

Toxic relationships leave us drained, and we all experience them. If you're wondering what to do next, Gary Thomas has written this practical and helpful book for you.

—Jennie Allen, author of *Nothing to Prove*, founder of IF:Gathering

GARY THOMAS
WHEN

TO

WALK
AWAY

FINDING FREEDOM
FROM TOXIC PEOPLE

WHEN TO WALK AWAY

FINDING FREEDOM
FROM TOXIC PEOPLE

GARY THOMAS

 ZONDERVAN®

ZONDERVAN

When to Walk Away

Copyright © 2019 by The Center for Evangelical Spirituality

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, 3900 Sparks Dr. SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546

ISBN 978-0-310-34676-0 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-0-310-34681-4 (international trade paper edition)

ISBN 978-0-310-35599-1 (audio)

ISBN 978-0-310-34679-1 (ebook)

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.Zondervan.com. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.®

Scripture quotations marked ESV are taken from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®). Copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation. © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NRSV are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Bible. Copyright © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Any internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers in this book are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by Zondervan, nor does Zondervan vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this book.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Published in association with Yates & Yates, www.yates2.com.

Cover photo: katherinegregorio / Shutterstock

Interior design: Kait Lamphere

Printed in the United States of America

19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 /LSC/ 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS

1. A Most Clever Attack.....	9
2. Walkaway Jesus	17
3. A Murderous Spirit	26
4. Control Mongers	38
5. Loving Hate	47
6. No Time to Waste.....	57
7. Reliable People	68
8. Pigs and Pearls	76
9. Love Tells the Truth.....	87
10. A Man with a Mission	94
11. Looking Like Jesus When Working with Judas	108
12. Learning How to Be Hated.....	118
13. Scripture's Skeleton.....	128
14. A New Allegiance	139
15. The Most Vicious Attack.....	146
16. Toxic Parents	153
17. Toxic Marriages	166
18. Leaving the Toxicity Instead of the Marriage.....	181
19. Toxic Children	192
20. Trading Toxic for Tender.....	202
21. Don't Be Toxic <i>to Yourself</i>	215
Epilogue	223
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	225
<i>Appendix: Jesus Walking Away</i>	227
<i>Notes</i>	235

CHAPTER 1

A MOST CLEVER ATTACK

Greg was sorely confused.

His coworker Aaron claimed to be a Christian, yet he seemed to relish attacking others. Aaron specialized in creating offensive nicknames for coworkers and others outside the office. He policed the entire office, even people who didn't report to him, making sure they adhered to a policy he had lobbied to get passed. Aaron was a master sleuth at uncovering personal secrets and launching them into a juicy gossip chain. He blatantly lied about coworkers' words and actions to pit one person against another so he could play both sides as a "comforting defender."

One coworker had enough of this and called him out on it, and Aaron convinced the boss to lay her off, which created a terrifying wall of protection against anyone else who thought about standing up to him.

While Aaron was toxic toward everyone in the office, he put on a different face with the boss. He had convinced his boss that he was the one true loyal employee and that everyone else was out to get him. He also used a twisted sense of humor to become the boss's favorite lunch mate.

Greg felt paralyzed because the toxic work environment impacted his physical health, his mental state, his family life, and his sleep. He needed the job, but Aaron was making his workplace torturous. It was so bad that Greg admitted he couldn't leave Aaron at the office. Mentally, Aaron followed him home and haunted him at night. Greg dreaded driving into work in the morning. His wife or one of his children would start talking to him in the evening, and he found himself

tuning them out, mentally back in the office, second-guessing what he had said or done, trying to figure out a way to make sense of what felt like a crazy situation.

“Why does Aaron want to control everything?” Greg asked me. “How can he get any joy out of acting like that? What pleasure is there in spreading gossip about everyone else, lying to make people hate each other? And how can he call himself a Christian when he makes everybody else’s life feel like a living hell?”

Sadly, the only role I could offer Greg was as an empathetic but naive listener. Back then, I had no understanding of how to handle toxic people. I’m sure I’d be ashamed of the pious advice I gave him about setting an example, praying for Aaron, turning the other cheek, etc.

It wasn’t until I found myself in the crosshairs of similar toxic personalities that I realized toxic individuals feed off misunderstood piety and are *enabled* by false Christian guilt to spread their attacks far and wide.

This naïveté of mine carried on for decades. Much later in life, I was caught off guard when, at first, a woman seemed pleased that I was speaking out on an issue she felt had been too long ignored in the church. She wrote to me to thank me, and then suggested I read her book and another person’s book to get even more information.

I was honest with her and made no promises. This was a one-time blog post, I explained. Addressing this issue wasn’t a primary calling in my life, so I couldn’t promise to read two entire books on the topic. It wasn’t anything personal; it was just a matter of time.

She was greatly offended and then launched a vicious attack.

No longer was I a friend; I was an enemy. In fact, I had helped cause the problem I was trying to address, and even my blog post, which seemed to agree with her, was only a cover for my ignorance and own evil behavior. And people should read and buy her book while demanding that my books be pulled from publication.

