

# Education and Mission: *Just. Do it.*

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**Abstract:** Although similar to the well-known Nike slogan, *Just. Do it.* is an abbreviation for *Justified. Do it.* As in, “now that you are justified, do the life of sanctification.” Ideas from early childhood education, foreign language learning, and coaching identify action and obedience as helpful for education in our faith, for living our faith, and for our mission to share Christ with our world.

Thoreau wrote, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” Some lead lives of open desperation: broken marriages, addictions, abuse, pornography, depression, loneliness, theft, murder, and more manifest brokenness. Something doesn’t work in this world, this society of ours. For Christians, it is relatively simple to put the name *sin* to this problem. The Bible says that this world *is* broken.

The Bible also speaks of a cure which is more than just repair for brokenness. Jesus Christ, God born as a human baby, lived a sinless life in this broken world and died a cruel death. He took our punishment, dying separated from God. Then He rose from death, came back to life and promised that death is no longer the end. For all who believe in Him, there is eternal life with Him in the new heaven and new earth, and there is *new life now*. Of course the full cure won’t be known until Jesus returns, but there is much for us to enjoy and live in now. Many Bible stories demonstrate that Christians lived noticeably differently from other people.<sup>1</sup> The cure, the *new life now*, was apparent.

This *new life now* unfortunately often gets missed by Christians, both lifelong and new converts. Christian lives may look very similar to non-Christian lives, including desperation, impatience, defensiveness, infidelity, and more. The love, joy, peace, and other fruits of the Spirit may not be obvious. Of course Christians can know that they are forgiven for all sins, but it is still a loss when we live with less than all that God is giving to us now.

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## God's Gifts Now

God's gifts now are many. As Luther wrote, He gives us ourselves, body and soul, and daily gifts of "clothing and shoes, meat and drink," and more (Luther's Small Catechism: The Meaning of the First Article of the Apostles' Creed). God's gifts now include the means by which the Holy Spirit works and sustains faith. He gives justification by grace through that faith, and sanctification by grace within that faith. Lutherans tend to do a good job of remembering justification and that the Holy Spirit works faith and salvation, but we could often benefit from taking another look at the new life of sanctification that the Holy Spirit longs to work in us.<sup>2</sup> Christ's command to His disciples encompasses both parts: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Mt 28:19–20 NIV). If in our teaching we skip the words, "to obey," we miss out on some of the present reality of our cure, our new life, in Christ. Including "to obey" in Christian education adds immeasurably to the Christian life and mission.

## What we teach in Christian education

In Christian education we teach something new. This may seem unimportant, but too often we miss out on the vitality of Christian life because we don't recognize that it is new and different. Being a Christian is meant to change us, not just be an add-on in our lives as they were before. We may bring some helpful habits to this new life, but even those habits need to be shifted to the new foundation and freedom in Christ. Learning a new language is hard enough, but learning to obey everything Jesus commanded us is learning a new language, a new culture, and a new way of life. As St. Paul wrote, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind" (Rom 12:2). What we are teaching and learning is different from the status quo, and that is the way it is meant to be. One cannot be transformed if one stays the same.

We teach to believe in Jesus, which begins this transformation. This is the primary thing of obeying everything that Christ commanded. Jesus said, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (Jn 6:29). Believing is too hard for us to do alone; we cannot by our own reason or strength come to Christ or believe in Him (Luther's Small Catechism: The Meaning of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed). The Holy Spirit gives us this obedience by teaching us the good news and working faith that Jesus' death atones for us and we are justified before God. This is the *Justified* part of *Just. Do it.*

We also teach to obey the other parts of the "everything" that Jesus commanded His disciples. This is the *new life now*, which the Holy Spirit gives. This is the *Do it.* part of *Just. Do it.* "Do not be anxious" (Mt 6:31, 34). "Seek first the kingdom of God" (Mt 6:33). "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to

them” (Mt 7:12). A particularly challenging one is, “Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well” (Mt 5:38). “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5:44). Jesus said that we are not to judge (Mt 7:1), that lusting in one’s thoughts is committing adultery in one’s heart, and compares insulting one’s brother to murder (Mt 5:21–23). Giving is to be done secretly (Mt 6:3–4). Many other instructions are included in the rest of the New Testament,<sup>3</sup> but for now we can conclude with “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35). Learning to do these things—to love, to obey—can be hard. The next section describes tools that we can use which can help with that learning.

