

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.

CHAPTER 2

WALKAWAY JESUS

Since Jesus came from heaven to walk among us, Christians tend to think that walking away from anyone, or letting anyone walk away from the truth, is a failure on our part.

But Jesus walked away or let others walk away . . . a *lot*.

After my conversation with Dr. Wilke, I reread the gospels and counted every occurrence where Jesus deliberately parted ways with others. Sometimes he spoke a hard truth, after which the other person walked away. Other times, the people had been touched and begged Jesus to stay, but he had other places to go and left them. Overall, I counted forty-one such instances in all four gospels.¹ Forty-one! Some of these references refer to the same encounter, but that still leaves more than two dozen distinct times when Jesus demonstrated walking away or letting someone else walk away.

These occurrences weren't always rooted in conflict. Sometimes Jesus walked away from others who wanted more of him. On still other occasions, he retreated for his own refreshment and renewal or protection. The point is that Jesus didn't let the needs, pleas, attacks, or unresponsiveness of others distract him from the mission given to him by his heavenly Father.

One thing we don't see when others walk away is Jesus giving chase. As powerful as Jesus was, as brilliant as Jesus was, as pure as Jesus was, and as surrendered to God as Jesus was, not everyone he interacted with "changed," repented, or agreed with him. Here's the principle that comes from that: *Sometimes to follow in the footsteps of Jesus is to walk away from others or to let them walk away from us.*

1. See appendix ("Jesus Walking Away").

Take, for instance, the story of the rich young ruler. Jesus discerned this young man's heart and the core issue in his life—he loved money. When the earnest young man couldn't walk away from his money, he chose to walk away from Jesus. Notice that our Lord didn't run after him. Jesus didn't say, "Wait! I know asking you to give 100 percent is a bit extreme; if you give away just 50 percent, I think we can make this work. I need followers! Let's bargain!"

No, he turned to his disciples (*reliable people*²) and explained what had just happened and why it was so difficult for that rich man to join them. This is a direct example of Jesus choosing to spend time training reliable people rather than spending more time with a closed person. "Toxic" doesn't seem to fit this young man's profile, but the principle is clear: when truth is rejected, spend your time on those who will receive it instead of begging closed-hearted people to reconsider.

On another occasion, after giving a difficult teaching about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, Jesus lost a *lot* of previously enthusiastic followers: "From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. 'You do not want to leave too, do you?' Jesus asked the Twelve" (John 6:66–67).

Notice the same pattern. Not just one, but *many* walked away. And not just casual onlookers; they're called his "disciples." Instead of chasing them down and begging them not to misunderstand him and to please come back, Jesus turns to the reliable people, the Twelve, and says, "So, what about you?"

Notice the confidence that gives authority to his message. Jesus never appears desperate, manipulative, or controlling, as if when people didn't agree with him, his feelings would be hurt. He is mission-focused and others-centered to his deepest core.

Jesus also demonstrates the need to sometimes "verbally" walk away when dealing with a toxic person, like Herod. Instead of arguing with Herod and trying to justify himself, Jesus remained silent:

2. You'll read the phrase "reliable people" several times before I explain its spiritual significance in chapter 7, when we discuss 2 Timothy 2:2.

“[Herod] plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer” (Luke 23:9).

Jesus adopted the same approach with Pilate and the religious leaders: “When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer. Then Pilate asked him, ‘Don’t you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?’ But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge—to the great amazement of the governor” (Matthew 27:12–14).

We don’t have to argue. When a toxic person is attacking you, you don’t have to participate. Especially when you know it won’t make any difference, spend those few moments worshiping and relating to your loving heavenly Father rather than contending with a hateful assault.

A particularly vivid example of Jesus letting someone walk away occurred at the Last Supper. Jesus knew Judas was going to betray him. He spoke about it in advance. And yet he allowed Judas to walk out of the room. He didn’t chase after him. He didn’t waste time trying to change Judas’s mind. Instead, he spent every last minute he had left investing in his faithful, reliable disciples and in prayer right up until the moment he was arrested.

Many plastic bracelets have been sold with the words “What Would Jesus Do?” If you’re dealing with toxic people, you may want to get a bracelet that reads, “What Would Jesus *Not* Do?”

