

Proverbs
an expositional Bible study
by Randall Radic, ThD
Chapter 4

Proverbs Chapter 4

Chapter 4, verses 1-9, of the Book of Proverbs are autobiographical. For here Solomon alludes to the experience of his own life, and thus is stating an inescapable conclusion: that 'wisdom' is an inheritance. The value of parental instruction is without equal as is demonstrated in the unhappy life of Solomon's half-brother, Adonijah, whose father never confronted him with the question, "Why have you done so?" And a detailed study of David's own life would be necessary to discover why David could behave so differently toward two sons. And although the responsibility of the parents is indirectly discussed, the subject of chapter 4 is the accountability of the children to obtain 'wisdom' by one means or another.

Proverbs 4:1-4 "Listen, my sons, to a father's instruction; pay attention and gain understanding. I give you sound learning, so do not forsake my teaching. When I was a boy in my father's house, still tender, and an only child of my mother, he taught me and said, 'Lay hold of my words with all your heart; keep my commands and you will live.'"

The word for "learning" is the Hebrew term *leqach*, which connotes something of value which is received from another, accepted, and the utilized as one's own; and this is 'wisdom.' And the word for "teaching" is *torah*, which has the primary meaning of "instruction," and the secondary meaning of "law." Thus, Solomon received instruction which he accepted and made his own. And he received the instruction of 'wisdom' while he was "tender," or inexperienced, and the only child of his mother, Bathsheba. Indeed, the word "only" is the Hebrew adjective *yachid*, which may be translated either "only," or "darling." [And note the similarity between *yachid* and *David*, which is *dyvD* in the Hebrew, from the passive participle, "to love." Perhaps, then, the name David was in fact a nickname; for Christ was the "Son of David," and was repeatedly denominated "my beloved son" by God the Father during the Incarnation.

And fascinatingly, David, the risen Christ, and the term *yachid* all reside together in one verse: Zechariah 12:10, which says, "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son."]

Proverbs 4:4b-9 "Keep my commands and you will live. Get wisdom, get understanding; do not forget my words or swerve from them. Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her and she will watch over you. Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding. Esteem her, and she will exalt you; embrace her, and she will honor you. She will set a garland of grace on your head and present you with a crown of splendor."

In verses 4b-9, Solomon cites the six items that his father taught him:

1. To retain wisdom and use it if he would find life -- a whole life in time, and eternal life in the future.
2. Get 'wisdom' at all costs; spare nothing to gain wisdom.
3. Do not forget, turn away from, or abandon 'wisdom;' and in return, 'wisdom' will watch over him.
4. If he cherished 'wisdom,' that is *loved* her, she would do more than just watch over him, she would protect him from evil.
5. Again, and with great emphasis in the Hebrew word order, "get wisdom;" the beginning of everything is wisdom. And with the 'getting' comes 'discernment,' or the ability to tell evil from good.
6. Exalt 'wisdom' and promotion will happen to you; embrace her, that is, learn her and practice her, and honor will happen to you. She will be "a graceful garland, a crown of beauty" on your head, i.e., everyone will notice.

Proverbs 4:10-19 "Listen, my son, accept what I say, and the years of your life will be many. I guide you in the way of wisdom and lead you along straight paths. When you walk, your steps will not be hampered; when you run, you will not stumble. Hold on to instruction, do not let it go; guard it well, for it is your life. Do not set foot on the path of the wicked or walk in the way of evil men. Avoid it, do not travel on it; turn from it and go on your way. For they cannot sleep till they do evil; they are robbed of slumber till they make someone fall. They eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence. The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day. But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know what makes them stumble."

In this section, 'wisdom' is presented as a way of life in contrast to the way of evil. John 6:63 reads, "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life." The words of Christ, then, or the 'wisdom' of God is life; therefore, any other manner of living or perceiving or thinking is death, or evil. And in this section, the way of evil is described as "darkness, the wine of violence," and evil men cannot see what causes them "to stumble."

What is this "darkness" that so causes mankind to stumble? Why do men revel in violence and wickedness? Answer: because they can't see. But what does that mean?

