

STUDY GUIDE

SIX SESSIONS

GARY THOMAS

WHEN  
TO  
WALK  
AWAY

FINDING FREEDOM  
FROM TOXIC PEOPLE

**GARY THOMAS**

WITH KEVIN & SHERRY HARNEY

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**FINDING FREEDOM  
FROM TOXIC PEOPLE**

 **ZONDERVAN™**

*When to Walk Away Study Guide*

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## INTRODUCTION

# WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

Maria is only ten years old, but she goes to bed with a knot in her stomach and worry in her heart. Her parents notice her joyful spirit only pops up occasionally and she is sullen and moody more and more often. When they ask how she is doing, she gives a quick, “Fine,” and avoids any other conversation.

After two months of this pattern getting progressively worse, Maria’s parents decide to have a serious conversation with their sweet daughter and let her know they might need to see a family counselor if things don’t get better. Confronted with the love and concern of her parents, Maria breaks down in tears. She recounts how her “friend” Holly has been treating her. Lies are being told to the rest of their friend circle. Holly is making threats that Maria will be utterly left out if she does not do whatever Holly says. Maria has asked Holly if she has done something wrong, and Holly has told her that there are all kinds of things wrong with her and she should just be thankful that anyone would play with her.

What would you do if you were Maria's parents? What advice would you give your daughter?

Karl is a transfer student at a new college. After two years of community college and working nights to save money, he is finally attending a great Christian university. This has been his dream from childhood. He is even playing soccer as a walk-on, and the coach saw fit to make him a starting striker. Karl should be having the time of his life. In some ways, he is. He loves his classes and professors. He is amazed that they actually pray to Jesus in many of his classes and faith comes up regularly in his course work and conversations with other students. Karl grew up going to public schools and he is really happy to be in an environment that is warmly welcoming of his Christian faith. But there is a dark cloud hanging over Karl's life and heart.

There are two guys on the soccer team who are relentless in their mocking and unflinchingly cold in their attitude toward him. He knew jumping into a team that had been playing together for a couple years might be awkward. He expected some friendly teasing and a little good-hearted initiation, but this was something entirely different. Most of the guys seemed to like him, but DJ and Johaan were getting crueler as the season went on. Karl tried to build bridges, be nicer, pray for them, and even offered to take them out to dinner and pay the bill. It seemed that the harder he tried to be kind, the more vicious they became. They were even making efforts to turn the other players against Karl.

Karl finally met with his Bible teacher and poured out his heart. He wondered if something was wrong with him. What could he do to get these guys to like him? What had he done wrong? What would you say if you were Karl's Bible teacher?

Toxic people come in all shapes and sizes. We have all met them. Maybe, in our worst moments, we have been them. What we can all agree on is that trying to appease people like Holly, DJ, and Johaan won't improve the situation. In most cases, things will only get worse.

From childhood, to teenage years, to young adulthood, and all through our life, we will face people who are mean, unfair, toxic, and deeply broken. For most of us, we have no category for these people, so we have no idea how to respond. Sometimes we blame ourselves. At other time we try harder to get along and smooth the waters. Those who are compassionate will often pray, care, and try to win them over. Those who are tenderhearted can end up with tears, depression, ulcers, and worse.

In this video Bible study we will look at a topic rarely talked about and often avoided. The fact that you are part of this study says you have courage to tackle the tough stuff in life. By the end of this study you will know what to say to a little girl like Maria, a young man like Karl, to friends and family members when they encounter toxic people. You will even know what to say to yourself when someone like this intersects in your life. Most of all, you will know more about how to love Jesus, stand with your Savior, walk confidently in your mission, and sometimes even walk away from toxic people hand-in-hand with him.

## OF NOTE

The quotations interspersed throughout this study guide are excerpts from the book *When to Walk Away: Finding Freedom from Toxic People* and the video curriculum of the same name by Gary Thomas. All other resources including the study introduction, small group questions, session introductions, and between sessions materials have been written by Kevin and Sherry Harney in collaboration with Gary Thomas.