### ***Just. Do it. Tools for teaching: Doing, Trial and Error, Repetition, Obedience, and Community***

As almost any child knows, learning involves doing. Children instinctively reach out to touch and examine, and even to taste, new things. They explore. Marie Montessori, a well-known educator, taught that this instinct in children can be used to aid their learning. She wrote, “Never give to the mind more than you give to the hand.”<sup>4</sup> Montessori classrooms are prepared so that children can tactilely explore the world around them, learning everything from geography and language to higher mathematical concepts using their hands. “The hand and the brain act in unison making a mental connection between an abstract idea and its concrete representation.”<sup>5</sup> Someone who does a thing, say weaving, knows what it is in a more intimate and real way than someone who has only read a description. Taking this thought farther, C. S. Lewis commented, through Screwtape’s words, that humans “constantly forget . . . that whatever their bodies do affects their souls.”<sup>6</sup> Touching and doing, these things expand learning.

Through doing, a student also has the benefit of learning by trial and error. A baby learning spoken language babbles and makes sounds, trying them out and learning to match the sounds made by other people. A small child working to build with blocks discovers how to make them balance, precisely because of the times the small tower will topple over. An older child in a Montessori classroom discovers how the algebraic formula works with special blocks, because errors are self-evident when the cube is not formed properly. Even in relationships we learn what works and what doesn’t work by trial and error. As we learn in faith, a benefit is that we can live assured that our mistakes are forgiven. We are given freedom in our justification to go and try to live as God’s people, making mistakes as we go.

Repetition of action is useful for learning our new ways of speaking and acting. Repetition can take a person from the awkwardness of a first attempt all the way to comfort and competence. Think of the young child who is learning to climb into a

chair, climbing on and climbing off and climbing on and climbing off. I will not write all the repetitions, but many parents have endured repetitions beyond their ability to count. The one-time action, repeated, is transformed into a skill. Knowledge connected with repeated action can be learned more deeply.

Learning is helped if the repetition is made meaningful. When I taught Spanish and German, it was challenging to make the spoken repetitions meaningful so that my students' brains (unlike the brains of the parents in the previous example) didn't shut off. We solved the problem by switching partners when we practiced speaking. A student could say, "Hello," ask how the other person was, and exchange names meaningfully when they spoke with five different people, instead of just repeating with the same person. I was amazed at how my students' competence increased with this change.

Practicing by doing and repeating can feel awkward; and even if we know what to do, it is often hard to make ourselves do. Obedience, doing when we don't feel like doing, is needed. We need to "be doers of the word, and not hearers only" (Jas 1:22).

Even with that encouragement, it might be easy to dismiss obedience as an antiquated idea, not appropriate for modern life. But the sports that many people play give the lie to that mental evasion. Almost everyone in the United States has some contact with sports and an awareness of coaches. Coaches expect players to do what they are told, to obey.

Coaches help coachable players improve in a sport through the obedience of the players. The coach says to run two warm-up laps. They run two warm-up laps. The coach says, "Put your arms this way, stand here, put your weight on your toes, tackle that way," and they do it. Or they try to do it, and through trial and error and repetition, they work at the new skill or strength. The players obey their coaches. And the coach helps to refine what they do, praising and correcting as needed.

Of course no one learns these skills perfectly, but players aim at improvement. No good coach would accept from a player, "Coach, I'm never going to get my batting swing perfect, so I'm not going to follow your instructions or work to improve it." Any player who said that could plan to sit on the bench. It is expected that players will continue to work to refine their skills.

Coaches know that players form habits. A coachable player forms the habit of attempting to do what the coach says. This habit of obedience forms by hearing information from the coach and doing one's best to put that into action. Knowledge connects to action. A player who regularly does not put the instructions into action, forms a habit of disobedience by disconnecting what the coach says with what the player does. The danger is, as C. S. Lewis wrote, that "The more often [a person] feels without acting, the less he will be able ever to act, and, in the long run, the less he will be able to feel."<sup>7</sup> One could say that the same principle applies to knowing.

Information that is known without being acted upon will eventually be eroded. Therefore, in faith, as in sports, learning needs to connect instruction to action.

A community provides a location for the learning, for caring for one another and being cared for. Hopefully we have at least a few Christians around us with whom we can discuss our attempts at obeying. Within this community we can find, as Montessori schools offer children, a place to practice our new skills, to make mistakes, and to try again. Hopefully we can also find encouragement with one another and motivation to keep going. Many an athlete has played harder and even played injured for the sake of the team. We can do the same for one another on our “faith” team.