Christ died, and thus we were forgiven. Because of this grace which God has provided, the Law cannot condemn us and execute us. Now, does that mean that God suspended the Law? Can we jump off the hundredth floor of a skyscraper and say, "It doesn't mater anymore. Jesus died, so there's no more law. Besides, God is a God of unconditional love. He wouldn't let us smash ourselves to bits on the pavement, would He?"

No! To the contrary! Not only is the law of gravity still in effect, but so are the Ten Commandments -- even though Jesus died and was resurrected. It is still a sin to commit adultery, even though Jesus died for adulterers. It is still sin to steal, even though He was resurrected for thieves.

Some people believe that becoming a Christian means they can now do anything they please.

Because they said the magic words and prayed to God, they now can become much better sinners and God will keep on forgiving them. That is nonsense! It reduces the Gospel to a fantasy, and it makes believers spiritual James Bonds with a "license to sin" -- and the assured protection from all consequences.

God's unconditional love does not mean we are not responsible for our actions and we can now sin with no ramifications. In Romans 6:1, Paul wrote about people who accused him of saying that any sin committed only showed the grace of God all the more. He posed the question: "Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase?" And his response is vehement: "May it never be!" The idea that the Gospel and the grace of God provide diplomatic immunity for the consequences of sin is blasphemous.

In Titus 2:11, Paul again visited the subject of God's grace: "The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men." Grace is unconditional love in action in the lives of mankind. What does grace do? It "...teaches us to say No to ungodliness and worldly passions." In other words, when we say we are not under the Law, that doesn't mean that, in our case, there are now no laws that apply -- any more than we can stand on the edge of a cliff and say we are no longer under the law of gravity. If I jump off the cliff, I will get hurt. Thus, the death of Jesus and His resurrection did not mean God abolished the law. Christ came to fulfill the law Himself and then give us the means to be able to do the same.

God created mankind with a dignity and an honor that places us far above the closest monkeys. Our dignity is that we are responsible to God in our actions. We are responsible to respond to the Cross and to confess Jesus as Lord. We are responsible to walk with God, putting away sin. We still have the dignity of human beings, but we are responsible to be true to the absolute.

The humanists have take away man's dignity by saying he is not responsible for his actions. A government destroys the dignity of mankind by saying he does not have to work. He can just sit and be paid for being alive. But we are human beings and that means we make choices. And when we choose to walk away from God's will and His presence in our lives, there are

consequences. If God rules in love, He must judge those who perpetually oppose His love.

In that sense, God will not take away man's free will to save him from the ramifications of his sin. Unconditional love is not saying that what we do does not matter. The path we choose will have consequences, but God will forever unconditionally love us in spite of those choices. Moreover, He will pursue us to the very end with His unconditional love. Nevertheless, mankind must respond to the love of God, or he is spitting in the face of his only hope of salvation and placing himself under the wrath of God. To not accept Christ as Savior and Lord is to reject God's outstretched hand of unconditional love and forgiveness.

If we desire to go to hell, we must fight our way through the love of God -- choosing to reject the Cross and denying the power of the resurrection to attain it. The reality of hell, however we define or describe it, is the tragic monument to the reality of man's free will. It is, in fact, the fullest celebration of his free will and dignity. And ironically, the God mankind rejects is the same One who gave mankind the dignity of free will.

Does God stop loving mankind when he sins? If He did, that would mean He loved us in the first place because we were *not* sinning. And if God does not stop loving us when we sin, then why do we feel like He has deserted us when we do? Because we have something new on the inside of us, an absolute standard that opposes sin. When we do sin, we feel an immediate conviction of being wrong, of being guilty.

Many individuals who have made a mistake and sinned ask if it is possible to delete the consequences of their wrong actions. No, and that is part of our dignity. Not even God can change consequences, but He can redeem them and cause them to become something we could never have dreamed of. God can create beauty from the ashes of our lives. The mercy of God works in consequences, if we repent and turn to His unconditional love and forgiveness.

