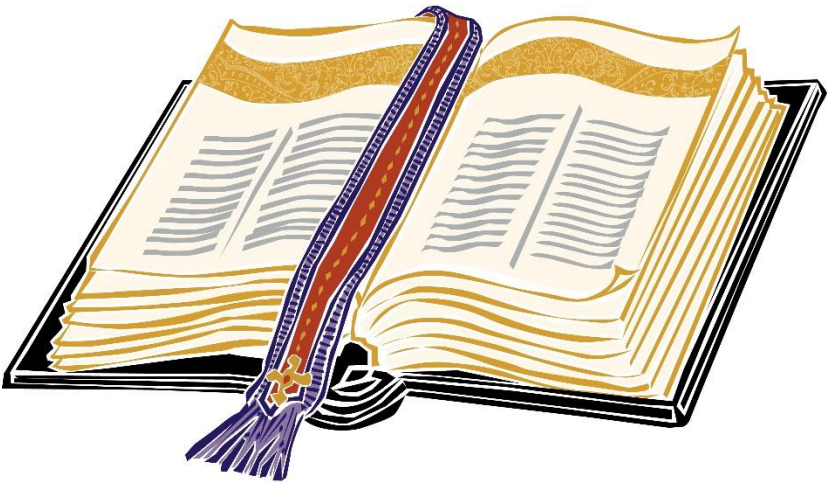


Better Memorization



OUTLINE

How Memorization Works

Techniques for Memorization:

- Repetition
- Make a Picture
- Use What You Already Know

How Memorization Works

(sort of)

The human brain is a terrifically complicated thing, and we mostly don't understand how it works. I have read up on various studies of memory, and there are a lot of theories but not much real information. So for our specific purposes, I'm going to describe several kinds of memory. Please note that these definitions are drawn more from my own experience than any scholarly source. This goes against my academic instincts, but it has been made necessary by widespread disagreement between the scholarly sources—and the failure of said sources to be actually useful. So for the (limited) purposes of this particular discussion, I'm going to identify several steps to truly memorizing something.

Concentration: In order to memorize a piece of data, you have to first receive that piece of data. You won't be able to remember it if you never properly heard it in the first place. This shouldn't be much of an issue when

memorizing Bible texts, but it definitely comes into play in an academic context, so I thought I would mention it anyway.

Short Term Memory: Short term memory refers to our recall of the immediate past. If I tell you a phone number, you could probably turn around, pick up the phone, and dial the number from memory. That's short term memory. Practically everybody has a wonderful short term memory, but it has limits. It is thought (by those scholarly sources that I mentioned previously) that short term memory holds just 5-9 pieces of information. And sadly, short term memory degrades very, very quickly... it only lasts between 15 and 30 seconds. Which is why, once you finished that phone call, you probably couldn't repeat the phone number.

Working Memory: Information that you want to retain can be passed from short term memory to working memory. Working memory is a bit like the notepad my mom keeps in her kitchen, where she writes her to-do and grocery lists, sketches gardening ideas,

and notes down things she wants to remember from Bible study. It's the memory that you live from, the place that holds the information you are actively using. Working memory holds a lot more information than short term memory, and it lasts longer—three or four days, maybe a week. But the hallmark of working memory is activity. Like my mom's notepad, the lists and sketches from last week are inclined to disappear forever. This is information that you are currently using, and it goes away as soon as you stop using it.

Long Term Memory: Long term memory is where vocabulary and basic math skills are stored. It's where your own history lives. This is the holy grail of memorization. Long term memory stores a lot of information indefinitely, which is definitely what we want for Bible verses. But that data has to stay in working memory for quite a while, being used frequently, before it shifts to long term memory. But even long term memory has to be accessed once in a while, or you won't be able to bring the relevant facts quickly to the surface when you want it.

"Whatever you think about, that's what you remember. Memory is the residue of thought."

-Daniel T. Willingham

Trying the Obvious First: Repetition

When you want to memorize something, the first thing you probably try is repetition, right? You might read it over and over again, or try to recite it aloud repeatedly. It seems to work for an instant, because short term memory tends to retain sound pretty well. Unfortunately, sound does not readily transfer to working memory. So you recited it ten times, but five minutes later you can't even remember how it started. Very frustrating. But I do have some suggestions to make it work a little better.

First, combining more than one method of information processing tends to improve retention. By which I mean that writing it as well as reading and repeating it will help.

When I have a theorem I need to memorize, I often begin by writing it down ten or twelve times. Then I recite it several times... then

write it down again. Then I double-check to see that I've got it correctly. And repeat.

