

MEMORIZE WITH MEANING

By Lorella Rouster

Boys and girls are a prime target for Satan today. God has promised to keep them from sin through His Word – *hidden in their hearts*. Are you doing all you can to promote effective memorization in your class? Firm principles and fun ideas are intermingled here to give you immediate support in this urgent task.

Bible memory work is as important as the Bible lesson itself. We are building into our students' lives the words of God, which the Holy Spirit will use to correct and challenge young hearts.

Marie Chapman, in her book *Yelling for Help*, points out that children can't remember what they have never known. Therefore, we must earnestly work at memorizing with meaning. Meaningful memorization is what this article is all about.

CHOOSING A MEMORY VERSE

Choose carefully the verse or portion to be memorized. The meaning must be comprehensible to the age to whom it will be taught. Some words can be explained, of course, but every unfamiliar word increases the difficulty of the verse. Ask yourself if there is another verse that says the same thing more clearly.

Memory verses should help children with their present problems and experiences. "Thou shalt not commit adultery" may not be the best text to teach young children, not because it isn't true or relevant to life, but because they're not at the age to appreciate its relevance. On the other hand, "He careth for you" is relevant to all ages.

The length of the verse should also be considered. Two and three year olds can easily handle verses up to five words, which they can "count off" on the fingers of one hand. The average four or five year old can learn slightly longer verses, perhaps eight or nine words. Memory ability increases with use, so children who become accustomed to memory work can often do phenomenal feats. Learn to know your children's abilities, and make memory work challenging but not discouraging.

It is vital and sensible that memory work reinforces the main Bible truth or lesson aim. Most lesson plans suggest a memory verse with this in mind. If not, a teacher with some knowledge of the Bible and a concordance can choose an appropriate verse.

In a series of lessons on one topic, such as prayer, it may be possible to use the same verse for two or even three weeks in a row, particularly with younger children who like review. But, by fourth grade at least, children are anxious for lots of variety, and are able to be challenged by greater memory portions.

In memory contests or programs where lists of verses are to be learned, it's best to list together verses emphasizing a single truth or a related subject.* This helps both understanding and retention.

MOTIVATE FOR MEMORIZATION

Rather than introducing a verse with, “This is our memory verse for the day,” the desire to learn will increase if you first pose a problem related to the children’s lives. Then introduce the verse, showing how it can help solve the problem.

Recently I taught the verse, “He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much” (Luke 16:10). I began with a story about a child who felt it was not important to be faithful in little things, but was certain when the really important responsibilities came along, he would be faithful in them. The memory verse showed how wrong he was.

Know the verse perfectly yourself, both words and meaning, before you begin to teach. I have watched many people try to persuade others to learn a verse they obviously didn’t know themselves. Why should their pupils consider it important? I’ve also seen teachers give pupils wrong definitions for words and become frustrated at the sudden realization they didn’t really know the meaning of the verse.

Look up unfamiliar words in a good dictionary. Examine the verse in several versions for further understanding. See what various commentaries have to say about it. Finally, ask for help from your pastor or a more experienced teacher. Then practice the verse yourself until you know it perfectly. Use the memory verse throughout the lesson. Paraphrase the overall meaning and use it several times in the lesson body or the application, followed immediately by the exact words of the verse. Plan ahead and mark on your notes where you will use the verse.

Last Sunday I taught a lesson warning youth against occult practices. As I told how Moses warned against stargazing or horoscopes, I emphasized that we don’t need wisdom from horoscopes because we have a far better source of wisdom. “God says if we ask, He’ll give us all the wisdom we need, and He won’t even scold us for asking. ‘If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not, and it shall be given him’” (James 1:5). The paraphrase repeated in the lesson the meaning I had already discussed, “upbraideth not” (doesn’t scold).

TEACH WITH DEPTH

Explain the verse thoroughly, with enthusiasm and a positive spirit. This means allowing adequate time for teaching, usually ten minutes. If you leave the memory verse until last and wail, “Let’s hurry and learn our verse before the bell rings,” what importance will the children place on the verse?