Certain scholars maintain that in the Old Testament, under the Old Covenant, individuals were unable to keep the Law; thus, to God it was a total failure. The Law did not work, so we can throw it out and bring in something else. However, this is incorrect. God did not abrogate the Law by His

grace. Indeed, He relocated the Law, by grace, into believer's hearts. Jer. 31:33 declares the New Covenant that would be made in Christ: "I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it." And Ezek. 36:27 echoes Jeremiah: "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes." "I shall give them one heart, and shall put a new spirit within them...that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances, and do them." [Ezek. 11:19]

Thus the Ten Commandments are no longer an abstract absolute that mankind cannot keep. They are now within believers, they are there by the Holy Spirit living in us. The Ten Commandments, then, are something that we now fulfill through the Spirit, and that we surpass by means of the same Spirit.

The question, though, was why do men pursue evil? Simply put, because they are pursuing *self for self*, which is a poor attempt to fill "that hideous void"¹¹³ that resides in all of mankind. These men have failed to recognize, or believe, that God's love has come. There is no more darkness. Thus whether or not we have broken the Ten Commandments is no longer the issue. The issue is greater, because Jesus paid the penalty for sin. John 16:8,9 states that the Spirit "will convict the world concerning sin...because," said Jesus, "they do not believe in Me." To be pardoned from sin, then, mankind must receive Christ as Savior and Lord. So the issue now is this: will mankind accept Christ? Will mankind accept salvation through Christ? If not, all is lost.

The Bible states that mankind has revolted against God, against the Ten Commandments, and against the God/Man Jesus Christ. Mankind refuses to accept salvation. This explains John 3:19: "This is the condemnation, that light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil." When faced with light, mankind tends to flee into the darkness like a bug in the basement.

Mankind was created to need God; there is a 'space' in mankind that can only be filled by God; this 'space,' or *koilia* in the Greek, is an insatiable craving for love that can only be satiated by the *agape-love* of God. When mankind turns away

¹¹³ Paraphrase of C.S. Lewis' *That Hideous Strength*.

from the Light, and searches for a method to fill the 'space' with love, he cannot; and there remains an "hideous void" in their lives. For mankind, all of mankind, feels the overwhelming desire, the craving, the ache for, love and the filling of the 'space.' So mankind attempts to make full the void with his own ideas of meaning and significance, and they are all 'evil,' because they are not through God; they are darkness.

So mankind searches for a surrogate love and a surrogate meaning to life and, of course, none exists. But still 'evil' men try. They try to substitute money for God -- stuff the 'space' with money. And money is fun, let's face it; but inevitably, greed implodes upon itself for it must have more, more, more; and finally, there is no more. Or mankind tries drugs or alcohol -- they seek to numb themselves to the pain of that empty 'space' that screams for love. And society, generally speaking, can provide no answer for they, too, are searching, searching.

What is homosexuality? Nothing more than a scream for love that has turned to perversion in its search to make full the 'space.' The result: violence, disease, implosion.

And a multitude of self-help books are written and published everyday; and a like number of books predicting coming judgment are written, too. But to predict judgment as "coming" is ridiculous. Judgment is now! And that is why TV news is the way it is: death, murder, rape, flood, destruction, war, famine, etc. The United States of America is a free nation, the freest on earth. Why, then, are not American dancing in the streets? Why all the despair, the disgust with life, the boredom, the confusion, the anxiety, the dread of tomorrow and what it may hold? We are like the dog that finally caught the school bus -- dead. The world is sour and stale for most people. Is there hope? Or will all mankind end up 'evil' and unhappy, "gotta' be bad just to have fun."

The answer, of course, is Christ, and His Church. But the Church, according to statistics, is shrinking, mainline denominations are failing, despite the advent of mega-churches. Why? Is the Church impotent? Perhaps the Church has erred in teaching that coming to Christ has only to do with post-death or the eternal state called Heaven. The Church tends to teach that to come to Christ is to get ready to die -- prepare for the rapture.

Indeed, most evangelistic appeals in today's world follow this pattern: "If you died today, where do you think you would go? Heaven or hell?"

And as a result, believers find themselves waiting until they die so they can be with Christ. Thus, we have a lot of 'loitering Christians.' Everyone is just hanging around waiting to die. The focus is 'after death.' And fascinatingly, there is not one single instance in the New Testament of any appeal to anyone to believe in Christ in order to get ready to die. Unbelieving mankind is already dead; *to come to Christ is to be ready to live!* To live in time, or to live in eternity, but *LIVE!* Not die, or prepare to die! If I have the idea that believing in Christ has to do with my abode after I die, then what has that to do with living in the real world with all my problems, and my need for love? Nothing.