### **Putting these tools to use: *Just. Do it.***

First, let us be honest with ourselves about where we are. If we individually examine our faith life as if from a sport’s paradigm, some things may show up. Most people would not be embarrassed to play catch or kick a soccer ball with their kids, practicing those skills in their yard. It’s not kept private. Sometimes as Christians we may keep our faith “skills” private or fail to practice them at all. When a kid first starts to throw a ball, we hopefully encourage her: “Try it again. You can do it.” Do we cheer learning and living faith stuff in the same way?

Here are two examples. Moving beyond just teaching good manners, we can coach our children to practice a spirit of thankfulness. “Come on, Junior, you can do it, find something to be thankful for! Now, ten more! Yeah, Junior!” Or we think of a situation where we have been wronged, and we try to move from thinking about getting back at the other person to struggling with ourselves to do good to them. Author George MacDonald described a character who “white with passion, cast[s] himself on his face on the shore and cling[s] with his hands to the earth as if in a paroxysm of bodily suffering, then after a few moments rise[s] and do[es] a service to the man who had wronged him.”<sup>8</sup> That is a battle for self-control. We can become aware of our current thoughts and actions and then, likely thinking outside the box, try new things. Of course, we will never get these instructions from the Bible completely correct, but we can continue to practice our faith skills just like athletes practice their sport skills.

### **Ideas for working with young children**

For raising young children in the faith, speak to them about faith stuff and teach them to do. Especially at young ages when children’s brains are fusing some synapses and eliminating other unused ones,<sup>9</sup> including faith in the conversation is so helpful for their long-term learning. From birth through about age 3, children’s minds absorb language and so much more from their surroundings like sponges.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, try to bring God into your conversations.<sup>11</sup> Use memorized prayers with

them so that they get to practice saying the words. Later, talk with them about what the words mean. Model free prayer for them, and as they grow encourage them to pray in their own words. Model apologizing for your children. Have family memory work. If you attend a church that uses a liturgy, memorizing parts of the liturgy at home can help a child be able to participate on Sundays. Memorize Bible passages that offer comfort, that remind us of God's love and faithfulness, and that direct our actions. At appropriate times, bring those verses back to mind. When children feel lonely, we can offer a hug, listen, and somewhere in the conversation remind them that Jesus is with them always (Mt 28:20). When two kids are having a fight, we can remind them to "be quick to listen and slow to speak and slow to become angry" (Jas 1:19). If you feel daring, role-playing different situations can be a wonderful and humorous teaching tool.

### **Ideas for working with ourselves and adult converts**

Many of the same ideas can work for us adults and new converts. We adults may feel self-conscious about making changes. It is important to be gentle with ourselves when we try new things. Once again *Justified* is where we start. God is gentle with us, forgiving our sins. We can confess privately to God in prayer; we can hear God's forgiveness out loud if we choose to confess sins that particularly bother us to a trustworthy pastor or Christian.<sup>12</sup> We discover we are forgiven, *Justified*, free to *do* in our daily lives. We can start with baby steps: memorize a Bible passage, say something about Jesus or faith, talk to Jesus about a struggle, or start a thank-you journal.<sup>13</sup> Beyond baby steps like these, our own unique circumstances will shape our living out our faith in daily life.

As adults we are often slower to learn new habits and slower to memorize than young children. That we are slower to learn suggests we would benefit from even more repetitions. After all, with children we are just trying to establish habits; but we adults, new converts or not, likely also have habits to *undo*. We do not know when old habits, culture, or ways of thinking may try to reassert themselves. It is especially important to be aware of friends and situations that contradict our Christian way of life. Just as a recovering addict needs to be aware around the old friends in the old life styles, so do we. Besides practicing this Christian way of life, it is important that we learn to translate what we are doing for those who do not know our Christian language. Be aware that, as with most change, we may also be surprised by resistance within ourselves. We need to believe that the change is possible, and work to obey.

### **Ideas for congregations**

Pastors can take a few moments in prayers and sermons to name specific sins and that they are forgiven. Attaching forgiveness to specific, not generalized, sins

increases our awareness of its value. Pastors can take a few moments before a general confession to mention a few sins for people to think about. It is perhaps not helpful to put specific sins into a confession read aloud by the congregation, because we do not all sin in the same way. Congregations can offer Bible studies that teach about our actions. They could also offer Scripture memory work for everyone and spelling bee-like get-togethers. Congregations can take time to celebrate together in community.

### **These educational tools in Christian life and mission**

A richer Christian life flows from this active kind of learning. In the midst of the normal ups and down of life, we can enjoy growing in the fruits of the Spirit. How wonderful it would be to live with more love, more joy, more peace, and more patience for one another! Imagine growing so that kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control characterize us! Or imagine actually discovering that we aren't as worried about the future because God has helped us to grow in trusting His care and providing. We don't know the limits of the good that God intends toward us and in us. We can keep growing into it and obeying more and more.

