



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Finding Freedom from Toxic People

Guest(s): Gary Thomas

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- James Dobson: Well, hello, everyone. I'm James Dobson and you're listening to Family Talk, a listener-supported ministry. In fact, thank you so much for being part of that support for James Dobson Family Institute.
- Roger Marsh: Got a question for you as we begin today's edition of Family Talk. Are there friends or family members in your life who literally drain the joy out of you, or they say things that wound you emotionally? Now I'm not talking about people who speak truth over you, or those who offer constructive criticism, but those who really just suck the life out of you for no good reason. Well, today we are identifying those people who are overly controlling, and those who are toxic to our wellbeing. Our host for this important discussion is Dr. Tim Clinton and his guest today is author Gary Thomas.
- Roger Marsh: Gary is an award-winning writer of 20 books with over 2 million sold all over the world. He's a well-traveled speaker and serves as a teaching pastor at Second Baptist Church of Houston, Texas. Today, he and Dr. Clinton will talk about destructive relationships as described in Gary's new book called When to Walk Away. They will be identifying the characteristics of a toxic person and explain how we can avoid those relationships all together. Unfortunately, this is an all too common problem that we all encounter in some aspects of our lives, which is why we are dedicating an entire broadcast to this topic. Here now is today's host Dr. Tim Clinton on this edition of Family Talk.
- Dr. Clinton: Gary, thank you for joining us on this edition of Family Talk.
- Gary Thomas: Well, thank you so much for having me. I'm honored to be here.
- Dr. Clinton: Gary, as we get started, you spend a lot of your time focusing on helping and healing and restoring relationships. This is a whole different turn, When to Walk Away: Finding Freedom from Toxic People. What pushed you in this direction, Gary?
- Gary Thomas: Well, one of the things, Tim, about building healthy relationships is not being pulled away by unhealthy relationships. So I do think it's a complementary aim. I've seen often that we pour most of our time into relationships that we should,

following in the footsteps of Jesus, probably walk away from because it detracts from the relationships that we are called to build.

Gary Thomas: Now, I have to confess that this book was really written out of my weakness. I've been a people-pleaser my entire life, and I came across a situation where I was just beside myself when I found out there was a toxic person that was just lying and undercutting me. And I just didn't understand. I get why somebody doesn't like me. I didn't understand the program against me. And I have a wonderful, wise friend who has been a marriage and family therapist for three and a half decades. He's worked with so many people. And I said, "Well, now that I know this, how do I respond as a Christian? I want to honor God in the way I deal with this." And he shocked me when he said, "I recommend you not engage him at all."

Gary Thomas: It seemed like such a failure to me, but he knew the situation. He had met this person. He said, "Gary, I want you to go to the Book of Luke. Count how many times Jesus walked away from someone or let somebody walk away from him without him giving chase." And Tim, it wasn't enough for me to go to the Book of Luke. I had to go to all four gospels and I was shocked at what I'd found. I can't count the number of times I've read the New Testament. I started reading the Bible daily when I was eight years old. And I came across 41 citations where Jesus let somebody walk away from him without him giving chase, or he chose to walk away from them. It wasn't all with toxic people or the way I would use toxic. And because of the Synoptic Gospels, some of them refer to the same instances, but it was a whole new world for me to recognize it isn't always a failure to choose to walk away.

Dr. Clinton: Right. Hey Gary, I'll tell you what. When I saw that, when I read that in your book, I just smiled and said, "That's amazing." Forty one times Jesus walked away from people. And what we're going to do is talk a lot more about how to understand his methods of what you'd call are playing defense and playing offense with toxic people. But Gary, everybody's got a somebody in their life, or everybody knows somebody who ruins family gatherings. They assault friendships. You guys talk about messing up businesses. They murder ministries. Let's put that in there. Now they make everybody insane. And by the way, they're exhausting. They're draining. And you can have toxic parents, toxic marriages, toxic kids, and so much more. Gary, let's start with this, the word toxic. A lot of people use it. Everything in anything is toxic. But you have a special meaning behind toxic. Can you share that with us?