Christianity is not just praying a prayer to Jesus so I can go to heaven. Christianity is death to the world and the flesh. Christianity is a totally different, totally radical way of perceiving life and living life. Christianity is changing one's mind about *self* and *self's* way of looking at life. God pardons us, forgives us, and the Holy Spirit is sent by Christ to live in us and produce a new style of life. As a result, the Christian has a new discernment of himself and of other people. The Christian treats people in a unique manner. And the Christian's expectancies concerning the future (tomorrow) are unique; for the Christian has hope instead of despair. Indeed, every facet of the Christian's life is uncommon compared to the rest of mankind; marriage, home, work, citizenship, etc., all have changed because the Christian perceives the Truth as it is in Jesus. Christ Himself becomes the very energy of the Christian's life and thoughts.

How then does the Church respond to the 'evil' and wickedness, the darkness of a humanistic, *self*-centered world? How do Christians live as lights that shine forth in the darkness?

The Church and Christians must understand that to be a Christian involves behavior -- a behavior induced by Christ living in us -- His strength and love and our *choosing* to live by them. Thus, Christians must pray without ceasing. James 4:2 states, "You do not have because you do not ask." The Church must learn how to ask of God. The key word to prayer is asking. You cannot pray without asking. Indeed, there are many Christians

who have never really asked for anything in the name of Christ. Why? Because they are afraid to ask. Unfaith causes fear, i.e., they do not know and believe that God loves them. Unfaith is afraid to put God on the spot by asking, so it retreats into pious language. Unfaith, just as in any relationship, is insecure, scared of a “no” answer; unfaith believes that God reacts like human beings; unfaith does not know that God’s love is foreign to anything human logic understands.

The idea of asking and expecting to receive from God is foreign to many people. But that type of thinking is “religion,” which is man by man’s works attempting to gain the acceptance of God. But we are Christians and are no longer involved in religion. We are in Christ, thus it is now okay to ask. We are now ‘royal family members’ to a God who has the power and the resources to answer. Our God *loves us and wants to give to us. Indeed, He declares that if you will only ask, He will give.*

Prayer is the focus of the supernatural nature of Christianity. Prayer is where we prove, and we live in the actual fact, that our *Abba, our Daddy*, is alive, He loves us, and Christ really did walk this planet earth. *Christ did die, rise, is alive, and has sent the Holy Spirit.*

This is fact.

But at this point, many Christians back off; they don’t want to be disappointed. Thus, they do not ask anything of God, and thus they don’t have to put God to the test. “In order to believe we must renew our minds with God’s word.”¹¹⁴ We must bring our lives and our minds into line with what we have now discovered in Christ. As Christians, *Christ-ians*, we cannot allow ourselves to be paralyzed by religion or religious thoughts, thoughts that forbid us to ask plainly and simply of our Father. “Prayer is the going forth of our spirit.”¹¹⁵ Here, then, is the highest sphere or stratum of a creature. We are allowed to speak to the Creator. But the one who comes to God must believe that God is there, that God communicates, and that mankind can communicate with God. In prayer, then, mankind converses with God.

¹¹⁴ Prater, Sheryl. *Prayer Seminar*; March 1, 1998; from handwritten notes.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

And it is no small task to ask something of God. For prayer is not a whim. It is not just a wish. It is your will put into your words. It is asking for what you want, and it is focused. When God tells us to ask for whatever we wish, He is attempting to get us to open our hearts to Him. For God is always attempting to bring us to who we are: royal family members. *It is God’s will for us to ask of Him, for prayer is the way we discover what faith really is.*

Scripture states that we are to become as little children in our faith. In other words, we are to approach God in simplicity; children have not read all the theology books, children have not been exposed to religion and its doubts, it attempts to earn blessing from God; children hear the Word, they do it! And it works! This is believing when we don’t understand how it works. It just *is*, just like God’s love just *is*. Adults talk about humility and surrendering to God, but it actually happens when they ask, because asking is acknowledging our helplessness. Thus in prayer one surrenders to the Father, and in asking we experience submission. So when we ask, we surrender. At this point, then, God gives us the wisdom, the ability, and if necessary, works the miracles: by us, through us, and for us. And in the asking is the faith; for prayer is commitment; prayer is abandonment. I am not trying it out to see if it works. The faith that people admire so when they see it truly happens in the area of asking, because up until that time, it is theory, books, and sermons. When I ask, it is reality.