SESSION ONE

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# FOLLOW JESUS' EXAMPLE

*Jesus walked away from toxic people and let them walk away from him. We can learn to follow his example.*



## INTRODUCTION

For the first fifteen years of their marriage they served the church in two dramatically different ways. Both David and Ginny had gifts for ministry, loved people, and felt honored to serve the same congregation. David was the pastor and Ginny led the music ministry and adult education. Their mission was the same, but they responded to toxic people in totally different ways.

When they started at their first church, a woman came at Ginny like a heat-seeking missile. She was clearly needy and explained to Ginny that she wanted an accountability partner, a friend, a shoulder to cry on, and someone to call (at any time, day or night) when she was in need. This woman was certain that the Lord wanted Ginny to be that person. So, Ginny made the commitment and jumped into a relationship that lasted fifteen long and painful years.

This woman demanded everything and gave nothing back. She would call at all hours and expect Ginny to drop everything, even the care of her children, to listen, pray, and help her manage whatever issue she was facing. When Ginny would try to establish barriers, the woman would declare that Ginny was not loving, not caring, and maybe not even a Christian. She would share this with anyone who would listen.

Over time, this woman began declaring to anyone who would listen that no one at the church cared about her or did anything to help her. She even wrote a letter to the church board saying that Ginny was an unkind person and should not be serving at the church until she learned how to “be more like Jesus.” Finally, this angry woman left the church. She told people, “I am going to find a church where the members actually care and where the pastor’s wife is not a hypocrite!”

During this same decade and a half, David also encountered a handful of toxic people in their church. He was kind to them but always seemed able to keep them at arm’s length. They would make demands of him and he would smile and let them know that it was not his job to be their personal counselor, to meet all of their needs, to be their best friend, or to come to every event they felt he should attend. Some of them got angry and pushed back, but other members of the church would assure David, “That guy has always been like that and everyone knows it!” They would assure him that keeping a safe distance from “that guy” was a wise decision that most of the church members would understand.

Instead of being controlled by a few super-needy, angry, and highly demanding people, David invested that time in two or three leaders each year. He would identify those who were mature leaders that needed some coaching and encouragement and he would pour into them. David also had a gift for finding younger and upcoming leaders and helping them sharpen their gifts, grow in prayer, and learn to serve Jesus in the church and the marketplace.

When David and Ginny accepted a call to move to a new church, they took time to evaluate their ministry. David was thankful that he had the honor of preaching and leading the

congregation, but he told Ginny that one of his greatest joys was seeing several leaders take serious steps forward in their love for God, service in the church, and their passion for living out faith in their home and in the workplace. Ginny told David that she celebrated the growth in the music ministry and the adult classes. But, sadly, she had not really invested in developing many leaders. She said, “Most of my time for the last fifteen years has been invested in one woman, and I wonder if I made any lasting impact on her life.”

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*Christians have the tendency of thinking that walking away from anyone or letting anyone walk away from them is a failure on their part.*

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## TALK ABOUT IT

If you or your group members are just getting to know one another, take a few minutes to introduce yourselves. Then, to kick things off, discuss one of the following questions:

- What attitudes and behaviors release a person like David to be fruitful and impactful in ministry and life?

— or —

- What attitudes and behaviors keep a person like Ginny from a full life and ministry?

## TEACHING NOTES

As you watch the video teaching segment for this session, use the following outline to record any thoughts or concepts that stand out to you.

### NOTES

Greg's story . . . a toxic person in the workplace

An elimination diet . . . this is not just for food

A good offense . . . two keys

Seek first his kingdom

Invest in reliable people

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*By definition, focusing on some people requires us to occasionally walk away from others.*

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A good defense . . . know when to walk away

Defining a toxic person . . . let the picture come into focus

Learning from Jesus in the four Gospels . . . watch his example

Sometimes he walked away

He never chased those who walked away

Jesus taught his followers to flee . . . and not feel guilty

Esther's story . . . the fruit of walking away

## GROUP DISCUSSION

Take a few minutes with your group members to discuss what you just watched and explore these concepts in Scripture.

