value, I mean, until I couldn't use it. Then, and only then, its real significance and importance and value came into sharp and proper focus: I experienced first hand why God had given my thumbs to me. It's a rather crude analogy and illustration, perhaps; but I hope you will get the full significance of what I'm trying to say and tell you. You need English and English Lit. . . ."

"I understand, Mother," Ray remembered having answered. "You're wanting me to know that, sometime and somewhere down the road of life I'll be needing English."

"Not just sometime, Ray; all the time. English is our mother tongue. You should know how to write compositions properly, accurately and intelligently, and how to make full use of its governing principles and 'laws.' Rules, really."

Ray grimaced. It was hard to like something one didn't like, he thought, wondering how he could bring about something positive out of the negative. Now if he were like Alison. . . . But, again, he reminded himself, Alison was female; he was male. There was a vast difference in likes and dislikes. Yes, a vast difference.
Tony met Ray at his locker just as he was shrugging into the sleeves of his wind-breaker jacket before leaving the school building.

"How about it, Ray?" Tony asked. "Can you come over tonight?"

Ray gave Tony a wan half-smile. "You heard the ultimatum, Tony. My science papers are all ready to be turned in, and I believe I pretty much have a 'handle' on everything else -- except English-Lit. I really work for the grades I make in that subject. The other subjects come easy, comparatively speaking. No, I'm afraid I'll not be able to come over. I must study. And I told you how my folks feel about visiting on a school night."

"A lot of that you do!" Tony retorted quickly. "It's almost like you're still a little kid. Don't they realize you're a young adult?"

"Hey, I don't allow criticism of my parents, Tony. I have the best parents God ever gave a fellow. They care about me; care what happens to me. They're real Christians and they love me. They want only what's best for me."

Tony guffawed loudly. 'Well, I guess if you don't mind being tied to parental apron strings I shouldn't meddle," he said with a sneer as he walked away.

All the way home, Ray tried to figure out why it was suddenly so important to Tony that he should come over to his house. Tony knew he didn't run around visiting all that often, and much; and especially not on school or church nights. So why the sudden and persistent invitation? he wondered, as he shuffled his feet through the dry leaves.

Ray felt sorry for Tony. He had tried repeatedly to get him to go to church with his family and him, and each time Tony had sort of laughed at him and turned him down flat. Tony was likable; and affable, even; but when anything spiritual entered the scene or the conversation he became a different and less than affable person. He then became downright cutting and mean.

Ray was surprised then, when the door chimes rang sometime after supper, that it was Tony who stood outside on the porch.
"I was kinda' nasty to you, Ray," he half apologized as Ray invited him inside. "And since you wouldn't come over to my house I decided to come over to yours. You see, I think I may be able to help you with that upcoming and bothersome, to you, EnglishLit test."

"How's that, Tony?" Ray asked, as he led Tony down the hallway to where he had been studying in his bedroom. "The best way to be prepared for any test is to study for it, then store the information learned inside one's brain. That's what I've been trying to do."

"Close the door," Tony said. "I have something to show you. But first, you must promise not to squeal on me."

"Hey, what is this?" Ray asked quickly. "I won't promise anything until I know what I'm promising not to tell is something I can promise without violating my conscience and/or my God-given convictions. So what's up, Tony? And please," Ray said, as Tony shut the door, "leave that open. I don't believe in hiding or concealing anything from my wonderful parents except Christmas gifts, birthday presents and Father's Day-Mother's Day surprises."

Tony's face blanched. "You're a fool, Ray!" He all but spat the words out. "I came here to help you and you . . . you . . .

"I what, Tony? I appreciate your kindness; but I have a feeling this -- whatever it is -- is not on the up and up."

Tony clenched his hands into tight fists. "Look, Ray, I need help in my math. I only wanted you to return a favor that I planned on doing for you. Here," he said, pulling papers from inside his jacket. "Here are the questions and answers to the upcoming English-Lit test. They're here, all of them. And stop looking at me like I'm some criminal from the pen."

Ray was incredulous. He was aghast. Tears stung his eyes. "I could never use that," he said kindly but unbelievingly, as he touched the forbidden papers.

"But why not, Ray? You'd make an A+. You would. And all I ask in return is for you to slant your math papers at a proper angle so I can copy your answers on the day of the test."
Again, Ray was incredulous. "Oh, Tony, I can't. That's cheating. And cheating's a sin. I wouldn't even so much as think of using those English-Lit question and answer papers. Never. That would grieve God the sweet Holy Spirit out of my heart and life. No, Tony, I'm not interested in them. I'd rather a thousand times over to make an F than to cheat. And I can't let you see my math answers either. Each way would be cheating. I'll help you, though, with the problems that are bothering you. Here, let's get to math. I'll study English-Lit later, God willing."

"Forget it! Forget it!" Tony cried angrily. "Some friend you are!" he added fiercely as he rushed away.

"What's wrong with him?" Ray's father asked as Tony hurried past him down the hallway.

"He's upset because I won't comply with his request, Dad."

"Request; like what?"

"To cheat on some upcoming exams, and tests."

"God bless you, Son. God bless you. I'm proud of you."

Ray sat down at his desk again, his mind a whirl of thoughts. From whom, and how, did Tony get the English-Lit exam papers with the questions and answers on them? And why hadn't he -- Tony -- gotten the math question and answer exam sheets if the English-Lit test paper was so easily available and attainable?

Ray felt how utterly wicked and sinful it was for Tony to have stooped so low as to be willing to copy his math answers. And it grieved him to think that Tony could have thought he'd be willing to accept, or look over, even, the English-Lit test papers with the questions and answers. Then a new and totally different thought projected itself to him: Could Tony have been testing him, to see just how genuine and real his Christianity was?

Whichever -- or whatever -- Ray thought, he was thankful that his heart was fixed and stayed upon Jesus. He had no desire to sin or do wrong; none whatever.
With renewed vigor and determination, he began studying for the English-Lit test, knowing that the Lord would help him and that the grade he made would be an honest and well-earned grade. Besides, he would have a conscience that was crystal clear and a heart that could look upward and in full assurance of heart and soul, reverently and lovingly address God as, "My Father."