Then ask! Begin to think of life as worth living, and of God as your *Abba, your Daddy!* Therefore, I am never alone! As needs arise, I ask and I receive. And I must learn to “join my will to the will of God. There is no greater power on the face of this earth than your will submitted and joined to the will of God. And out of that will, when you ask of Father and you receive, you will shape and change your world.”¹¹⁶

And the Christian must pray for the Church. For in the last century, mankind has reinvented Christianity: the real response to the Gospel is: “Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*; paraphrase of Sheryl Prater’s words.

Spirit." [Acts 2:38] The strong Church, then, knows who they are and exhibits all the life and energy of Christ. When an outsider looks in, he will see a behavior and style of life that is *foreign* to the rest of mankind. Thus, the Church not only must pray for the unsaved, but for believers also, because if believers are who they are in Christ, then the unsaved will be led to Christ. In other words, if the Christian becomes who he is in Christ, then he is the light of the world.

In today's world, the 'evil man,' the man on the street has no idea who Christ is. This man has no idea of a God who is personal, infinite, loving, and the meaning of life. Thus, often one cannot just say, "Believe in Christ and you will be saved." Why? Because nobody knows who Christ is. Sometimes people don't repent (change their minds) with just a nod, because to repent means a total reversal of a way of thinking and looking at life: repentance is a turning away from *self for self* to *self for others*.

Thus the unbeliever's despair must be addressed. The Christian must address the 'evil man' and his despair with the Gospel that God loves them, and demonstrated this love at the Cross. Do you realize that once a person has removed God from His heaven in the mind, and thus left empty the 'space' in his soul, that person has to fill it with something. So he fills it with the demonic, the 'New Age,' with neo-paganism. Teenagers are taught the philosophy of humanism in school, they are surrounded with violence, tempted by drugs, alcohol, etc. What has the Church provided in many instances? This: "Pray about it. Plead the blood." Whereas what they need is help; they need something so powerful that they will know, for a fact, that they are not of this world even though they live in it. They need to know that they have been baptized, and that they now stand clothed in Christ, one with the Body of Christ on earth. They need to know that they are in and why.

People are screaming out. They are screaming for some type of sense to a despairing world that leads to suicide. The author does not believe that people want little church programs. People want to know the answers to life! They want to know the answer to despair. They want to know how to love and be loved. This is real evangelism.

The Church must go into the world of 'evil' men and preach the Gospel. The Church must go into the 'evil' world of here and now, not just in South America. "Evil' men, that is, those in darkness are in every world, the factory, doctors, schools, secretaries, garden clubs, etc. The Christian travels with a behavior, an attitude that speaks deafeningly. Christians stand out, they are the blinding light in a world of impersonal despair.

Finally, the Church must explain to 'evil' men the concept of covenant and covenant meals. For here is the center of the Christian's relationship with God. Humanism quickly burns itself out in its own emptiness; and did you know that people are attracted toward people who are living sanely? And did you know that people are attracted toward people who are not screaming at them that they are sinners? Christians are the light of the world, not the pessimism of the world. And that light takes on the form of behavior, and it shines into the darkness of a confused, weary, and crazed world.¹¹⁷

Proverbs 4:20-27 "My son, pay attention to what I say; listen closely to my words. Do not let them out of your sight, keep them within your heart; for they are life to those who find them and health to a man's whole body. Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. Put away perversity from your mouth; keep corrupt talk far from your lips. Let your eyes look straight ahead, fix your gaze directly before you. Make level paths for your feet and take only ways that are firm. Do not swerve to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil."