1. Tell about a toxic person who has intersected your life. (Be sensitive about using a name or recognizable details in this setting.) How has their behavior and attitudes impacted your life? Would you describe the time you spent with them as “fruitful”? Explain.
  
2. What is it that causes us to keep playing offense and refuse to walk away from a toxic person? How can being a Christian and looking only at the compassion of Jesus keep a person from walking away?

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*Sometimes walking away is the best way to defend the good work God is calling us to do.*

---

3. What are some of the possible consequences if we refuse to walk away from a toxic person?

Relational consequences:

Spiritual consequences:

Emotional consequences:

Physical consequences:

Tell about how you or someone close to you has faced some of these consequences.

- 4.** Read Matthew 6:33–34. What does it mean to seek God's kingdom above all else (in general and in your own life)? How can following this call of Jesus set the course of our lives (including our relational lives) on the right path?

5. How can the behavior and expectations of a toxic person get in the way of us following this essential call of Jesus for all of his people? How have you seen the pressures of a toxic person keep a sincere Christian (yourself or someone else) from fully following the plans of Jesus?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. Read 2 Timothy 2:1-2. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the apostle Paul tells the young pastor Timothy to invest what he is learning into the lives of some reliable and qualified people. Why is it critical that all of us hear this call to invest in a few faithful and receptive people? Who is one person you feel God has placed in your life that you can invest in and help grow deeper in faith, and how can your group members pray for you as you seek to do this?

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*Toxic people may represent one of Satan's most clever attacks against God's work.*

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- 7. Read Matthew 8:28–9:1.** This crowd could have marveled at the power of Jesus. They could have fallen on their faces and worshiped the Lord of glory. Instead, they asked him to leave their region. Why do you think they responded this way? How did Jesus respond to this request and why do you think he responded this way?

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*The hearts of some people were not changed by the actual Messiah when he walked on this earth . . . so who are we to think that our efforts can fix every broken person we encounter?*

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- 8. Read John 8:58–59 and Matthew 12:13–15.** How did Jesus respond in these conflicted and unhealthy situations? How can Jesus be our example when we are around people who are toxic and dangerous? How can walking away be the most godly and honoring thing we can do?

9. Jesus told his followers that there were times and situations where they should flee. Tell about a life situation where you have been “hanging in there,” but you believe Jesus might be calling you to walk away. What is keeping you from walking away and what would help you take this step of faith and walk away with Jesus?

## CLOSING PRAYER

Spend time in your group praying in some of the following directions:

- Thank God for the faithful people who have taken time to invest in your spiritual journey ,and also pray for those who are still cheering you on as you grow in faith.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to help you recognize and identify people in your life (or the lives of those you love) who are truly toxic. Pray for discernment to know the difference between a difficult person who needs God’s care and toxic people who need to be avoided.
- Ask for courage to embrace the idea that one of the godliest things you can do is walk away from toxic

people so you have the time and energy to invest in receptive and hungry people.

- Invite your heavenly Father to comfort and care for one of your group members who shared the pain and struggle they have faced because of a toxic person in their life.

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*Satan knows that he can't stop God's fresh water from flowing through you, so he tries to get you to pour it down the drain of toxic people rather than onto the fertile fields of teachable and thirsty people.*

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## SESSION ONE

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# BETWEEN-SESSIONS PERSONAL STUDY

Reflect on the content you've covered this week in *When to Walk Away* by engaging in any or all of the following between-sessions activities. The time you invest will be well spent, so let God use it to draw you closer to him. At your next meeting, share with your group any key points or insights that stood out to you as spent this time with the Lord.

### TRY AN ELIMINATION DIET

Some people take time to do an elimination diet with food to see how specific foods are impacting their physical health (and sometimes their emotional health). Try this with a person in your life who you feel might be toxic. Use the process below to guide you:

**Pray for wisdom to identify a toxic person.** You might already feel you know who that individually is but ask for a confirmation from the Holy Spirit.