I spent way too much time, lost too much focus, and expended too much energy trying to placate a toxic person. My desire is to encourage, lift up, and support others through my writing and

speaking. Here's where my ignorance brought much distraction and angst. For most of my adult life, I've focused only on playing offense when it comes to ministry. No one taught me about playing spiritual defense. The very idea seemed "unchristian."

I'm not speaking here about "professional" ministry, by the way; I'm referring to every believer's call to spread God's love and truth to people wherever we live and work, whether it's in a bank or a bakery or on the ballfield. God's work will be attacked in many very clever ways. If we fail to learn how to play defense, we're going to be tied in knots of false guilt and distraction. As we are sidetracked, fewer people will be loved and served, and we'll bring unnecessary misery into our lives.

I used to think, *If I can just become a little holier, a little wiser, more loving, a little more patient, a bit more knowledgeable about the Bible, more surrendered to the Holy Spirit, etc., then everyone will "see Jesus" in me and line up to hear what God has to say.* When someone didn't respond or became hostile, I thought, *Is there compromise in my life holding me back? Are my words lacking grace? Did I not hear God correctly?*

So I spoke and wrote almost exclusively about playing offense.

When writing about marriage and parenting, I stressed playing a good offense: love, serve, sacrifice, and cherish. I didn't stress enough the need (sadly) for some couples and individuals to play a little defense.

It wasn't until a friend of mind, Dr. Steve Wilke, noticed my distress as I endured another toxic attack that he began to teach me about the need to occasionally play defense.

"Gary," he said, "read the book of Luke. Jesus walked away from people many, many times."

Dr. Wilke's passing remark opened my eyes to an entirely new dimension of ministry: *defense*. With new eyes, I saw how Jesus frequently walked away from intended persecution. I read how Paul, Peter, and even the "apostle of love," John, warned early believers to beware of certain toxic individuals. It's wise and loving to focus on playing offense, but to play offense without any defense is to make ourselves unnecessarily vulnerable and severely diminish our impact.

My lack of defense, my naïveté in thinking that a stellar offense makes a good defense unnecessary, held me back for thirty years of adult ministry. I have wasted way too much time on toxic people, and not one of those toxic people came out the better for it. But many reliable people whom I could have interacted with were ignored or given less attention so I could devote my time trying to placate the malignant.

I'm done with that. I repent of that.

I want to play the best offense possible: Know the Word inside and out. Surrender to the Holy Spirit's guidance. Live in the affirmation of the Father and the grace of the Son. Love others sacrificially and enthusiastically.

But I believe future years of ministry can be even more fruitful if I learn to also play a little defense along the way.

If you've never been a people pleaser, this may all seem rather elementary. If you find it easy to write people off, you may justifiably say, "Welcome to the world of being an adult, Gary." But if, like me, you've let guilt and misplaced "compassion" tie you up in knots as you tried to figure out why a relationship or ministry situation made you feel like you've lost your mind, you may find this book to be very helpful.

I got a call from Greg a few years back. He hadn't talked to or seen Aaron in fifteen years until Aaron tracked him down by email and warned him he needed to hire a lawyer. Aaron said he was going to sue him. (For the record, Aaron never actually filed a lawsuit.)

If you have any doubt whether toxic people exist and typically refuse to cede control or give up their attacks, just ask around.

There are certain people who drain us, demean us, and distract us from other healthy relationships. Long after they're gone, we're still fighting with them in our minds and trying to get them out of our hearts. They keep us awake. They steal our joy. They demolish our peace. They make us (if we're honest with ourselves) weaker spiritually. They even invade times of worship and pervert them into seasons of fretting.

They are toxic, and we know they are toxic, but perhaps they're a lifelong friend, relative, or coworker. You can't avoid all troublesome

people, can you? And aren't we supposed to reach difficult people? Didn't Jesus tell us to search for sinners?

And so we keep engaging them, keep running into a wall, all the while thinking we're doing the Lord's work.

But what if we're not?

What if there's another way of looking at how we handle toxic people in our lives? What if the way and work of Christ are so compelling, so urgent, and so important that allowing ourselves to become bogged down by toxic people is an offense to God rather than a service to God?

Toxic has become a psychological catchphrase of the day, but you'll see how steeped in Scripture this approach is. In fact, I quote more Scripture in this book than in any of my previous books. This truth about playing defense was staring me in the face the dozens of times I read the Bible; I was just too blind to see it. The mere act of Jesus letting so many walk away has changed the way I look at life, ministry, and service.

A Clever Attack

If someone is getting in the way of you becoming the person God created you to be or frustrating the work God has called you to do, for you that person is toxic. It's not selfish for you to want to be who God created you to be, and it's not selfish for you to do what God created you to do, so it's important to learn how to be on the lookout for toxic people. That may mean cutting them out of your life when possible or severely limiting your exposure to them when there's no better solution.