Again, the author makes an appeal to his son to heed Wisdom's instructions, for she is "life and health to the whole body." And then the author reminds his son that "the heart" is "the wellspring of life," i.e., out from the mind and its thoughts flow the "issues" of life. In other words, what you think is what you are! Then, in verse 24, we have the injunction against "perversity of the mouth," and "corrupt talk." In other words, this is a

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Most of the above dissertation is based upon the works of Archbishop M. Smith and the 'Prayer Seminar' taught by Sheryl

Prater; the author makes no claim to originality in either thought or word. And these two great scholars and theologians

should receive credit for that which is rightfully theirs and theirs alone.

reference to deceit, lying, turning aside from anything that is right, true or just. And this would, upon the surface, appear to be a self-evident or axiomatic statement, i.e., "it is not good to lie or cheat or deceive." And this is true, almost simplistically so. Why, then, is this emphasized? Because lying is so *easy* and natural to mankind's flesh 'thinking.' For recall that when Satan introduced his will into the Garden of Eden, he did it not with power or miraculous revelations -- which reveals his very impotence -- but with the Lie! Thus lying is the only power that Satan really possesses with which to try to combat God's Word. Thus by means of a tawdry magician's trick, *a lie*, the Satanic rationale and all its physical and mental and spiritual projections were brought into being. And this Lie has spawned millions and billions of lies which revolve around it. Thus, in a perverted sense, the Lie is almost a monumental work if you like monuments....for one is irresistibly put in mind of the Laocoon group in mythology, with Satan contorted against the coils of his own original Lie, and the rest of mankind likewise endeavoring to disengage themselves -- if only they could!

When mankind believed the Lie, this same method of impotence became mankind's only source of strength -- to lie! For when I discover that I am not "as a god," and that I cannot control my own life or the circumstances around me, what other recourse do I have when confronted with my own impotence? Only two: believe that I have been the victim of a lie, change my mind, and accept the Truth, i.e., the Word of God, *or* utilize my only 'strength,' which 'strength' I inherited from Satan, I *Lie*.... How sad -- my only 'strength' is perversion, distortion, pathetic duplicity.

Ponderously, then, Satan's original Lie, his only power, his great I-will-make-myself-a-god-machine, ingests its bales of self-empowerment and independence; and grinding, groaning, and shuddering, it brings forth its final product: small puffs of acrid vari-colored vapor -- *The Lie with all its attendant lies*.

Thus when the author addresses his "son," and reminds him to avoid "corrupt lips," he is not speaking idly. For 'lying' is what all of mankind and Satan fall back upon when faced with their own inadequacy.

And how does one avoid such perversity? The answer is found in verses 25-27: "look straight ahead, fix your gaze directly before you," i.e., keep your eyes on Wisdom. Do not turn from her; do not neglect her for even a moment. And this will keep your "feet on firm ways," and "keep your foot from evil." And "evil" here refers to the utilization of Satan's way of thinking, which is based upon an impotent system of *lies*. For recall that 'evil,' in an abstract sense, is a system of thought that is directly antagonistic to God's system of thought: God's system is self for others, and *agape love*, and the Truth; Satan's system is self for self and the Lie.

Possibilities and Attitude

Matthew 25:14-30 relates the Parable of the Talents, wherein our Lord was speaking about the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus is the one telling the story; and the story concerns a very wealthy eastern lord who is about to take a protracted journey. So he sends for three of his slaves, three slaves that he has been watching for some time. And he gives to each slave a sum of money and instructs them to take this money and invest it; thus, in effect they are to hold the money in trust for their lord. And his motivation is that he wants them to enter into the excitement and the adventure of the business world, he wants them to enter into the passionate cerebration associated with financial transactions, calculated risks, and money-making.

He was risking, and investing in them -- they have the freedom to invest his money in anyway they choose. And by so doing, he is hoping to realize the potential of his money, for if the money is invested wisely, there is more money there than actually exists. Furthermore, he is providing these slaves with the opportunity to realize their latent, inherent, personal potential. He believed that they could be more than slaves.

One slave received one talent of money, another received two talents of money, and the third slave received five talents of money. A talent in the ancient world was a weight of precious metal. Thus, this was a weight of money. And the weight varied from culture to culture, but according to all historical records was never less than 58 pounds of metal. A talent, though, was equal to twenty years of salary. Thus the slave who received 5 talents held 100 years of wages in his hands. However,

really and truly there was much more there than 100 years worth of wages -- for the potential of that sum of money was, in fact, unlimited.

