

Memorizing Scripture – Don't Do It!

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Not only hearing but also doing

Alright, the title of this article is meant to get your attention. I'm not saying that we shouldn't ever try to memorize Scripture, only that it should have its proper priority in our walk with God. Some ministers endorse Scripture memorization as one of, if not the most fundamental and important of all spiritual disciplines. I humbly and respectfully disagree. I contend that memorizing Scripture should be regarded as one of the least important endeavors in which to occupy our time.

Suppose, for example, that you work an office job where your boss emailed you instructions for a special project. A couple of days later she follows up with you for an update on the progress of the project. But instead of having worked on it you spent all the allotted time memorizing the email she sent! Do you suppose she'll be happy that you can quote back to her verbatim everything she wrote? Most likely she couldn't care less that you can quote any of it and was never expecting you to do that. The only thing that matters to her is your progress in doing what she told you to do. Now, why would it be any different with God? Do we think He is pleased that we're not doing what He said yet we can quote it?

Probably the most common verse cited to teach Scripture memorization is: "This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, **that thou mayest observe to do** according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success" (Jos 1:8). But notice that the entire objective is that we do it! Granted, if speaking God's word, meditating in it, and even memorizing it helps to obey then by all means we should do these things. But as James said, "But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves" (Jas 1:22). We're deceived if we think that hearing and even memorizing God's word without doing it is accomplishing anything in God's sight.

I know some ministers that start new converts with a regiment of Scripture memorization. They have them purchase a verse packet or have them write verses on index cards to carry around with them and read throughout the day. I've even heard them claim that "make disciples" in Christ's statement, "Go therefore and **make disciples** of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you**; and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age. Amen." (Mat 28:19-20 NKJV), means that new Christians are to discipline themselves particularly in Scripture memorization. However, Christ stated that it means "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you." True discipleship isn't teaching them to memorize but to obey.

Understanding the Scriptures

Now, in case you might be thinking that I haven't memorized much Scripture and that I'm just making excuses here, I assure you that I can quote my fair share. In fact, not only can quote many verses but even many entire chapters. But most of this retention didn't come from trying to memorize but simply from disciplined reading

and studying in order to understand the Scriptures. I've found that the more I understand what God is saying, the more it sticks with me.

Paul prayed for the Christians in Ephesus: "The eyes of your understanding being enlightened" (Eph 1:18). He didn't pray for them to memorize it but to understand it. God's word is the message He intended to convey through the Scriptures. If we don't have the correct understanding God meant to communicate, then we don't have the word of God. What good is it to quote something that we don't even understand and aren't applying correctly?

Also, what about languages? Am I quoting God's word when I quote it in English? If so, which English Bible Version? Would it not be better to memorize and quote it in the original languages it was written? It's quite instructive that Paul usually quoted from the Septuagint which is a Greek translation of the original Hebrew. This indicates that he esteemed the intended message to be what matters. In other words, what's important is that the message God intended to communicate is being conveyed correctly whether it be through Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, English, Chinese, Spanish, or some other language. God's word is His message to us.

Furthermore, what about people in false religions? Many Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses can quote a lot of verses as well. Does it really do them any good? What about Jewish people that reject Jesus as their Messiah? Many can put us to shame with their Scripture memorization yet they're not saved. What does it ultimately accomplish for them?

Even when I can quote particular verses or passages when around other people, I almost never do. For example, if I'm in a class or a Bible study where a certain passage or reference is mentioned that I know I can quote, I almost always look it up in my Bible and read it instead. I don't want anyone knowing that I can quote it. God's word is just as effective whether I read it from my Bible or quote it from memory. There's no need to try and impress anyone by quoting it.

I used to have an elementary school teacher who would have each student in class read out loud a paragraph from a book then explain it back in our own words what we just read. This was to test our reading comprehension. And this same principle applies with Scripture. It's more important that we can correctly paraphrase in our own words what the Scriptures are saying rather than quoting it verbatim.

Hypothetically, what if we memorized the entire Bible and could literally quote it all verse by verse? Paul said that without love "I am nothing" (1Co 13:2). If we're not obeying Christ's commandment to love others, then quoting the entire Bible means absolutely nothing. Some are deceived into thinking they're really doing well because they can quote verses yet they're not treating others right.

