



"Doctrine is only the drawing of the bow; application is hitting the mark."

—Thomas Manton

03-Jun-16

Using Our Spiritual Vocabulary

As much as we talk, we should all be experts on language, at least the one we grew up speaking. When we were just infants, we began absorbing the broad strokes of our native tongue, and within a few years, without any real instruction, we were speaking in full sentences and whole paragraphs. Then came grade school and formal lessons in spelling and grammar, not to mention a great deal of reading and writing of book reports, essays, and even the dreaded term paper in later years. All this exposure to language should have made us all skilled wordsmiths.

Sadly, most of us are not wordsmiths at all, much less skilled ones. The average adult speaker of English—call her Jane—uses a paltry 20,000 or so words. This is only double what she used at about age 8, and by middle age, Jane will pretty much cease adding words to her vocabulary. Though some may think 20,000 words is a substantial number, the English language contains just over a million words, according to the Global Language Monitor, and about fifteen new words are created each day. To be fair, "only" about 172,000 words are currently in use, the rest being inflections (different forms of a word) or obsolete, technical, or scientific words. Still, Jane's 20,000-word vocabulary is a mere 11% of this lower figure.

What makes our proficiency in our own tongue seem even more lackluster is the fact that linguists have found that Jane, despite her 20,000-word vocabulary, employs the first hundred most-used words in fifty percent of her speaking and writing, and the first thousand words in 89% of it. This means that she rarely uses the remaining 19,000 words—95% of the total—in her vocabulary. Her core thousand-word vocabulary comprises only one-half of one percent of the language's words currently in use.

These facts do not mean that the average person is stupid or deficient. Instead, they point out a truth regarding the function of the human mind: It uses only a small portion of what it has learned or experienced. What is not used may be stored in memory, but much of it is not retained in a way that will enable it to be brought readily to mind and used. The brain efficiently culls from active memory what is not useful, burying it so deep as to become inaccessible. In the area of knowledge, just as in muscle-building, "Use it or lose it" is an apt exhortation.

Research on the "efficiency" of the brain's ability to forget has found that a person forgets half of what he is presented (say, in a lecture) within one hour, and after a day, seventy percent of it has slipped his mind. In a week, he has forgotten ninety percent of it. Only when information is repeated consistently—and better yet, used—is it retained for longer periods. Generally, what is used most often is remembered the longest.

These findings have significant implications for our lives as Christians. [God](#), knowing how He made our brains to work, encoded instructions into His Book that account for this very human susceptibility to forget. For instance, He made it a commandment—one of the Big Ten—that we keep the seventh-day [Sabbath](#) each week, on which is a holy convocation, so that we will remember Him and His works and be regularly instructed in His way of life. In fact, "remember" is the first word in that commandment ([Exodus 20:8](#))!

He also gave us [Passover](#) and [the holy days](#) to observe each year. These are regular, appointed times on which we rehearse the meanings of those days, each of which illustrates a step in the plan of God, beginning with the sacrifice of [Jesus Christ](#) for our redemption and ending with the eternal reign of God over the New Heavens and New Earth. We may grouse at hearing the

same old information given in sermons on these holy days, but God is on to us, knowing that we *need* the repetition so that we will not forget what we are involved in. Sad to say, but some of those who have left the church of God no longer remember why they once kept the holy days—and some seem not able to remember *when* they fall during the year! They have not had the benefit of the repeated observance and instruction.

The Bible also encourages us to "pray without ceasing" ([I Thessalonians 5:17](#)), meaning we should be in [constant contact with God](#). David sets an example of praying at "evening and morning and at noon" ([Psalm 55:17](#)); in other words, he prayed throughout the whole day. In the same way, God tells us to "meditate in [His Word] day and night" ([Joshua 1:8](#)); the blessed man thinks about God's Word all day long ([Psalm 1:2](#)). We are also to be conscientious about "rightly dividing the word of truth" ([II Timothy 2:15](#)), which requires thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. Add periodic fasting to these repetitive activities, and the result is a routine that regularly reinforces the words of God to us.

Of course, the most effective reinforcing activity is actually practicing God's way of life daily. The best way to overcome a bad habit—or a sin—is not just to repudiate it, but also to practice a wholesome habit in its place until the new and better way of living becomes natural and habitual. If we have a problem with being judgmental—and so many do—we certainly need to quit being critical but also replace the disparagement with kind words and even praise. And we should do this, not just once, but recurrently and consistently because, if we fail to ingrain this better trait into our character through repetition, we will soon find ourselves judging and criticizing again.

In the same way that we use only a small fraction of our vocabulary, because we are human, we use only a small fraction of what we have learned from God's Word. How much have we really changed throughout our conversion? We all know the Standard, Jesus Christ. He is "the way, the truth, and the life" ([John 14:6](#)). How many of us live our lives anywhere near to the perfection of His life? We have read the gospels many times and know how He acted and reacted in situations analogous to our own, but we still fail "to walk just as He walked" ([I John 2:6](#)).

Life is a continual learning process. Humans never really stop learning, but at some point, many individuals stop making the effort to transform their learning into growth. Christians cannot be satisfied with an "average" 20,000-word spiritual vocabulary, nor can we intellectualize our knowledge of God and His way. It must be read, studied, meditated on, and actively practiced, whether it is comfortable or convenient to do so. We must strive to apply God's way so routinely that it becomes our way. Otherwise, our Christian lives will stagnate, and we run the risk of stepping off the path altogether.

The writer of Hebrews agrees, urging us, "Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away" ([Hebrews 2:1](#)). The eternal stakes of Christianity dictate that we cannot afford to do otherwise.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Living by Faith: Human Pride](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Our carnal nature is the primary impediment to submitting to the Sovereign God. Our human nature is pure vanity with a heart that is desperately deceitful and wicked, motivated by self-centeredness, a deadly combination for producing sin. Satan, motivated by pride, could not control his excessive self-adoration. Sadly, even after our calling and our baptism, we are perpetually saddled with this carnal nature for the rest of our lives, with the mandate to overcome its prideful pulls. Pride, indeed, is the father of all sins. If pride motivates and drives us, we become the offspring of Satan the devil, a hopelessly corrupt being who imagined himself equal or superior to God. Nebuchadnezzar's foolish pride brought him low, causing him to behave like a beast until he repented. Belshazzar failed to learn from his grandfather's example and succumbed to pride. Edom's pride, causing a false sense of infallibility, will lead to a horrible, future end of total obliteration. Ephraim's pride was characterized by prophetic descriptions as a cake unturned (full of

hot air), behaving like a silly dove. Pride and wickedness go together like hand and glove; pride indeed is the badge or ornament of the wicked. Before we appear before the judgment seat of Christ, we must first go through a strenuous vetting process, determining whether pride (a natural characteristic generated by our human nature) or humility (an elective God-given characteristic) motivates us.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[God's Quality Way of Life](#)

by Staff

Our God is a God of excellence and quality. As Christians, we should be striving to develop our lives to the sterling quality of God's character.

If you would like to subscribe to the C.G.G. Weekly newsletter, please visit our [Email Subscriptions page](#).
