

# Memory work philosophy and Approaches

Memory work is an important part of children's ministry. Children are often asked to learn Bible verses and Catechism questions and answers. Mark Twain in *Tom's Sawyer* satirized the Sunday School system of memorization in his day. Tom, by some judicious trading, managed to win the prize without memorizing a single thing. Some features of that system are still around today – leaving the memorizing up to the children and giving them no help on how to do it.

Further, we have two kinds of memory – long term and short term. Short term memory can hold only a few items usually for immediate use. Sometimes we can help it by breaking items into chunks like grouping the digits of phone numbers. Too often what we teach enters only a child's short term memory, soon to be replaced by other data. Long term memory requires more. The practice of learning verses at the last minute just long enough to score some points is quite common. Verses seldom stay learned for long. But prizes or punishments as motivations are usually not enough to place those in long term memory.

The Biblical basis for encouraging memorization can be found in Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 11:18-25, 31:13; Psalm 119:9-11, Colossians 3:16, and 2 Timothy 3:14-17.

- Some memory systems focus on how material enters the mind – by the eyes, the tongue, the ears, or the fingers.
- Some focus on a system of frequency of repetition and it is clear that spreading the practice over a period of days increases retention.
- Other learning systems focus on how the mind acts on the material, or organizes it. Younger children do not have as much a grasp of mental systems of organizing material as older children have developed. And understanding that material is also a key factor in memorizing. Otherwise that material becomes distorted, we've all experienced the "gibberish" that children come up with in trying to recite a verse.
- Another approach is to code the material or convert it to associations with a series of vivid mental images – often the more ridiculous the better. Certain information is converted to some form of "pegs" upon which we hang the other rest of the information.

Studies in memory have found two basic principles that apply to learning:

*Time and Understanding.*

- *Time* means repetition, practice, relearning forgotten parts. The more time we spend on a passage, the better it will be learned.
- *Understanding* means the mind has to work on the passage, processing each part into verbal meaning or mental images. Unless your mind actively thinks about what you are memorizing, it will quickly slip away.
- **Both Time and Understanding are necessary** to move something from our short term to our long term memory.

Remember **Time and practice** - the more we go over it the better. Keeping it interesting, using a variety of creative and fun ways, you want to recite the passage together over and over through the week. Working on a different verse each day does not provide enough of either of these factors. However, working and reworking the same verses using a variety of fun and interest provoking methods - reciting and thinking about the whole passage every day over a longer period of time helps write these passages on all our hearts. We work as a group as well as individually in this. The age old problems of connecting the parts of the passage together, or of inadequately learning Friday's verse can be overcome as well.

And it is important to **use as many of the Senses as possible.**

The written word is helpful for the eye, for most people vision is the strongest, most vivid of the senses. Writing things over and over is helpful, but arduous. Memory cards that you carry and pull out frequently for review are a tried and true method. There are other ways to use the eyes. One "tool" is the use of a series of "icons" or "picture words." Identify the various phrases in the passage with their individual "icons". A large flannel graph board and a large set of these "icons" will be useful for a class. When a child sees a "bee and honey", for example, he or she should begin thinking: "They are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb.", etc.

Another sense we can use is the tongue and the ears— reciting the words out loud. Having children listen to others recite to them, as well as reciting also helps them learn. The words could be put to music and sung, or chanting the words as a group, even with a particular rhythm, like a “rap” song. Recite a phrase and have them finish it. Or when they recite certain words do it louder than others.

Jay North, in a internet tutorial on memorizing Scripture says “Facts, names, numbers and such are best memorized via pictures, but if you are trying to memorize a chapter of the Bible (or other book) word for word, it would take forever to form a picture in your mind for every single word and then try to link it all together. Instead, sound is better. The only problem is that inventing a song is much more difficult than enhancing a picture. The song has to sound good, otherwise you won't remember it. Also, the more words there are, the harder it is to make a good, unified song.”

Or there is the use of the fingers. My daughter has found with younger children that sign language works well for teaching verses. She teaches hand signals along with the words to the children. There are a number of children's songs that use hand motions like "Rise and Shine and Give God the Glory Glory", so children are comfortable with them. You can use commonly accepted signs and make up your own hand motions, or perhaps you can find someone who knows American Sign Language that can help you with the signing. The children enjoy working at mastering the motions, and learn the verse as they do it. Posture can also help. Try pacing while learning. Have the children recite standing on one foot, sitting cross-legged, with eyes closed, even jumping rope, or in odd positions.

**Develop Mental understanding** - The children's minds must work on the meaning, putting it into images and content they can comprehend. Converting the content to icons or symbols, and defining the individual words and concepts is a part of this process, especially if we can connect them to a child's own experiences. This method works even for non-readers.