Gary Thomas: Right. I'm glad you brought this up at the start, Tim, because it's really key. By toxic, I don't mean non-believers. We're called to search out and be compassionate and gentle in presenting a case for Christ to non-believers. I don't mean people who are different from us and so they bug us because they're different from us. I don't even mean people who are difficult. All toxic people are difficult, but not all difficult people are toxic. And here's the difference. Toxic people are taking pieces out of you. They're destroying you a little bit. It might be all of your joy. It might be your peace. It might be your self-

confidence. It might be your sanity. They're gaslighting you until you feel like you're going crazy. It's the kind of people where if you see their name on your phone, your blood pressure immediately spikes. They haunt you late at night. You want to be there for your spouse or your kids. And you're still trying to work through the craziness of your interaction with them. You're hoping you don't see the email. You're hoping you don't see the name on social media.

Gary Thomas: When you have that haunting effect, it's not just the time you spend interacting with them. They're spending a lot of time with you infecting your healthy relationships. They may not send me to a mental hospital, but they zap my joy. They zap my peace. And people say it sounds guilty that you say they steal my joy. Except the Bible says, "The joy of the Lord is our strength." So if they're making you weaker, so you're not available to other people. If they're undercutting your self-confidence, you feel like you have nothing to give to other people, you're going to find, at least as I have looking back on my life, I've never had one situation with a toxic person where there was redemptive change. In every case, all the extra time I spent with them ended up taking pieces out of me, pulling me away from healthy relationships, distracting me from productive ministry. And if I could go back, I would have urged myself, follow in the footsteps of Jesus and learn when to walk away.

Dr. Clinton: Yeah. And they often do it under the guise of Christianity. They're laboring together in Christ trying to correct the whole world out there. And they don't really care about anything that you have to say. They don't really want to engage you. They just want to destroy you. They want to take you down. They're focused on what they want to do. And if you don't believe me, go back and look at their Twitter accounts and see how much "Christ-honoring" stuff's really in there. All they're doing is hammer, hammer, hammer.

Gary Thomas: And Tim, what you say is true and that they're able to co-opt Christian language. One of the chapters I mentioned, because this is maybe one of the most frequent attacks I hear as a pastor on Christians, well, aren't Christians supposed to such and such were an example of a father who had been abusive and an alcoholic. And the mother who had been verbally abusive knew that they'd blown it with their kids. And so when their son who became a really strong Christian and was flourishing in life and whatnot, he had his own kids and thought, "Here's our chance for a do-over, right? We're going to have time with our grandkids." And they started asking him, "When do we get to have a weekend with the grandkids?" And, and he had to tell them, "Never. They can't be in your presence without me being here." They were not repentant. This was not an act of malice. It was just responsible parenting. And they'd throw out the line. "Well, aren't Christians supposed to forgive? You haven't forgiven us, have you?"

Gary Thomas: And I found that toxic people are so aware of telling Christians how Christians are supposed to behave. Even though in this case, they didn't even believe as Christians, they weren't Christians, they're not asking a Christian to respond as a Christian out of Christian concern. It's a method to control the Christian. It's

trying to make them feel guilty. And when you try to use Christ for evil ends, to put a child in an unhealthy situation, it just shows we've got to get used to that, that they'll use everything. They'll use neediness. They'll use threats. They'll use cold shoulder. They'll use, "You're not living as a real Christian should live. Christians have to forgive in every situation." And we just need to become aware of their methods.

Gary Thomas: I was as naive as they come and I've lost way too much time in my life. And I felt like this book in one way was a gift from God to me to give me a more fruitful future. However many years I have left, I want them to count and I want to be engaged in healthy relationships. And I realized that means learning when to walk away from the toxic people and just not taking their bait.

Dr. Clinton: Gary, I want to go with a couple of concepts you present in the book and have you explain them for us. Murderous spirit. You say toxic people are those people that are trying to take you down. Toxic people murder. They murder relationships. They turn people against each other. They murder churches. They turn meeting times into gigantic fights instead of worship and service. They take workplaces and destroy productivity. They destroy reputations and more. I mean, that's some pretty strong words. Here's one more piece you said. "My toxic radar goes off whenever I sense a person or a group of persons seem to exist primarily to take out another person or an agency." I mean, this is more about destroying things and people. Removing them.