One of the cleverest attacks against God's church today centers around our guilt in dealing with toxic people. Satan knows he can't stop God's people from loving and caring, because God's Spirit makes us love and care. What he can do, however, is urge us to pour most of our God-breathed love, intention, and goodwill on people who actually resent it and who will never respond to grace. Satan can't stop God's clear water from flowing through us, but he *can* tempt us to

pour it straight into the gutter, quenching the thirst of no one and creating no fruit.

This trap needs to be exposed, and God's people need to be set free.

One caveat before we begin. Some use the label *toxic* much too broadly as an excuse to avoid difficult, different, or hurting people. Let's not do that. As we'll see in chapters 3–5, *toxic* has a special designation that we can learn to discern and then manage accordingly. Yet there are naive Christians who aren't on the lookout for any toxicity and who then find themselves going crazy because they become overwhelmed by something for which they have little understanding and no label.

There are perhaps far fewer truly “toxic” people than we may think, but the reason we need an entire book to address them is that their negative assaults are inordinately effective. In the wise words of the seventh-century monk John Climacus, “A single wolf, helped by a demon, can trouble an entire flock.”¹ In more contemporary language, one toxic person can all but empty a solid midsize church if he or she isn't called out on it.

Toxic people ruin family gatherings. They assault friendships. They can run businesses into the ground. While their numbers may be relatively small, their influence, unfortunately, is not. They murder ministries. They rob saints of their joy and peace and sometimes make us question our sanity.

It's time to call them out. It's time to make the most of the one life God gives us, and that means we have to learn how to play a little defense. Resolve today that the toxic people won't take you down or even distract you. Your mission matters too much for that.

Road Map

Here's where we're going to go and what we're going to discuss. The entire book hinges on studying the life of Jesus, who walked away from others (or let others walk away from him) many times. Understanding his methods of playing defense will inform how we

preserve our call to love and serve (playing offense). We'll look closely at how Jesus played defense in chapter 2.

Chapters 3–5 will define what a toxic person is. Toxic people can be toxic in different ways, but we'll show some of the major markers.

Then—this is so key—chapters 6 and 7 (“No Time to Waste” and “Reliable People”) lay out the case for focusing on playing offense. Matthew 6:33 and 2 Timothy 2:2 tell us how crucial it is to be active servants and what we are to focus on in our service. This book is about protecting our mission from toxic attacks even more than it's about protecting ourselves from toxic people.

Chapter 8 explores Jesus' famous passage where he warns us not to throw pearls to pigs. Chapter 9 looks at the difference between labeling and name-calling; if it seems harsh to you to call someone “toxic,” you'll find this chapter particularly helpful. Chapter 10, “A Man with a Mission,” uses Nehemiah as a particularly excellent example of someone who kept their mission on point in the face of many toxic attacks.

Since it's not always possible to walk away from toxic people, chapter 11 explores how to “look like Jesus when working with Judas,” and chapter 12 follows up by teaching the sad but essential reality that in order to maintain our mission before God, we must learn how to be hated without letting it distract or destroy us.

Chapter 13 offers a biblical view on how evil infects every good thing that God has created on this planet. That sets us up for chapter 14, where Jesus tells us that our allegiance to his spiritual family takes precedence over our allegiance to our blood family of origin. Chapter 15 helps us sidestep the common (and vicious) attack leveled by family members: “How come you're not acting like a Christian?”

Chapters 16–19 apply all we've been learning to family relationships with our parents, spouses, and children. Chapter 20 gives a powerful example of a man who learned to leave his toxic ways behind, and chapter 21 teaches us to be less toxic toward ourselves. The epilogue speaks a final pastoral word to those who have been harmed by toxic behavior.

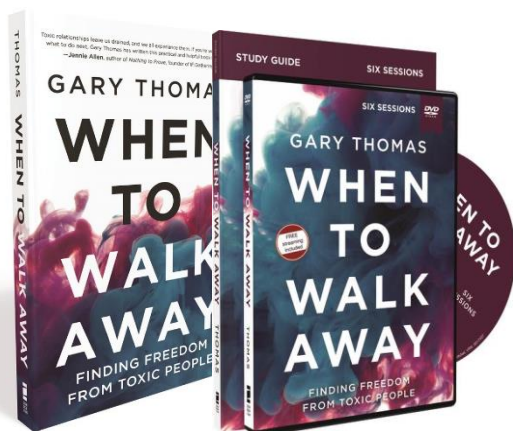
I had envisioned that this would be a short book, about half of

what it has become. Once I opened up the Scriptures, however, it was like the glaciers melted and the dams overflowed, and I had to ride the rivers way downstream.

I hope you enjoy and learn from the ride.

Takeaways

- Because toxic individuals exist, we need to learn how to play defense. Focusing only on offense is naive and undercuts the impact we can have with others.
- Seeing Jesus walk away from others or let others walk away from him presents a model to consider in our own lives.
- Toxic individuals drain us of joy, energy, and peace.
- One of Satan's cleverest attacks is getting us to pour our time and energy into people who resent the grace we share and who will never change, keeping us from spending time with and focusing on others whom we can love and serve.
- There may not be a lot of toxic people numerically, but they tend to have an inordinately negative effect on families, churches, relationships, and ministries, so we need to be on the lookout.



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