Begin with the overall meaning of the verse; explain it phrase by phrase, word by word, then go back to the total verse. For instance, in teaching James 1:5, begin with the main idea: God invites us to ask Him for wisdom. Break it down into five phrases.

- 1) “If any of you lack wisdom” – discuss the things we need wisdom to decide.
- 2) “Let him ask of God” – talk about how great it is that God invites us to ask His His wisdom. Etc.

Then work on the verse word by word. For example in James 1:5, “YOU. Who? Any Christian, the children themselves. LACK. Can you think of another word that means lack? Need; not to have. WISDOM. Knowing what to do or how to act in a hard situation.” After covering major points, put the whole verse together and review its overall meaning once again.

Connect the verse to something children are familiar with. The above verse may be contrasted with another person who is too busy, too tired, too troubled with his own problems, or who simply can’t help because he doesn’t know the answer.

It is often helpful to say something about the theme of the book, chapter or passage in which the verse is found. “The people had a mind to work” (Nehemiah 4:6) becomes more meaningful when we know the protective wall around Jerusalem had been broken down by God’s enemies. Many years later the people were returning from slavery in Babylon and rebuilding the wall. Because the people had a mind to work, the project was a success.

RELATE TO LIFE

Show how the verse can be used in life. Children love to hear you tell your own experiences (even failures) in trying to “live out” the verse. Begin preparing early enough so you can consciously seek to put the truths to work in your own life.

Briefly give the children an opportunity to report on how they attempted to obey the verse from the week before. This is especially good when you give suggestions as to specific ways they might begin to practice it. For instance, when our verse was “In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you” (1 Thessalonians 5:18), I challenged the children: “This week, every time you feel like griping, instead think of something good and thank the Lord for it.” The stories they shared the next week were exciting and showed they were beginning to make God’s Word a part of the fabric of their lives.

After the lesson, I sometimes role play situations where the memory verse would be helpful. For James 1:5 you could role play scenes where children need great wisdom: a parental conflict, a fight with a best friend, a difficult choice of subjects in school.

A less time-consuming variation of role playing is the game, “What would you do if...?” For example, give a series of situations where children could apply Isaiah 12:2, “I will trust and not be afraid.” “What would you do if...you were scared during a thunderstorm?...you were afraid of moving to a new place?...your mother was very sick?...your best friend was hurt in an accident?”

Help the children find the verse in their own Bibles. The verse is then no longer the teacher’s; it is the child’s, found in his very own Bible.

CREATIVE REINFORCEMENT

Use the verse in craft or art projects or in creative writing if time permits. This is especially good when memorizing longer portions of Scripture which will require several weeks to learn. When memorizing the Twenty-third Psalm, children may make a mural of a shepherd with his sheep, illustrating the different ways the shepherd helps his sheep. Another group may make a mural showing ways our shepherd, the Lord Jesus, cares for us.

Children can make their own filmstrip. Rub the black off a length of exposed 35mm film with household bleach. Print or draw illustrations on the film with fine-tipped markers. (An alternative is to purchase clear slides for this purpose.)

Have a class party and dress up students for various roles. With a few props take actual slides of the various scenes needed to illustrate a Bible portion. The children will think of the Scripture while working on the project, and will love seeing their own creations for review.

Making mobiles of the verse learned also combines learning and fun.

Time is the major holdback for all art projects. Try using pre-session time with early comers or having an extra class activity to work on the larger project.

Older students may write their own paraphrase of a verse or develop the various phrases of a verse into a choral reading. Some may enjoy making up stories to illustrate the meaning of the verse. This could be done at home, and shared later with the class.

Give immediate verbal recognition to memorizers. Praise should abound for all children who even try. But keep high standards! For further recognition (prizes, names on a chart, stars or stickers), the verse should be repeated with very little hesitation, word perfect, and the students should be able to tell what it means and how it applies to their lives.

Memorization of God's Word is at its best when students memorize with meaning.