Gary Thomas: You see it on social media, Tim. Most large churches have somebody who does a blog that's simply there to tear down the church. Or you see some people on Twitter and Facebook. Their job is just to catch the next person that they can bring down. They're not building. They're not encouraging. They're not exhorting. They're not teaching in a positive sense. It is entirely a murderous thing. Jesus said, "I'm the way, the truth, and the life." But he said Satan is a murderer. Satan, the thief comes to steal, to kill, and to destroy.

Gary Thomas: So there's a huge difference between calling somebody to repentance with the offer of grace and praying for conviction than taking glee in somebody's downfall. There are times when like John the Baptist, we have to speak out against evil, but that's calling somebody to repentance. It's calling somebody to find life and to leave death. It's not taking glee in someone's downfall. We need people who have been humbled, but then found grace and are serving God and seeking first the kingdom of God. We shouldn't want an enemy. We should hope that everyone wants to become a brother or sister in Christ.

Dr. Clinton: Yeah. You're tipping the scale when you become assaultive, hateful, even sinful in your own response. Gary, let's jump to another concept. You talk about control mongers. When people think of toxicity, toxic people, they think, "Here you go. That's it right there." Tell us what you mean by it.

Gary Thomas: Well, the one thing that surprised me, Tim, is as powerful as God is and the fact that He is always right, I mean, in one sense, if He forced me to do what I should

do, part of me thinks I be better off. But God doesn't operate that way. Throughout scripture, He reveals himself as a God who proclaims truth and invites us to respond. That famous passage from Joshua, "Choose you this day whom you will serve." And then in Revelation, Jesus, "I stand at the door and knock. If you will open the door, I'll come in." We have the model of Jesus. He spoke the truth to the rich young ruler. The rich young ruler said no. Jesus didn't chase after him. He turned to his disciples.

Gary Thomas: So God doesn't control. And I was fascinated to realize when the Bible talks about demonic possession, it never talks about God possession. It talks about being filled with the spirit. But then Paul says in Corinthians, the spirit of the prophet is subject to the control of the prophet. So God invites. He persuades, but He lets us choose. When somebody is trying to control us, they're doing something that even God doesn't do to us. And He's always right.

Dr. Clinton: That's a good word. I like that.

Gary Thomas: I'm to respond to God. I'm just to call everyone to respond to God as their highest allegiance. If I want to control someone, in one sense, I'm acting like an antichrist. I'm trying to fulfill a function. I wouldn't even say as God. It's above what God does. It's a horrendous thing to try to control another human being. It's why tyrannical governments are so evil. It's why slavery was such an abomination. To control someone is just wrong. Now, obviously, Tim, I'm not talking about a two year old, but you don't raise a 20 year old like you do.

Dr. Clinton: They control the world, Gary. It's the opposite. The two year old does. Gary, I'm going to keep going here. These concepts are amazing. Again, we're talking with Gary Thomas today, When to Walk Away: Finding Freedom from Toxic People. You're listening to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. I'm Dr. Tim Clinton hosting the program today. And Gary, another concept in the book here that I thought was fascinating is loving hate. And how in Colossians 3:12 and 14, we talked about how we in Christ are spiritually wired toward compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, et cetera. Versus some people who are wired Colossians 3:8 and 9. You referenced anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language, lying, manipulative. It's just amazing how some people would just fit in these two lanes.

Gary Thomas: Yeah. And here's the thing. Some of the listeners might be get a little bit nervous that, well, sometimes I'm angry, sometimes I slander. There's a difference between a toxic act and a toxic person. And here's the difference. Those who are toxic as people, they come alive when they're doing their worse. They have more adrenaline. They feel more alive. They feel more energetic when they're injecting. Intrigued into an office environment for them, a healthy marriage, in which a husband and wife love each other, encourage each other and support, that's boring. They need drama. They need arguments. They need fighting. We're all tempted toward toxic acts. If a mother has a son who's getting into drugs, she's going to be very tempted to control him not because she's a toxic woman, but because she's concerned for him.