The answer is, “He wouldn’t chase after them.”

Please Leave

One of the most painful passages for me to read in Scripture occurs after Jesus demonstrates his power to a city by sending an entire herd of pigs tumbling over a cliff.

Having been visited by Jesus, these farmers were among the most blessed people in the history of the world by getting to hear God speak in the flesh. When Jesus got in the way of their pig farming, though, the loss of their business blinded them to the glory of the person standing in front of them. In a crude sense, this town chose

pork chops over salvation: “Then the whole town went out to meet Jesus. And when they saw him, they pleaded with him to leave their region” (Matthew 8:34).

Can you imagine an entire town looking at Jesus—the Messiah we love, the one we wish we could talk to *face-to-face*, the one we’d pay a year’s salary to get a personal audience with for one hour—and pleading with him to *leave*?

And yet Jesus didn’t argue. We’re told that “Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to his own town” (Matthew 9:1).

He walked (or in this case sailed) away.

There’s a terrible messianic complex in many of us that thinks if we were more intelligent or a little holier, if we fasted and prayed a bit more, then everyone we shared the truth with would agree with us and welcome God into their hearts.

That didn’t happen for the *real* Messiah, and it certainly won’t happen for us. It’s okay to walk away when people resist the truth. And it’s okay to let them walk away.

It took a while for Jesus’ followers to get this. They often remained more enamored with the people’s response than Jesus’ truth. For example, when Jesus challenged the way the Pharisees put human tradition over the commands of God, the disciples “warned” him, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?” (Matthew 15:12).

Listen to Jesus’ response: “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. *Leave them*; they are blind guides” (Matthew 15:13–14, emphasis added).

Leave them.

You don’t always have to stay and argue with unreasonable people who are offended by truth.

Turn Away

Some of you still can’t imagine turning someone away or letting someone walk away, even if the relationship has become toxic. Your Lord and Savior doesn’t have that problem: “Many will say to me on

that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’” (Matthew 7:22–23).

Jesus actually *sends* these people away. He spoke the truth and respected people’s choices. As we’ll discover in a later chapter, controlling others is a primary sign of toxicity, not a method for ministry. Jesus never cheapened the beauty of what he was saying by appearing desperate. In fact, he pretty much took the opposite approach: *This is what’s true; take it or leave it*. That confidence built the early church.

Lord of His Life

Jesus didn’t just walk away from toxic people; he was also willing to walk away for purposes of ministry effectiveness and strategy. He never allowed the desire of others to dictate who he spent his time with. After a powerful time of ministry, Jesus became a rock star of sorts, and hordes of people wanted to be around him. Jesus had gotten up early in the morning to pray, but the disciples furiously tracked him down and said, “Everyone is looking for you!”

Listen to Jesus’ reply: “Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come” (Mark 1:38).

Just when people most wanted him to stay, Jesus often left: “When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake” (Matthew 8:18).

Jesus wasn’t moved by either standing ovations or jeering ridicule. He was truly Lord of his life. Neither should we allow the neediness of others or the toxicity of others to determine where, when, and how we spend our time. Neediness can be a subtle form of toxicity. Our spiritual radar goes way up when someone forcefully attacks us, but a passive-aggressive neediness can slip in unawares and steal our attention even more effectively than a full-frontal assault.

If someone is trying to control you, that itself is toxic. Whether

they use force or guilt, direct attack or unreasonable neediness (“You’re the only one who can help me, and you have to help me *now*”), it’s still all about control. Controlling someone (or letting yourself be controlled) is wrong.

An experienced pastor once pointed out to me that Jesus chose his disciples, and so should we: “Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve that they might be with him” (Mark 3:13–14).

Jesus didn’t just model this mastery of his calendar; he specifically taught his disciples to do likewise:

“If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, leave that home or town and shake the dust off your feet.”

MATTHEW 10:14

“When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another.”

MATTHEW 10:23

Jesus didn’t tell his disciples, “Stay there and let them hit you because they may finally come to their senses.” No. He gives his disciples permission—even more than that, a command—to flee from those hurting them and go to another place. (If you’re wondering, *What about when he said to turn the other cheek?* see the endnote.)¹

For added balance, sometimes Jesus walked away, not to accomplish more ministry, but to recharge: “Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus *often* withdrew to lonely places and prayed” (Luke 5:15–16, emphasis added).

