

# Back to School: A Letter to Me

Jay Ferguson August 13, 2019

It's been my joy and privilege to be a head of school for 16 years now. During that time, I've walked alongside you also as a school parent: sitting beside you at football games, clapping proudly with you as our children played the recorder in the spring music festival, and marking the passage of time as they moved from elementary to junior high, then junior high to high school, then from high school right on out the door.

This place, these people, and these moments resonate deeply in my soul. But for my own family, this is our last time around the track. Our youngest, the caboose, is a senior, readying herself to leave our station. I'm pretty sad about it, to be honest. With my other two, I was ready. God has a way of readying your heart for your children to leave your home, usually manifested in butting heads with them as they become independent and anxious to leave. Not this one, though. I think this one is going to hurt.



I'm always pretty reflective at the beginning of the school year, but this year I find myself even more so, as my wife and I enter what will be our last year of kids in our home. So, as we celebrate and hold precious each one of our "lasts"—last first day of school, last meet-the-teacher night, and last Homecoming—I've been thinking about what, for many of you, might be your "first." Maybe your oldest is just beginning school, or maybe you're on the front end of your child's schooling years. If so, I'm a little envious of you, all the while thinking how I would never, ever want to do it over again. Brad Paisley wrote a song a few years ago called, "A Letter to Me," musing on what he would tell his 16-year-old self if he could write a letter to that kid. I was thinking about my own letter to me, what I would say to myself if I were just beginning this ride all

over again. It would probably be way too long for a blog, but here are one or three of the things I think I'd say:

## This stuff really works.

I know you're wondering, 30-year-old me, if this Christian education thing is really worth it. It's expensive, and you're young, and you're not making as much as you will be someday (little do you know God will take you from lawyer to head of school—downward income trajectory for you, bud—surprise!) You could have a nicer car, or maybe a vacation home. But, trust me, it's worth it. You know those three little girls, whom you bathe, and sit on towels and carry around the house playing magic carpet ride, singing “A Whole New World” from *Aladdin*? They're going to be driving Mazdas instead of magic carpets before you even realize your hair went grey. And, in only six weeks or so after you watch them drive those Mazdas off to Baylor or A & M or Alabama, or wherever, you're going to realize every dime you ever dropped on teaching them to love Jesus and think Christianly was the best money you ever spent. From, “Dad, people are so messed up here. Thank you for helping me know exactly who God made me to be,” to, “No one here even knows what a thesis statement is, Mom! I never realized I could write so well,” you won't have to wonder if it's worth it. You'll hear it from their lips. For some of our friends, it took a little longer than others, because God writes a different story for every one of us, but now that I've been doing this a long, long time, I'm a huge believer in the power of God to transform hearts through Christian education. So, stay after it, 30-year-old me.

## Be who you want those kids to be.

You can talk about Jesus until you're blue in the face, but those girls will become who you are. If that makes you uncomfortable, change yourself. Although you love those girls deeply, there are some things we don't do well. We get frustrated easily, because we're kind of control freaks (you'll figure that out later). We are achievement-driven, and sometimes we let that go way overboard. You and I are far from perfect, 30-year-old me. But, here's one thing you can definitely do, even in the midst of that imperfection: you can confess to those girls when you mess up, not try to hide it or pretend we're perfect. You can tell them about the extravagant, incredible, unfathomable grace of Jesus, and how He loves, forgives, and redeems us even in the depths of our imperfections and faults. And, we can show them what repentance looks like, and purposing to live a life worthy of the gospel. Challenge yourself to imitate Christ, because they will for sure be imitating you.

## Let them fail—then walk them through it.

Like so many in our parenting generation, I learned too late *in* life not to work so hard to protect them *from* life. So, 30-year-old me, here's the deal: *back off*. Let them fail. Stop trying to engineer success for them or prevent them from making mistakes. If you remind them to study for a test and they don't follow through, stop coercing them to do it. When they're having friend issues, if they're not in danger, coach them through it—don't try to rescue them. Let them grow strong and learn that life is about struggle and perseverance against great odds, and finding God's joy and peace through pain and suffering, and that all these really difficult things are the beautiful stuff of life.

That's why you're there, 30-year-old me: to coach, teach, love, and pray those beauties through all those moments. This parenting stuff isn't easy; it's not for the faint of heart. But, everything spectacular in life has the immanent ability to tear out your heart and stomp it flat, and parenting is certainly no exception. Live out loud, and love deeply, and pray like it's all you can really do—because, in the end, you'll realize it's all you could ever really do.

And, while you're at it, 30-year-old me, invest in Apple. You don't know what it is yet, but the iPhone is going to be huge.

## ***About the Author***



***Jay Ferguson, JD, PhD***, is the headmaster of Grace Community School, Tyler, Texas. He practiced law for 10 years and, in 2002, joined Grace as development director before assuming the headmaster role in 2003. He's written extensively on Christian education and training children, including his weekly blog, [JaysBlog](#).