"Play with" or "on" the semantics of the words frequently - for example - "Statutes" and "Statues," or "Precepts" and "Prescriptions", etc - to aid understanding. In a larger assembly, have a planted "nerd" recite each day making deliberate mistakes and use the opportunity to illustrate and clarify meanings. Talk about the meaning of the verses frequently, asking questions. Prepare and use pictures. Object lessons are useful, as well as illustrations from a child's experiences of the more abstract concepts and terms.

In drilling, try and come up with all sorts of fun ways and games to drill on the memory passage. Scramble icons and have them put them back in order, while reciting. Leave blank spots to be filled in on the board. It is important to encourage every effort, even if a child gives a wrong answer. Remember that as one child is trying, the other children are reciting along with them in their minds and correcting and being corrected. Keep order in the group and have children answering speak loudly and clearly so every one can follow.

**A third grader is at exactly the right age** to begin memorizing things, and what better thing to memorize than Scripture, which will provide a lifelong benefit! Make memorizing a game with the children by seeing who can memorize the verse first. Children will enjoy winning, and you won't be able to beat them! See if he or she can still remember verses learned in past weeks. Send the verses home! If they start learning the verse early in the week, the child will retain them better than if they are only learned on Saturday or Sunday.

The usual approach to learning a passage is to go at it verse by verse, day by day, and you may well be inclined to do just that. However there are sound educational reasons for learning passages as a whole in larger blocks, rather than consecutively verse by verse. And working on them using a variety of methods involving the various senses, repetition over periods of time, and exercises aimed at comprehension of meaning. The main objective is for the children to learn the whole memory passage by heart and understand what it teaches about the Scriptures by the end of the learning period which may be several days or even weeks!

**Here are some hits for enhancing personal memorization skills:**

- Read the verses out loud. Listening to the verses helps you memorize the words.
- From "Two-Seven discipleship training course" of Navigator, recite repeatedly. Once you forget a word, complete that sentence. And recite that passage from the beginning again until no error at all.
- Recite to someone and let him/she check your verses.
- Dictate the passage, if you have no one to check your verses. Carry memory cards.
- References, by the way, are perhaps the hardest part of learning verses. Reciting them at the beginning and end of the verse is an important practice.
- Understand the whole paragraph. The logical flow helps you memorize the passage.
- Think about it when you memorize it. God may give you some insights about that passage and you will love to memorize it.
- Remember some key words.
- Logically cut it into smaller passages (units), if you memorize a long passage or a book. So, you won't need to recite it every time from the very beginning.
- The more you make memorization a habit or life-style, the easier it is to memorize.

## The Don'ts of Scripture Memory

1. **Don't "kind of" memorize verses.** Not only did God inspire every word of Scripture but if you do not memorize it perfectly today you will lose it tomorrow. Perfectly means knowing every word in the correct order without having to hesitate to think about it.
2. **Don't forget to memorize the references as carefully as the verses themselves.**
3. **Don't feel you have to know one verse perfectly** before you can start on memorize another verse. It is very possible to memorize two or more verses at the same time.
4. **Don't consider waiting to be a waste of time but an opportunity to memorize or review.**
5. **Don't think your mind is too old, slow, forgetful, overloaded, etc. to memorize scripture.** We all have memorized many things.
6. **Don't consider a verse that gets assigned to you to memorize to be less important to memorize than one you select yourself.** All Scripture is profitable (2 Timothy 3:16) you may one day appreciate having memorized the verse.
7. **Don't memorize verses in more than one translation.** This can get too confusing. Decide on a version and replace any verses you may have memorized in another version with the new version as soon as possible.
8. **Don't memorize verses in a paraphrase.** The NASB is good because it is a very literal translation. Some prefer the NKJV or NIV. Some verses may be awkward but you will get used to the reading.
9. **Don't lose heart in reviewing past memory verses.**
10. **Don't depend on anyone else.** Purpose to memorize for your sake, not to please someone else. Plan to continue memorizing regardless of whether anyone else does or not.
11. **Don't memorize passages of Scripture in the order in which they are written.** Instead, memorize each verse separately and out of order. Then review the passage in order. This will help you memorize the verses more accurately, particularly those toward the end of the passage. By memorizing verses in order, the first verses tend to be retained longer than the last verses. But reviewing them in order will help you understand the flow of the passage.
12. **Don't set a scripture memory goal that is too low.** If it is too easy, then you will not feel you have to work at it and may put it off and not get around to it.

Resources: Teaching Primaries, Chapter 4 by Ruth Beechick

**Jay North's Tutorial:** <http://www.premiumhealth.com/memory/biblemem.htm>

**The Ten Don'ts:** <http://www.valleybible.net/resources/MemoryPrinciples.shtml>

**Easy Bible Memory System:** <http://www.members.cchat.com/duo/ebms.htm>

**Memorizing Scripture** by Jonathan Lindvall: <http://www.boldchristianliving.com/articles/scrimem.htm>