And it says that he gave the money to them "according to their abilities;" thus, he wanted to stretch them to their fullest potential, but not cause them to implode. So each slave received a different amount, but their responsibility was the same: invest the money, realize its potential and their own potential. So this parable is the story of potential, the story of possibilities. The potential of a bar of gold, the potential of a man's soul. This is the story of drawing upon hidden power that these men didn't even know they had.

What is potential? Potential is that vast, unknown bank of resource that was given to each person at the point of birth. Each of us has potential -- and it is vast; none of us knows how big ours is. But we will never know our potential or discover it until we go outside the familiar, the safe, the secure. For while we stay where it is safe and secure we will never touch that reservoir of potential. To discover our potential we must go where we haven't been.

Potential, then, is latent ability; it is silent, you can't even feel it within you. But when you are suddenly challenged, then you discover abilities that have been hibernating within you. Potential is all that power that you have within you that is in reserve -- but you don't know it is there. It is strength that you have never called upon; it is all the gifts and abilities that you and I have. It is all that you can be but presently aren't; it's all that you can do but up until now have not done; it's everything that you are capable of but never followed through. Look: everything that you have done up until this very moment is your biography. Everything that you have not yet done -- that is your potential, your possibility.

Thus, this eastern lord of the parable is taking some of his realized potential and giving it to others. And this tells us that potential is called forth by challenge. So this lord applies the pressure of challenge to these slaves -- he asks them to do something that they had never done before.

Verse 16 of Matthew 25 states that two of the men "went at once and put their money to work." Note that they did not compare with each other: "What did he give you?" In other words, the one

who had five talents did not despise the one who only had two; and the one who had two was not jealous of the one who had five. Nor did they sit down and indulge in questions: "Now why did he give you two and me five? There must be something behind this." They did neither. And what's the point? First, that there is a lot to be said for "at once," and second, that if I begin to compare my gifts and abilities with those of others, I am blinded to the vast riches that I have been given. I become so jealous of what God has given you that I can't see what he has given me.

So these two men went out into an area that they had never entered before; they spoke with people that they had never spoken to before. And they discovered that they could do it, too. They discovered that they could be just like their master -- something happened inside them -- they discovered they were not just slaves, they were businessmen.

And then the lord returns, and they stand before him and show him what they have done. And in the Greek the excitement jumps off the page at you: "LOOK!" And their reward? Verse 21: "I will put you in charge of many things." The lord rewarded them with more work -- a bigger challenge. The challenge they had is no longer a challenge, and if there is no challenge then there is no draw on hidden resources. Now they need more, otherwise they will be living on their biographies, living where it is safe and secure once again.

The lord's real interest was not in the return on his money, for he already had plenty of money. The lord's real interest was in bringing forth the potential of these slaves. His excitement was that they had worked, risked, grown and invested.

Now, what is this story about? You and I are the slaves of this story; we are the people who in and of ourselves have nothing, we have no future. But the Lord of Grace gives to us the opposite of what we deserve. And this brings up another question: Why did God create in the first place? Why did God create anything? For you see He did not have to. There was no pressure on God to create; there was no need within God that demanded that He create, nor was there anything outside of God to pressure Him to create. Was He lonely? No, for if God was lonely then He was incomplete; and if He is incomplete, then He is not God. For God is

totally complete within Himself. Then why does He create? Because God is love. He is such fantastic *Life*; His life is the source of His own unending Joy; and so Love must share. And He created the Universe, and specifically mankind, in order to share His life, to bring us into the actual participating in of Who He is -- because He couldn't keep it to Himself. So when He created us, He created us so that we would be capable of partaking of His very Person.

Look at how you are made: you have the ability to love, you have the ability to know that *you are loved*, you have the ability to know joy and peace; you can laugh! You know what it is to delight and dance and we can know the other sides: sadness, melancholy, the whole range of emotions. You are creative -- the God who made you, made it possible for you to make things, too. He gave you imagination -- the ability to see what isn't; He gave you the ability to dream of things that are not yet; He gave you the ability to fashion clay into great sculptures, the ability to create pictures on canvas, the ability to make music -- the ability to make, to make, to make! He gave you the ability to speak the thoughts that reside in your head -- you can share your inmost heart, he gave you the ability to carve beautiful things. The minds that read these pages have tremendous capabilities -- minds that can understand, record, penetrate thoughts and concepts.