**Seek wisdom from a confidential, wise, and godly friend or family member.** Share what you have experienced in relationship with this person and ask if it sounds like they are operating in a toxic manner. You might want to share some of what you have learned in this study.

**Eliminate this person for a set period of time.** If they contact you or are around you daily, you might want to make it a week. If they are around weekly, consider making it a month. Either avoid them for this time or let them know that you won't be available for this time period. If they push back strongly, this might be an indicator of the kind of person you are dealing with.

How long I will do this elimination diet: \_\_\_\_\_

**Evaluate** how you feel, your emotional condition, your spiritual vitality, and your general outlook during this time. What changes with no contact with the toxic person? Do you feel more peaceful? Does your stress level go down?

**OBSERVATIONS:**

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

## Follow Jesus' Example

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

**Decide** if you need to walk away from this person in some specific and measurable ways. How will you communicate this? Who will pray for you and keep you accountable to follow through?

How I will communicate this decision?

Who will pray for me and keep me accountable to hold to this decision?

## LEARNING FROM THE MASTER

Take time in the coming weeks and read all four Gospels. Record when you see Jesus walking away, encouraging his people to walk away, or not chasing after those who walk away from him. Use the space beginning below to record your observations from each of the Gospel accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus.





After reading all four Gospels, review all of your observations and write down your four biggest composite observations from the life of Jesus recorded in the Bible:

**OBSERVATION 1:**

**OBSERVATION 2:**

**OBSERVATION 3:**

**OBSERVATION 4:**

## **FIND RELIABLE AND QUALIFIED PEOPLE**

Take time to memorize 2 Timothy 2:2:

*And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.*

Next, pray for God to place the name or face of one person on your mind. Ask that this person be someone healthy,

hungry, and reliable. Ask God to help you invest time and spiritual encouragement in the life of this person.

Decide how you will make this investment and follow through for at least a month. At the end of the month, decide if this is a wise and fruitful use of your time and determine what next steps you will take.

## JOURNAL

Use the space provided below and on the following page to write some reflections on the following topics:

- What are the characteristics of those who have poured into my life spiritually and how can I emulate these same traits as I invest in others?
- What are the situations where I have a hard time drawing boundaries and walking away from toxic people? How can I respond in a more Jesus-honoring way in the future and learn to walk away?
- How can I share some of the learning and biblical insight I am gaining from this study with those who are still not aware that Jesus calls us to walk away from toxic people?

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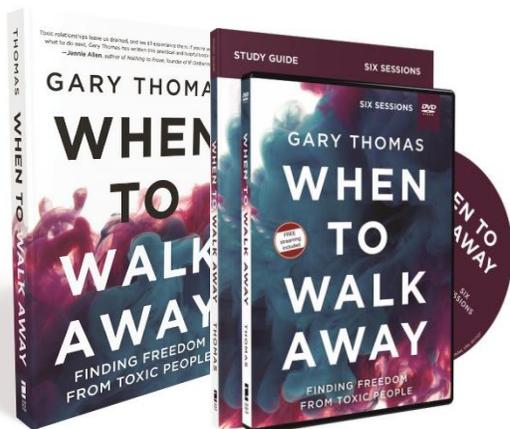
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# WHEN TO WALK AWAY

By Gary Thomas

**Jesus walked away from toxic people, and you should too.**

Bestselling author Gary Thomas draws on Jesus' example to show how the best course of action for us to take with some relationships is to walk away . . . or let the other person walk away. Most of us have run across toxic individuals who drain us of our joy and peace—people who resent the grace we share and will never change. In the Gospels, we read that when Jesus spoke a hard truth, sometimes the other person chose to walk away. Other times, the person asked Jesus to leave—and he complied. As Gary will show in this study, we don't have to pour our time and energy into toxic people. Instead, we can follow Jesus' example to walk away from toxic people and walk toward healthy relationships that will encourage us, strengthen us, and build us up. And as we do, it frees us to focus completely on the purpose that God has established for our lives.

[LEARN MORE](#)