Gary Thomas: But a toxic person just loves to control someone. They love to demean someone. Instead of feeling awful when they're convicted of it, they feel excited, which is why we can't be naive. Because if you tell a toxic person that you're hurting me, that makes a toxic person come alive. They've succeeded. They get a really sick thrill out of it. And that's where I was so naive, Tim, is that I thought if I could just call people to righteousness. This is shameful. Those things simply don't work with toxic people. They have a different motivation. They come alive doing the things that most of us, if you're a healthy believer, would be ashamed of.

Dr. Clinton: One of the chapters I loved. And it was called No Time for That. How do we get beyond this? I think it starts with perspective. And I love this when you said, "Protecting your mission from toxic attacks when they come at you, they're taking you off of mission and putting your focus, your energy on them." And if you are on mission, by the way, you're going to attract opposition. We know that.

Gary Thomas: Yes, yes.

Dr. Clinton: And so Gary, can you just kind of walk us through, how do we get our bearings now if we're in the midst of this kind of a journey?

Gary Thomas: Yeah. Well, it's about preserving your mission before God that every one of us matters. Jesus prayed with his disciples. Ask the Lord of the harvest for more workers. Why? There aren't enough of us. We need more, which means every worker who is intent on seeking first the kingdom of God wants to make the best use of his or her time. That's why I want to walk away from toxic people because I want to go where the fields are ripe whether they're ready for harvest or whether they're ready to be planted. Toxic people, if they just distract you, if they can tell you, "This is the agenda you should have, the agenda I want for you," it just evaporates our ministry.

Gary Thomas: And so I'm encouraging people not to walk away from toxic people to go binge watch Netflix or to live a self-absorbed life, but to fulfill God's calling on your life. You matter because one, the message of God reconciling the world to himself and then reconciling us to each other is the most important message and the most needed message we have today. And second, not because we're special, not because we're particularly gifted, but we have the Holy Spirit within us. Jesus is building His church. He sent His Holy Spirit. Every Christian's life is significant. Every Christian's life matters. Every Christian's life can be impactful. And so we don't want to be distracted by the toxic people.

Dr. Clinton: Gary, you also say that we need to find reliable people that we can spend our time with, get around us. That can be challenging, but at the same time, if you get caught up in this mix and you start into this spin with a toxic person. They'd love to engage you by the way. Proverbs 26:4 and 5 says, "Don't answer a fool according to his folly, or you yourself will become just like him or her." But Gary, that's so hard. Talk to us about the significance of bringing healthy, reliable

people into our lives to help counterbalance this and to keep us on the right path.

Gary Thomas: For me by that, I mean, for people-pleaser like me, a codependent like me, it's important to do that because if I'm investing sacrificially and generously in reliable people, it's just a matter of priorities and time. You need the love of Jesus Christ in your life so that you love love instead of loving hate. But I'm not going to try to amend a toxic person's behavior when their heart is bent on evil. And Jesus said that we're to make disciples. This is a great commission in Matthew 28, "Teaching them to obey everything I've commanded you." So I'm to be on the lookout for people who want to know, genuinely want to know what does Jesus say and how do I learn to obey that? And then Paul said to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:2, "Whatever you've heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who are qualified to teach others." And so Paul is saying to Timothy Christianity is all about reproduction. Take the lessons that God has taught you, pass it on to someone else who will also pass it on to someone else.

Gary Thomas: And when I look at the life of Jesus, I mentioned the rich young ruler already, it's amazing how Jesus would speak the truth. And if they didn't respond, then He turns to His disciples, the reliable people and says, "Well, let me tell you why it's so difficult for the rich to follow the Lord." And so He doesn't chase after the rich young ruler, even though one of the gospels says Jesus looked at him and loved him. There was an affinity that Jesus had for this person, but He said, "If you're not ready to hear the truth, then I'm going to spend my time with somebody who is, somebody who wants to live an obedient life."