This all originates in God, comes forth from God. And in all of this, He made us to be a home for Him -- so that God could actually dwell within us! The infinite can dwell within the finite! Talk about potential!! Your potential, then, is not just in your natural body and natural talents, but in this flesh you can live in union with God -- you can be filled with the Holy Spirit. So what is your true potential? *It is He in you!!!* He in me equals my potential. This is how God made us.

Scripture says, "that after the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you shall receive power." And the word for "power" is the Greek word *dunamis*, which means "latent ability or potential power." So you are not only the child of God, but you have supernatural potential. You have supernatural reserves of power within you through the Holy Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit is "love, joy and peace."

Your potential is the Holy Spirit dwelling in your unique abilities, in your mortal flesh. And don't divorce you and the Spirit -- the Spirit dwells in your body. Psalm 139:16ff. reads, "Your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be." In other words, when I was a child still in my mother's womb, You were writing my book, giving me my abilities, you fashioned me with this and that.

And God the Holy Spirit brings all these talents out. All that we have received from God is not merely for us to selfishly enjoy. No, we are to invest these possibilities back into the world -- we have a destiny -- that we might present it back in worship to God with 100% return. And to do so we must go where we have never gone before. We must take our deposit of life and invest it into the world. We must make an impact in the world where we work everyday: in the workplace, in our home, in school, in our personal arena. And this is not just *positive thinking!* Indeed, this is what our Lord was telling us in this parable: start taking what you have and investing it into life, into other people's lives, into your own life. Take the deposit of God that resides within you and begin to love as you have been loved.

God has given you His life, His very Self, because His love wanted you to enjoy it as much as He does. In that sense, then, God is a gambler, a risk taker, an adventurer. For before anything was, there was only God, and He is the ultimate potential. For if there is only God, then that means that everything that ever was, or ever should be, was in God -- potential. But before Creation there was only the silence of latent Almightyness. So He spoke, and created all that is out from nothing -- *ex nihilo!* Out from His own potential! And then God rested on the seventh day. Now does that mean that His potential was exhausted? No, it means that there was no reason at that time for further activity. But then entered death. And with death entered the viewpoint of self for self, and this viewpoint is antagonistic to God -- for God is self for others.

Now, can God's power and God's life conquer death? Can love swallow up self for self? Is life stronger than death? Yes, we say, and Yes, said the prophets. But listen closely: it had never been done before -- it was, in that sense, only potential. No one, not even God, had overcome death up

until then. Listen carefully: when God became flesh and lived among us, His name was Jesus, God from God -- you are looking at God's faith in His own Life and Love! You are seeing the first move from God's potential since Creation. At Creation God spoke! But now we are not considering speaking life from life; we are now speaking bringing life out from death. *Now* God's love is challenged by the sneering lips of self for self. Thus, when God stepped out in Jesus Christ and said, "My Life is stronger than death, My Love is stronger than self," we had nothing to prove that. And when Jesus went to the Cross and knew death from the hands of the self for self, Satan, the creator of self for self, thought he had won, and it appeared that he might have. This was real history -- this had never been done before. Oh, God knew He could do it -- for He is Omnipotent and Omniscient, but it had never been actually, really, historically, been done before. This was the real thing!

God has faith in His own life, faith in His own Love. So when Jesus entered into death, He believed in the potential of God to do what had never been done before. And when He in death, killed death, and in resurrection walked out of the other side of death, leaving behind Himself permanent tracks, which had never been done before, *God Himself had gone where He had never gone before!!!* And He would have us know this excitement -- we are to take His life and exhibit it under the most impossible of circumstances -- we are to take His life and do it! Just as He did.

And only then, when we do it, will we know what it is to enter into the Joy of our Lord Jesus Christ!¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ The above dissertation on 'Possibilities' is based upon the works, words, and thoughts of Archbishop M. Smith. The author

makes no claim to originality in any area: words, thoughts or phrasing. And the author begs the indulgence of the Archbishop

for blatantly absconding with the results of his great scholarship and gifts.