Proof-texting memorization

"Therefore shall ye **lay up these my words in your heart and in your soul**, and bind them for a sign upon your hand, that they may be as frontlets between your eyes" (Deu 11:18); "**Thy word have I hid in mine heart**, that I might not sin against thee" (Psa 119:11); "Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name. **But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones**, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not *stay*." (Jer 20:9); "If ye abide in me, **and my words abide in you**, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you" (Jhn 15:7); "And be not conformed to this world: **but be ye transformed**

by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what *is* that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God” (Rom 12:2); “And take the helmet of salvation, and **the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God**” (Eph 6:17); “**Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly** in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Col 3:16); “**For the word of God is quick, and powerful**, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and *is* a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Heb 4:12).

These are the most common proof-text verses for memorization yet actually say nothing of the sort. Having His word in our hearts, for example, isn’t about memorizing but living because our hearts are where the motives for our actions are stored. Some people do and say the right things but with the wrong motives—it’s ultimately about benefitting themselves in some way. As servants of the Lord, on the other hand, we should be doing and saying what’s right with the intent of pleasing God even when displeasing people. This is what it means to have His word in our hearts.

Furthermore, renewing our minds isn’t about memorizing Scripture but about having a mindset of no longer being conformed to the ways of this world. Earlier Paul had urged the Christians in Rome, “Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom 6:11). It’s in our minds that we reckon ourselves to be dead to sin and therefore live righteously in obedience to Christ as Lord. This is what he meant later by “For to be carnally minded *is* death; but to be spiritually minded *is* life and peace” (Rom 8:6). A renewed mind is a spiritual mind. It’s having the mindset and attitude of a servant like Christ Himself, “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phl 2:5). Those who are of the world are carnally minded—they ultimately live for what they can have in this life.

Reasons given to memorize Scripture

People come up with all kinds of reasons to push Scripture memorization on others. One is that it supposedly sharpens our witnessing skills to make us more effective. Actually, what’s far more important is that we’re sharing the true saving gospel message. What good is it to quote a lot of Scripture to someone yet ultimately communicate to them a false message? Besides, sometimes one of the best things we can tell someone is our own testimony of how God changed our lives. We don’t need to be able to quote verses to do this.

Another reason is that memorization supposedly strengthens our prayer life. But prayer is simply talking to God as our normal selves, being sincere and transparent before Him. What He really wants when we approach Him in prayer is a broken spirit and a contrite heart, not quoting verses back to Him. Living a life of obedience to His Son in striving to always please Him is what’s conducive to a strong prayer life.

I heard one man tell about having memorized the first three chapters of Ephesians and what an unspeakable blessing it was to him. But my question would be how much of those three chapters does he really understand? I can quote most of Ephesians—more than just the first three chapters—yet I don’t really find it to be a great blessing. And most of my retention of it didn’t come by trying to memorize but from many years of studying the letter intently to understand it. For me, the true blessing comes with understanding the message from God that Paul revealed in Ephesians.

Finally, one last popular reason given for memorizing Scripture is that it supposedly helps us resist temptation. Of course the main example of this is when Jesus quoted verses to the devil. But most all orthodox Jewish men can quote at least the Torah—the first five books written by Moses—yet this doesn't give them victory over temptation. Everyone except Jesus has sinned. Just memorizing and quoting Scripture doesn't keep us from sinning.

The trial of our faithfulness

Some think of discipleship as “connecting” with a new convert over coffee and helping them memorize Bible verses. But when suffering persecution, and when tragedies in life occur, being able to quote a few verses is superficial and does little good. What we really need is spiritual maturity and the fear of God.

James began his letter “Knowing *this*, that **the trying of your faith [faithfulness] worketh patience**” (Jas 1:3), then said toward the end, “Behold, we count them happy which endure. **Ye have heard of the patience of Job**, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy” (Jas 5:11). Job's faithfulness to God was sorely and severely tested far beyond anything any of us will ever endure. He had 10 children and lost all 10 in one day! I cannot even fathom having to go through something like that. He was a real person with real feelings and emotions who loved his children dearly just as we do. He was also ruined financially then later was stricken with a terrible disease that almost took his life.

How did he patiently endure these trials? Did he quote Bible verses he had memorized? Actually, none of the Bible had even been written yet! He was strong through it all because he lived righteously in the fear of God and avoided all appearance of evil, “And the LORD said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, that *there is* none like him in the earth, **a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil?**” (Job 1:8). Notice that this was God Himself praising Job. What gets us through the trials of our faithfulness is having God on our side defending us against the attacks of the enemy. This only comes by living in faithful service to Him by striving to always please Him. It doesn't come by simply quoting, “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me” (Phl 4:13).