There are also ways to engage other parts of your brain in the memorization process. Try walking across the room while you repeat whatever you're trying to memorize. I realize that it sounds insane, but something about the physical movement of walking involves your brain more actively in what you're saying. A recent Harvard study even suggests that walking backward helps memory... but that sounds a little dangerous. Try walking forward first!

Alternatively, try studying with a partner. Recite the verses to someone who's looking at them, so they can catch any errors. The social and competitive parts of your brain will engage, making your memorization efforts much more effective. When studying alone, your mind can trick you into thinking you've mastered the topic to a greater degree than you actually have. Bringing in an audience will ensure that you have truly mastered the material.

“Making the simple complicated is commonplace; making the complicated simple, awesomely simple, that’s creativity.” -Charles Mingus

Bringing Information to Life: Make a Picture

The idea here is to create a mental image that will stick in your mind and help you recall the key words that you want to remember. The kind of image that you make matters! Make it ridiculous, entertaining, unlikely, or even embarrassing. Give whatever you’re picturing an action, a voice, a personality. Bring it to life. Make it...unforgettable!

The choices you make will be personal—what *you* personally find funny, embarrassing or otherwise memorable, based on your experiences. And you don’t have to explain it to anybody! If it works for you then it works, and that’s all that counts.

Once you’ve developed an appropriate picture, one that works for you, take the time to really make it come alive in your mind. Use your senses. What does it look like? Sound like?

Can you smell or taste it? How does it make you feel?

Making it real in your mind is a critical step! If you make the picture crazy enough, funny enough, real enough, then you won't need to spend any effort on actually remembering the picture. It will just pop into your mind. But you won't get away without any effort at all. In this case, constructing an appropriate picture is the difficult part.

So how do you turn a Bible verse into this kind of picture? This doesn't seem natural at all. You could try to picture the 23rd Psalm, but what about something less pastoral? One way is to take the words and break them up in an original way. Then use those words to construct a picture.

Let's use an example. Consider this verse:

Micah 6:8

**He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good;
and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to
do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk
humbly with thy God?**

Okay, so this doesn't naturally develop a mental image. But we can make it work anyway. I'm going to describe a scene, a picture, and I want you to try and see it in your mind. Close your eyes and make it come to life. Imagine how it looks, sounds, feels, smells, and so forth. Ready?

Standing proudly on a grassy plain is a really big guy. He's extremely tall, six foot eight, and also very heavy, with a big belly. Oddly, he's wearing a loose, flowy, white tunic, like a priestess outfit. The wind is blowing his dress back and molding it against his big belly. His name is Mike Ah, and it's written on a big blue sash across his chest, like a Miss America sash. Mike is shouting, but you can't make out what he's saying over the wind. Then he points, up in the sky, where something really remarkable is happening. You follow Mike's finger up to a great disturbance in the clouds. They're rolling back, revealing a dark spot in the sky. As you stare and Mike shouts, you see brilliant letters form in the dark space. They say "Oh, man," which pretty well sums up how you're feeling about the big dark spot in the sky.



So that's a pretty strange image, right? Did you find it easy to picture? You might have picked up that Mike Ah, six-eight, showed you O man. Is that enough to jog your memory for the rest of the verse? If not, you could have a little green alien pop out of the dark spot in the sky and ask, "what is good here?" ... and so forth! Now to make this work, you really have to see this image in your mind. Feel the wind. Smell the grass. Then once you have the picture firmly in your memory, you can use it to remind you about Micah 6:8.

Do you have the technique down? Make the image crazy, make it strange, make it memorable, dramatic, emotional, whatever. Then use it!

"The existence of forgetting has never been proved: We only know that some things don't come to mind when we want them." -Friedrich Nietzsche

Making Links:

Using What You Already Know

You already have plenty of information at your command. You know plenty of lists in your life already! No one needs to remind you about the alphabet, or what your living room furniture looks like. And you can use that to help you remember other lists. We'll use the technique of making pictures and link those images to something you already know. I'm going to give an example, but I'll only do the first couple of images, because you need to make this your own.

Matthew 5: 3-4

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

Now imagine a dyspeptic-looking woman. Her hair is a weak blond, lank and greasy. Her lips are chapped, and her eyes are dark and sunken. She's poor in spirit. And she's floating on a heavenly cloud.

Now put her, and the cloud, floating above your coffee table. That's where we're going to start this list.

Now picture a hound dog. Howling. Mourning. Big, round tears are flowing down his cheeks. He's flung himself down on your couch. But then a big, fleecy blanket is covering him. His howls are muffled under the fluffy blanket. He's being comforted.

Strange images, I know, but do you see how this works? Finish the list using your own images, and your own living room furniture. Now every time you sit down in your living room, you can think about the list of beatitudes. Hopefully you will see those images you created every time! This will not only help you remember to practice your memorizations, but to recall the list itself!