Obedience is of great value. When we learn without doing, our brains are being trained to disbelieve the reality of our cure in Christ. When we learn with doing, our bodies reinforce what our minds have heard: that God is faithful and we belong to Christ. The benefits to us of obedience are significant. C. S. Lewis wrote from the perspective of Screwtape, a demon, "Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do [God's] will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys."<sup>14</sup> Holding to doing as Jesus commanded even when difficulties come is hard.

It is in those hard times both that we grow more and that other people notice. It is noticeable when we can hold to honesty, to generosity, to kindness, and even to joy in difficulty. A man tells his neighbor that he cracked the neighbor's window. That neighbor may be upset, but he also knows that he lives next to an honest man. This is Christian living that is at the same moment mission work. A woman suffering and slowly dying in a care center radiates Christ's peace and joy to the staff and fellow patients. This is Christian living and mission work. A congregation surrounds that same woman with love, noticeable for the many visits and ongoing care. This is Christian living and mission work. Any of those situations may open a door for further conversation about Jesus. Through the Word and Means of Grace, God gives forgiveness and strength for living and obeying that flows out from us in noticeable ways.

Christians living their lives growing in obedience and the fruits of the Spirit stand out in a winsome way. Much as a first-time grandmother radiates joy and can't

wait to show newborn's pictures to anyone she meets, so we, too, can overflow with joy. Speaking about Christ can also flow from our joy and peace. When we are growing in knowing God's Word and growing in obeying what we are taught, our lives keep changing. The richness added to our Christian lives and how we live and speak shares Christ with the world.

In conclusion, we Lutherans live in this amazing freedom of salvation by grace alone—*Justified*, and we easily lose sight of the gift of education in our Christian walk—*Do it*. Reducing Christian education to teaching knowledge leaves out much that is life changing and allows part of “teaching them *to obey* everything I have commanded you” slip through our fingers. The educational tools of doing, allowing oneself to make mistakes and try again, repeating to practice skills, and striving to obey within community all enable us to incorporate the learning.

Learning our faith in this active way can allow our lives to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. The fruits of the Spirit can fill our lives with richness and banish much of the quiet desperation. Learning to live with the fruits of the Spirit is how education in faith ties to mission work. For living with joy and peace and patience and more in the midst of circumstances just like our neighbors gives a living and active witness to the difference Christ makes.<sup>15</sup> Our lives are our mission work. Can there be a greater witness?

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Acts 16–31 (Unless otherwise noted, all Bible verses are quoted from the ESV.) and Acts 4:34 are two examples.

<sup>2</sup> R. Kolb, T. J. Wengert, and C. P. Arand, “The Augsburg Confession” in *The Book of Concord: the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 40 (AC VI).

<sup>3</sup> Other instructions from the New Testament: husbands love your wives, wives respect your husbands, work for your overseers as if you were working for Christ (from Ephesians 5–6), “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph 4:31–32). “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you; sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. . . . But now you must put them all away; anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another” (Col 3:5, 8–9).

<sup>4</sup> Paula Polk Lillard and Lynn Lillard Jessen, *Montessori from the Start: The Child at Home from Birth to Age Three* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 48.

<sup>5</sup> Paula Polk Lillard, *Montessori Today: A Comprehensive Approach to Education from Birth to Adulthood* (New York: Schocken Books, 1996), 36.

<sup>6</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (Including *The Screwtape letters*) (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 195.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>8</sup> George MacDonald, *The Marquis' Secret* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1982), 143.

<sup>9</sup> Rima Shore, *Rethinking the Brain: New Insights into Early Development* (New York: Families and Work Institute, 1997), 17.

<sup>10</sup> Lillard, *Montessori Today*, 26.

<sup>11</sup> I remember the first time it hit me that I was responsible for sharing Christ with my son. After that I made myself add little faith comments, like mentioning that God made the rain. I am happy to report that after several years of this I am more comfortable talking about my faith with my children.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Luther, *Large Catechism* (Exhortation to Confession).

<sup>13</sup> *One Thousand Gifts* by Ann Voskamp, is a wonderful book about thankfulness.

<sup>14</sup> Lewis, *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics*, 208.

<sup>15</sup> Years ago I heard the observation from a friend, “When God allows a non- Christian to suffer something, He allows a Christian to suffer the same thing so that the difference Christ makes will be revealed in him.”