

Chapter 5

Memorize the Mind of God



Perhaps you've heard the pitch for Scripture memory a hundred times. You're persuaded the benefits would be incalculable, and that there may be no better use of your time than to hide God's word in your heart and store it away for future use. But you've tried your hand at it again and again, and just never got the magic working.

Maybe the thought of memorizing Scripture brings back some sentiment you can't shake from doing rote memorization in grade school, or eventually you've thrown up your hands and blamed your failures on a bad memory. You know it would be wonderful to have a store of Scripture treasured up, or an arsenal of weapons stockpiled for the Spirit's use. But if it is all oriented on saving up for some uncertain future time, and has little to do with today, you likely don't feel much urgency about it.

But maybe a breakthrough could come with some simple change in perspective. What if Scripture memory really is about today? At least for a minute, forget decades from now; throw aside the litany of daily reviews of previously memorized texts;

abandon the mentality of building the store and stocking the pile, at least as the driving motivation. Instead, focus on the present. Scripture memory, at its best, is about feeding your soul today and mapping your life and mind onto the very life and mind of God.

Mold Your Mind for Today

It's all well and good to store up bright treasures and sharp weapons for future use, but if you're cut from the cloth I am, you find it all too easy to put Scripture memory off when every today seems to already have enough trouble of its own (Matt. 6:34). Maybe the discovery you've needed to finally make some tracks is simply applying this line from the Lord's Prayer to Bible memorization: *Give us this day our daily bread* (Matt. 6:11).

When we learn the Scriptures by heart, we're not just memorizing ancient, enduringly relevant texts, but we're listening to and learning the voice of our Creator and Redeemer himself. When we memorize lines from the Bible, we are shaping our minds in the moment to mimic the structure and mind-set of the mind of God.

Good theology forms our minds in a general way to think God's thoughts after him. But memorized Scripture molds our minds, with as much specificity as is humanly possible, to mimic the folds and creases in the mind of God. Theology gets us to the ballpark; memorized Scripture, into the clubhouse.

And so Bible memory not only prepares us for the someday-maybes when we might use a memorized verse in counseling or witnessing or fighting sin, but it contributes powerfully in the present to making us the kind of person who walks in the Spirit today. It contributes right now to your being "renewed in the spirit of your minds" (Eph. 4:23) and being "transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern

what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2). Not only might it then be accessible to us for future decision-making and temptation-battling in varying contexts, but the very act of memorizing Scripture, as we understand and engage with the meaning of the text, changes our minds in the present to make us the kind of people who “discern what is the will of God.”

Memorizing God’s words today, then, is not just a deposit into an account for tomorrow, but an asset working for us right now.

Some Call It “Meditation”

Note the disclaimer above: “as we understand and engage with the meaning of the text.” That is, we must flood the process of memorization with the habit of grace and lost art we discussed in chapter 3: meditation.

There’s nothing necessarily new age or transcendental about meditation. The old-school version, commended throughout the Bible, is thinking deeply about some truth from the mouth of God, and rolling it around in our minds long enough that we feel a sense of its significance in our hearts, and then even begin to envision its application in our lives. Making meditation work in tandem with Scripture memory has tremendous bearing on how we go about the arduous process of memorizing. For one, it makes us slow down. We can memorize things much faster if we don’t pause to grasp and ponder. But mere memorization does us little good; meditation does much good. When we take meditation seriously, we seek not only to understand what we are memorizing, but also to linger over it, and feel it, and even begin to apply it as we memorize.

When we pursue Scripture memory with meditation, we’re not just storing up for transformation later, but enjoying food for our soul today and experiencing transformation now. And when the focus is more on feeding and shaping, then constant

review is less important. Once-memorized, now-forgotten texts aren't a tragedy, but an opportunity to meditate again freshly and mold your mind even more.

Reset Your Mind on the Things of the Spirit

Another important benefit today, not just in the future, is how Bible memory with meditation refocuses our souls for the business of the day. It is a way to reset our minds “on the things of the Spirit” and then “live according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8:5), which “is life and peace” (Rom. 8:6).

The mingling of meditation with memorization helps us obey the command of Colossians 3:2: “Set your minds on things that are above.” It dials us in for the day with “spiritual truths to those who are spiritual,” rather than walking as “the natural person” who “does not accept the things of the Spirit of God” (1 Cor. 2:13–14). And when we reset ourselves on the things of the Spirit by molding our minds with the words of God, the result is simply remarkable. Paul asks with Isaiah, “Who has understood *the mind of the Lord* so as to instruct him?” and answers with this stunning revelation: “we have *the mind of Christ*” (1 Cor. 2:16; see Isa. 40:13).

