



# THE ART OF SAYING GOODBYE IN A CULTURE OF SEE YOU LATER

By Jess Fankhauser, co-author [Ready or Not: Leaning into Life in Our Twenties](#)

I remember towards the end of a semester long study abroad trip in college when I read the beginning of John 13. Not the well-read section on Jesus washing the disciples' feet but the very first verse that introduces why Jesus washes their feet.

In the ESV John 13:1 reads, 'Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.' And in the NIV the last part reads, 'he now showed them the full extent of his love.'

My time abroad was ending and I wasn't ready to say goodbye. My default was and had always been to withdraw when I knew I was going to have to say goodbye. I would stop investing and start self-protecting in order to minimize the impending hurt and loss. I would retreat. Yet, here this one verse was challenging me to approach goodbyes differently. In this passage, Jesus was doing the opposite. Knowing he was getting ready to leave, he was pouring even more of himself into those he loved. I was blown away.

After that trip, I went on to graduate study and work in academia. What no one ever told me as I prepared for a career on college campuses is that goodbyes are integral to the work. Every August you welcome a new group of college freshman onto campus, invest in them over the next 4ish years, and then watch them leave. Rinse and repeat. They are never meant to stay. Specifically, my previous work in the Calling and Career Office at my institution was entirely focused on helping

students discover and develop their gifts and talents in ways that prepare them for life after college.

Each day I am keenly aware that to do my job well means that I am investing in them so they will be prepared to leave and live well.

Several years ago, I became a licensed foster parent and I remember the first time I had to say goodbye. My first placement had been three little girls who had been living in my home for almost two months. As much as we had talked about the transition in the days leading up to the move, when it came time to say goodbye they didn't really understand. All they wanted to know was why they weren't going to be staying with me anymore. As a foster parent I know from the day I welcome a child into my home, I will almost always have to say goodbye. But knowing that doesn't make it easier.

And as I stood and said goodbye to those little girls, in my heart I questioned whether it was really worth it to follow Jesus' example and to invest until the very end. In that moment, I wanted nothing more than to withdraw and protect my heart. I wanted to invest less so it didn't hurt so much. I wanted to say 'see you later' rather than 'goodbye.' But I knew I likely wouldn't see them again and what they needed from me was an honest goodbye. Empty promises that I would see them again would not help them fully engage and settle into their new family.

In these and many other experiences, I have often wished someone would have taught me how to say goodbye well when I was growing up. Instead one of two things usually happened. Either I couldn't wait to say goodbye and good riddance to an experience or person or I held on for dear life to what I was losing. Both negatively impacted my next experience or relationship.

In the church we rarely, if ever, talk about saying goodbye unless we are at a funeral. The reality though is that goodbyes are a part of our lives long before we get to a funeral. Our lives are full of comings and goings, transitions—the changing of seasons, both in nature and in our lives and hearts. Different seasons, with different people, roles and responsibilities.

And the more I encounter these different seasons and roles and relationships in my work and life, the more I am convinced that our inability to say goodbye well, is paralyzing us (me) from living fully into the abundant John 10:10 life that God desires for us.

And so, I find myself at the end of another academic year preparing to say goodbye yet again (maybe you do as well).

So what have I learned about saying goodbye that I wish we talked about more (and that we and our students practiced) in this season?

1. We are meant to live and invest fully until the very last day. Withdrawing or checking out early from a relationship or experience before the end may feel easier in the moment, but it doesn't help us say goodbye well.
2. It is better (if at all possible) to leave with no regrets. This is where it can be easier to avoid hard conversations because you know you're leaving soon and it doesn't feel worth it. If it is healthy and safe for you—have the hard conversation.
3. Take time to grieve what you are losing. We live in a culture that rarely likes to name emotion or slow down long enough to reflect. But to leave well we have to do both. Name what you are losing and give yourself permission and time to grieve it.
4. Extend extra grace to yourself and others as each person says goodbye and grieves differently. If it is a group experience like college or a trip—where there is a group of people all grieving the same loss at the same time, this step is critical. Emotions are high, sleep and self-care are usually lacking and a little extra grace can go a long way in helping you not leave with regrets.
5. And finally: when the time comes there is a need to actually say goodbye, not see you later.

Goodbyes are complex. Some we have been waiting to say from day one, others we have been dreading. Some are expected, and others are sudden. There is the loss of children, homes, communities, family members and certain life stages. Goodbyes carry emotions and memories of shared experiences, relationships and life lived with others in community that we don't want to lose or admit are changing.

But goodbyes also give us the opportunity to genuinely thank those who have made an impact on our lives in a particular season. I'm not often a note person—but in seasons of goodbyes—I've found it to be helpful both for myself and others to have something tangible to mark the goodbye. Goodbyes allow us to reflect on what we've learned in a particular season or from a particular person. They allow us to stop poor habits or start afresh in new places with new people.

And so, I think we need to talk and practice the art of saying goodbye. I think to learn to leave well is to learn to live well (And I'm not above some chocolate, coffee or a nap after a hard goodbye either).

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#ReadyOrNotBook

# THE ART OF SAYING GOODBYE

Your ability to say goodbye well now will directly impact your ability to say hello and invest fully in your next season of life.

What have been some memorable goodbyes in your life (either positive or negative)? List them here.

What made them memorable?

Who and/or what will you be saying goodbye to in the next few weeks?



### **1. Commit to being present until the very last day**

- What does it look like for you to stay invested until the last day?
- What do you still want to do before you leave?

### **2. Leave with no regrets**

- Who do you need to have conversations with?
- Who do you need to thank?

### **3. Grieve what you are losing**

- Name the things you are losing.
- What does it look like for you to grieve in this transition?

### **4. Give grace to yourself and others as you process differently**

- What does it look like to practice the fruit of the spirit?

### **5. Actually say goodbye—not see you later**

- Who are you realistically going to stay in close contact with? (4-5)
- Who do you need to say goodbye to?

# NOTES

## Further Resources

- C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*
- McIntyre, *A Long Letting Go*