If we try to minister when our own fuel tanks are empty, we may end up doing more harm than good. We should follow Jesus’ example and not feel guilty about telling others no until we have first sat at the feet of our heavenly Father and received his love and care. We have to occasionally play defense in order to go back on the offense with renewed passion and fervor.

Not Today

As far as allowing himself to be mistreated, though Jesus came to die the death of a martyr, *he didn't allow consistent and persistent abuse to continue throughout his life*. He let himself be tortured and crucified *once*, but there were many occasions before that when he “slipped away” from those who wanted to hurt him.

Here are just three examples from the gospel of John:

At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.

JOHN 8:59

Again they tried to seize him, but he escaped their grasp. Then Jesus went back across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing in the early days.

JOHN 10:39-40

So from that day on they plotted to take his life. Therefore Jesus no longer moved about publicly among the people of Judea. Instead he withdrew to a region near the wilderness, to a village called Ephraim, where he stayed with his disciples.

JOHN 11:53-54

And here's one from Matthew:

But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus. Aware of this, Jesus withdrew from that place.

MATTHEW 12:14-15

Your persecution may not be physical stoning, but emotional shaming, slander, gaslighting, etc.³ Jesus once entered a ruler's house

3. “Gaslighting” is a term used to describe someone who tries to defend their own reprehensible behavior by making you feel crazy for calling them out on it.

to heal a dead girl. Notice the juxtaposition of how the people responded and what happens next: “They laughed at him. *After the crowd had been put outside*, he went in and took the girl by the hand, and she got up” (Matthew 9:24–25, emphasis added).

Jesus didn’t argue with the crowd. He also didn’t just stand there and take it. He had the crowd “put outside.”

And *then* he did his work.

In the course of kingdom work, whether you’re serving God in an office, at a soccer field, or in a school, being abused is inevitable. It seems to me that for every Christian who is bent on seeking first the kingdom of God, there is a corresponding number of Christians bent on telling those seeking first the kingdom of God that they are seeking the kingdom in the wrong way. We can’t avoid this pushback without leaving this planet, but we can learn to walk away when the time is right and as God leads (which is what this book seeks to teach you). We can “put those people outside” and carry on our work.

Here’s what I’m getting at: don’t think that letting yourself be abused is always the holy choice. Proverbs 22:3 reads, “The prudent see danger *and take refuge*, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty” (emphasis added). The teacher is telling you it is supremely *wise* to step aside in the face of danger. If you don’t, you may pay a penalty, but *not* because of your “obedience.” Rather, your pain will be caused by being “simple.”

If life is about following Jesus, then at times we will follow him as he walked away from abuse and danger. Jesus didn’t cede control of his life to anyone. He told his disciples that his death would be *his* choice, not his enemies’: “The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again” (John 10:17–18).

So then, in his words and in his practice, Jesus modeled how to let people go, how to walk away, and how to stay in charge of our

They deny what you know to be true, attempting to make you feel confused and shamed so you’ll drop the issue.

schedule (and to a certain degree, not allow ourselves to be unnecessarily abused). Follow in the footsteps of Jesus by boldly walking away and finding a reliable person in whose life you can make a worthy investment (see chapter 7).

We've got an entire book left to explore how to apply this. How do we know when to walk away? How do we find the balance between playing a good offense and an appropriate defense?

Before we get to all that, let's take a few chapters to more clearly define what we're talking about when we use the word *toxic*.

Takeaways

- Jesus walked away from others (or let others walk away from him) more than two dozen times in the four gospels.
- At times, Jesus remained verbally silent when others tried to goad him into a conversation or a foolish controversy.
- When people asked Jesus to leave, he usually complied.
- Not only does Jesus let others walk away; at the great judgment he will *send* people away. You won't be able to reach or influence everyone you meet.
- Sometimes Jesus walked away for personal refreshment, prayer, or the need to reach others.
- Though Jesus came to die the death of a martyr, he repeatedly walked away from persecution, attacks, and violence throughout his adult ministry. In the same way, it can be prudent for us to walk away from verbal, emotional, or physical abuse.