The Mind of Christ Is Yours

In other words, the apostle has two answers to the question, *Who has known the mind of the Lord?* The first is implied in the rhetorical question of Romans 11:34: “Who has known *the mind of the Lord*, or who has been his counselor?” Answer: no one. His mind is infinitely beyond ours. “How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable are his ways!” (Rom. 11:33). No human may fully know the mind of God.

And yet Paul gives this second answer in 1 Corinthians 2:16: “we have *the mind of Christ*.” As we not only read and study

the Scriptures, but understand them, and then meditate on and memorize them, we increasingly “have the mind of Christ” as we are conformed to his image. We cannot know the mind of God exhaustively, but we can make real progress in degrees. And few ways, if any, imprint the mind of God on our minds like memorization, with meditation, of what he has so plainly said in the Scriptures.

Two Great Effects

One other text mentions “the mind of Christ” and points to two great effects of memorizing the mind of God. Philippians 2:5, as the introduction to the famous “Christ hymn” of Philippians 2:6–11, says, “Have this *mind* among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.” And what will that mean in our lives? Two clear things in the immediate context are *unity* (Phil. 1:27–2:2) and *humility* (Phil. 2:3–4).

There is no better tuning fork for harmony in the body of Christ than the members striving together to conform their minds to the mind of Christ, not just with Christian concepts but with the very words of God. Having the mind of Christ will make us catalysts for a community “standing firm in one spirit, with *one mind* striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27), and “being of *the same mind*, having the same love, being in full accord and of *one mind*” (Phil. 2:2).

And such “unity of mind” goes hand in hand with “a humble mind” in 1 Peter 3:8. Few things cultivate humility of mind like submitting our minds to the words of God by memorizing them. And so we become people ready to

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Phil. 2:3–4)

Hide God's words in your heart; build an arsenal for fighting temptation. But don't miss the life-changing power today of memorizing the mind of God.

Five Tips for Bible Memory

Some Scripture memory systems are amazingly involved. They can include boxes of memorized verses on cards, or long lists of previously memorized verses for review. I admire and appreciate those who have persevered in these systems and found them life-giving and sustainable in the long run. For me, such a process would threaten to dominate, if not devour, the limited time I realistically have on a daily basis for devotions.

Instead, I've found Scripture memory to be for me a tool in the belt of meditation, and one important pathway for Bible application. Meditation is the nonnegotiable habit of grace I want to practice each day, even if only briefly when life circumstances have crunched my time.¹ Scripture memory is not something, at least in every season of life, that I practice daily, but I aim on a weekly basis, if not a couple times each week, to spend several minutes seeking to memorize some powerful text I've come across in my Bible reading and want not only to meditate, but memorize, for my own soul or for the sake of ministry to others.

In regards to the latter, I once put together a list of "Ten Passages for Pastors to Memorize Cold," which are texts I've found especially helpful in ministering to others.² As for the former, for the feeding of your own soul, I've included on the following

¹For more, see the afterword on communing with Christ on a "crazy day."

²Available online at [desiringGod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org), July 10, 2013, <http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/ten-passages-for-pastors-to-memorize-cold>.

pages “Ten Gospel Verses to Keep Warm,” along with “Twelve Gospel Passages to Soak In.”

Before providing those two short lists of gospel texts, here are five simple tips for Scripture memorization.

1. DIVERSIFY YOUR PICKS

You can memorize whole books, or whole chapters (Romans 8 is a great starting point, or Philippians 3), or key sections.³ My preference over the years has become key sections (say four to seven verses, like Titus 3:1–7) that I come across as I’m moving through a Bible-reading plan. It’s often a section I find so densely rich that meditating on it for just a few minutes feels woefully inadequate. To enjoy more of its goodness, I need to put it to memory. (If you’re looking to get started on a few key sections to memorize, try Col. 1:15–20; John 1:1–14; Heb. 1:1–4; and Phil. 2:5–11.)

2. TAKE IT WITH YOU DURING THE DAY

Write the passage down or make it prominent and easily accessible on a tablet or phone. I wouldn’t suggest quarantining your memorizing to a certain slot in the day, but unleash it into all of life. Play an audio recording in the car, look at a piece of paper while standing in line. Put a text on your home screen so you see it when you look at your smartphone.

3. SEEK TO UNDERSTAND, FEEL, AND APPLY THE TEXT AS YOU MEMORIZE

Resist the urge to see simple memory as the goal. Learning the text “by heart” is secondary; taking the text *to heart* is primary.

³The most acclaimed text I know of for memorizing entire books of the Bible is Andrew Davis, *An Approach to Extended Memorization of Scripture*, available as an e-book as well as a free pdf online at <http://www.fbcdurham.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Scripture-Memory-Booklet-for-Publication-Website-Layout.pdf>.

Don't memorize mindlessly, but engage the text and its meaning—not only its implications for your life, but what effects it should have on your emotions.

