

## MEMORY TEACHING

By Lorella Rouster

Eight-year-old Kathy Johnson stood straight and proud as her pastor awarded her first prize in her church's Bible memory contest.

"You must be proud of Kathy," the pastor told her mother after church. "She must have worked very hard to memorize 100 verses!"

"Yes, she did. But, pastor . . . "Mrs. Johnson's voice trailed off and a glint of sadness flickered in her eye. "Pastor, if only she'd put more of it into practice in her life! Kathy knows each verse perfectly, but I'm not so sure she understands what they mean, and I know they haven't made any impact on her life!"

There are many Kathy Johnsons in our churches today because there are many teachers who are content to teach merely the words of a Bible verse. I call this "flat" teaching, because it is only one-dimensional.

Effective Bible verse teaching must be three-dimensional. The first dimension is remembering the words; the second dimension is understanding the meaning of the words; the third dimension is applying the words to life or acting them out in concrete life situations.

In teaching three-dimensionally, the teacher asks (and answers) three questions: What does the verse say? What does the verse mean? What should I do about the verse in my life?

### What Does It Say?

The first dimension is vitally important. The student must learn what the verse says. This form of teaching is to be criticized only when it stops there.

In helping pupils remember the words, it is most helpful if they can SEE IT, SAY IT, and WRITE IT.

First, let them see it. Visualize the verse if the student can read at all. The lower-grade students may not know every word, but they will more than make up for it due to the interest generated by their newly acquired reading skills.

Use pictures, cartoons, and drawings to illustrate some aspect of the verse and to make it more interesting. Draw these yourself or cut them out of magazines. Try also cutting different-shaped poster board to use as background. For instance, a Bible shape for "The word of the Lord endureth for ever" or a cross for "The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin."

Use color too – colored poster board, colored felt-tip pens, even fluorescent colors on occasion, for eye appeal and interest.

Besides seeing the verse on a card, it is important that the children see it in the Bible, especially if they are older children, fourth grade and up. They gain practice in finding various books; they learn how to locate chapters and verses; they know its approximate location in the Bible; and most important, they associate it more strongly as being from the Bible. Perhaps the whole class could read it in unison.

There are other ways the pupils could see the verse too. Vary your technique. Occasionally put felt-backed word cards or strips on a flannel board, or without felt in a pocket chart. Jumble them up and let one or two students arrange them in order. Or write the verse on a chalkboard and erase a word at a time, repeating the verse each time to fill in the missing word.

Second, let the children not only see the verse, but say it. Most teaching techniques use a combination of these. The teacher should say it first, carefully giving the correct pronunciation and emphasis (check on pronunciation ahead if you are not certain). Let the students hear you say it several times in the course of the lesson. Weave it into the story at least three times. To do this, you will probably need to plan ahead,

and to indicate on your lesson notes where you will do this. For instance, “Jonathan didn’t know our verse, ‘Love one another’ for First John wasn’t written yet. But Jonathan certainly lived by that idea!”

The group should also say the verse. I have found it best to repeat it by short phrases first, then combine phrases until the children are repeating the entire verse. Very small children may say short verses on their fingers, one word to a finger. The group may read it together from the Bible or any visual aid being used. Then have different groups say it together. This can be great fun – the sillier the groupings, the better. Some I have used are: all who had eggs for breakfast, who are wearing blue, who have freckles, who play an instrument, who are 10 years old, who live in Chelsea, who fought with a sister last week.

Children enjoy games using verses such as this one: The teacher starts to say the verse, then suddenly stops and points to an individual, who must supply a given number of words, or finish the verse.

One of the most effective ways of teaching the words is to use the verse as a response to a life situation. This is not as easily applicable to all verses, but it is especially well suited to some.

For instance: Teacher: “When it is dark at night.” Class: “I will trust, and not be afraid.” Teacher: “Here is a picture of Susan fighting with her brother. What should Susan remember?” Class: “Be ye kind one to another.”

The third way teach the words of a verse is for the pupils to write it. This takes more time, but does much to stamp it upon their minds. Each student may copy the verse directly from the Bible onto his workbook or lesson sheet, either in or out of class. Even kindergartners and first graders who are learning letters and simple words will take pride in copying a short verse if you supply wide-spaced tablet paper and have it appropriately printed in simple, neat letters for copying. Writing the verse goes a long way towards writing it on the memory.

For most effective teaching, use all three categories – SEE IT, SAY IT, and WRITE IT – but vary your techniques within each category from week to week.

### What does it mean?

Teaching the words of a verse is only one-third of the battle. Kathy Johnson, who won the Bible memory contest, only one-third learned the verses if she quoted the words without understanding them or applying them at home.

How can a teacher help the students understand the meaning of the words?

First, consider the verse itself. Is it comprehensible to the age level you are teaching without elaborate explanation? Make sure the verse you’ve chosen is suitable for the age of the pupils. For instance, “Thou shalt not commit adultery” is not the most relevant verse to a six-year-old. “Be ye kind one to another” or “Obey your parents” might be better choices for this age. Good published material, of course, takes age-groups into consideration in suggested memorization programs.

Explain the verse carefully word by word and phrase by phrase. Don’t take understanding for granted. Watch faces for signs of comprehension or bewilderment. Then test the children verbally. Before you attempt this, look up all the background information you can find, and also read the verse in its context. It is essential that the teacher have a thorough understanding of the verse before teaching it.

In explaining a verse, make sure the children understand the total concept the verse conveys. Ideally, the verse will express the lesson aim – the main idea you want each pupil to carry home and incorporate into his life.

Also, point out who is speaking in the verse, and to whom. Is God speaking? Satan? A godly person or an evil one? Help the pupils to understand the verse in the total scheme of the passage, the book, the Bible.

Use pictures, cartoons, and drawings to illustrate the truth and to aid the students' understanding.

After you have communicated all this to your class, quiz the students with such questions as: "Who can find the word in our verse that means . . . ?" or "What does this verse mean when it says that . . . ?" With older children, fifth and sixth graders, I sometimes make a wrong statement and let them correct it. (Be sure they do, so that no one will go home with incorrect thinking.) Tell them you are going to do this – they love to catch errors, especially when the teacher is making them. If they fail to catch it at first, elaborate on the error, making it more and more absurd until they realize it. This is good training in sorting out whether ideas are right or wrong according to God's Word – a lifetime task for every Christian.

#### Applying it to life

Now your students know the Bible words perfectly. They understand them thoroughly. They are ready to apply them by putting them to use in their lives. Show in your teaching how the verse applies to their lives. Remember that it may apply differently to children than to adults. Make it clear what you suggest they do about the verse, and challenge them to do something specific and concrete about it in the coming week. Before you begin your lesson the following week, give them an opportunity to report. Even if they report failure, encourage them to keep trying.

One of the best ways to show students that God's Word is meant to change their lives is to let it change your life first! Share your experiences in applying scripture to everyday life with them, whenever suitable. As I have shared my life situations with my girls, their eyes have grown wide with interest. Their attention is never so rapt as when I share my own failures and successes in confronting my life to God's Word.

Another method of applying the verse is to ask, "According to this verse, what would you do if . . . ?" and follow with a series of problems suited to their ages.

Every student must decide for himself whether or not he will obey God's Word, but if you make sure your memory teaching covers all three dimensions – remembering, understanding, and doing – more and more of your teaching will begin to bear fruit in the lives of your students. You will see your students growing – changing week by week as you challenge them with God's Word. Try teaching in the third dimension; it is teaching at its very best!