4. TURN YOUR TEXT INTO PRAYER

Personal and corporate prayer times are a great time to exercise what you're memorizing, and see and feel it from a fresh angle as you turn it godward and express its significance for others. There have been times for me when praying some memorized text became the pathway for seeing fresh glories that had been hidden to me until then.

5. MEMORIZE IN LIGHT OF THE GOSPEL

Finally, let the truth of Colossians 3:16 shape your memorization: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." The "word of Christ" here, or "message of Christ," isn't first and foremost Scripture, but the gospel. So, in other words, memorize in light of the gospel.

Memorizing Scripture, in and of itself, isn't necessarily Christian. Jesus spoke with Jewish leaders who had memorized more of the Old Testament than we ever will, and he said to them, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (John 5:39–40). And Paul spoke about Jews who intimately knew the Scriptures, but

their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. (2 Cor. 3:14–16)

Whether we're memorizing texts from the Old Testament or the New, this is our need again and again: *to turn to the Lord*. In our memorizing, whether whole books or chapters or passages or single verses, we always must keep in mind Jesus's great lessons in Luke 24 about Bible interpretation: "He interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27), and "he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures," and that "everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44–45).

Ten Gospel Verses to Keep Warm

Bible memorization is always time well spent. All Scripture memory is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). And especially useful are one-verse statements of the gospel.

When you memorize a "gospel verse," and keep it warm, you have hidden in your heart a divinely inspired and inerrant expression, in human language, of the very point of the whole Bible and all of history. You carry with you the sword of the Spirit in its strongest alloy. One-sentence encapsulations of the Bible's central message strengthen our spiritual backbone and solidify our core, rooting us deep down in the bedrock of God's heart and the nature of the world he made, and sending us into confident combat with unbelief, whether our own or someone's else. Gospel verses are invaluable in both evangelism and discipleship.

So, alongside other Scripture memorization efforts, sprinkle in some gospel verses that guide and shape and flavor your whole reservoir. By “gospel verses,” I have in mind verses like John 3:16 (don’t begrudge this verse its fame—it’s for good reason), verses that communicate succinctly that *Jesus saves sinners*.

Here’s a starter list of ten. Perhaps keep your eyes peeled for others and add them as you go—and don’t be surprised if you find a lot in Romans.

The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45)

God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom. 5:8)

The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 6:23)

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (Rom. 8:1)

He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Rom. 8:32)

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor. 5:21)

You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. (2 Cor. 8:9)

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. (1 Tim. 1:15)

In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. (1 John 4:10)

Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed
people for God
from every tribe and language and people and
nation. (Rev. 5:9)

Twelve Gospel Passages to Soak In

Mere truth won't sustain our souls. We desperately need the gospel. "The grace of God in truth" (Col. 1:6) is the shock that brings a dead soul to life and the charge that keeps it living. The gospel is the fuel that awakens and energizes the human heart, not mere truth—essential as truth is. Two plus two equals four—that's true. It just doesn't do much to jump-start and drive a languishing soul.

It's all wonderful and good to learn various truths from the Bible—and there are many crucial truths to learn—but we must not miss or minimize the one truth of the gospel, "the word of the truth" (Col. 1:5; see Eph. 1:13), the

message so central and significant that the apostle calls it not merely *a* truth, but *the* truth, throughout the Pastoral Epistles (1 Tim. 2:4; 3:15; 4:3; 6:5; 2 Tim. 2:18, 25; 3:7, 8; 4:4; Titus 1:1, 14).

In addition to the ten one-verse summaries of the gospel on the previous pages, here are twelve carefully selected “gospel passages” that get at the heart of the biblical good news in just two to four verses.

These short sections are ripe for memorization, and warrant at least some extended time of reflection. Build your life on them and around them, and let them shape and flavor everything. Soak in them—and soak them in.

Surely he has borne our griefs
 and carried our sorrows;
 yet we esteemed him stricken,
 smitten by God, and afflicted.
 But he was pierced for our transgressions;
 he was crushed for our iniquities;
 upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
 and with his wounds we are healed.
 All we like sheep have gone astray;
 we have turned—every one—to his own way;
 and the LORD has laid on him
 the iniquity of us all. (Isa. 53:4–6)

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,
 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the
 redemption that is in Christ Jesus. (Rom. 3:23–24)

Now to the one who works, his wages are not
 counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one
 who does not work but believes in him who justifi-

fies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness. (Rom. 4:4–5)

I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. (1 Cor. 15:3–4)

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith. (Gal. 3:13–14)

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved . . . (Eph. 2:4–5)

Though he was in the form of God, [Jesus] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:6–8)

In [Jesus] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (Col. 1:19–20)

You, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. (Col. 2:13–14)

When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:4–7)

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. (Heb. 2:14–17)

[Jesus] committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not

threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. (1 Pet. 2:22–25)