Gary Thomas: So by all means, speak God's truth. But if you realize their heart isn't receptive, there isn't conviction, they're not there, then turn around and pour yourself into someone who is. There was one guy who's had three kids, two daughters, and a son. His son was troubled from top to bottom. Any number of issues. His two daughters love the Lord. They were serving God. Until a counselor finally said to him, "You spend more time with this troubled son than you do with these two daughters combined. They're asking for their dad. And you're putting all of your effort trying to rescue this son who resents you for rescuing him." I should say he was an adult son.

Gary Thomas: So he comes to me as a pastor and he says, "But aren't I supposed to seek after the one that was lost?" Well, the biblical priority is to invest in reliable people. The church needs women of God who know that God loves them and God can use them and a father who will empower them and affirm them and train them. And he was neglecting the reliable to chase after the unreliable. And I pointed to him, "Has five years of doing this helped him or has it made him more resentful?" He goes, "It's made him more resentful." I said the biblical pattern is that we invest our time in the reliable.

Gary Thomas: Now, walking away isn't riding off. If that son comes back repentant, we should be like the father of the prodigal son. We grasp their knees. Welcome back.

We're going to celebrate. But the father of the prodigal son didn't grasp the son's knees when he was leaving. He grasped the son's knees when he was returning. Too often, we do the opposite and we can neglect responsible kids for the sake of the irresponsible. I think that's opposite of what Jesus did in his own life in ministry.

Dr. Clinton: The truth is too, Gary, though, there are a lot of factors that keep us in the midst of that kind of insanity. You may feel guilt because it's somebody you love and they're piling on you. You may have experienced a lot of grace and you want to share that grace with other people. You may be naturally inclined to helping people. So you're a fixer by nature, and there's sort of some type of return that comes back to you when you're able to contribute. Or you've been forgiven a lot by God. And you think if I don't forgive him or her or help them, God won't help me. And so a lot of challenges, Gary, in the midst of this whole thing, isn't there?

Gary Thomas: Oh, absolutely. I'm a recipient of grace. I am eager to give grace. I want to show grace. And I've found chasing after a toxic person-

Dr. Clinton: Never works.

Gary Thomas: Pushes him away. And that's why I'll just ask the parents. You know you're dealing with that. I'm just saying, has it worked the past five years? Has it worked the past 10 years? Then they realize what they've given up, the ministry that they have sacrificed, the lack of attention to the other kids or other ministry opportunities. And they admit sometimes. We get in God's way in a sense of if we would walk away, perhaps then they're going to notice the absence and say, "Wait a minute, maybe I need to rethink what I'm doing."

Dr. Clinton: This book is so packed full of help and guidance. And I know toward the end of the book, you kind of go into that people-pleasing piece you were talking about that you've journeyed with in your life. I think we all journey with a little bit of that. But Gary, you can be toxic to yourself and these patterns can erupt and it can be so difficult. Breaking free, that beauty can be ours if we'll just press into the Lord and understand more about what's going on in the relationships around us and the power that's associated with us. And ultimately it's that Galatians 5 piece, "It's for freedom that Christ has come to set us free." That's what we all hunger for. The book again, *When to Walk Away: Finding Freedom from Toxic People*, it's a gift. And we thank you and celebrate that good work that God's done in and through you.

Gary Thomas: Thank you, Tim.

Roger Marsh: A meaningful discussion on ways to handle and deal with toxic relationships in our lives here on Family Talk. I hope this broadcast has challenged you to respond to difficult people in a biblical way. Our host today here on Family Talk has been Dr. Tim Clinton and his guest, author, speaker, and pastor Gary Thomas. Learn more about Gary's new book, *When to Walk Away*, when you

visit today's broadcast page at drjamesdobson.org. That's D-Rjamesdobson.O-R-G, and then click on the Broadcast tab at the top of the page. Be sure to join us again Monday for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.

Roger Marsh: The battle lines for Decision 2020 had been clearly drawn. Dr. Dobson believes that there are several essentials every Christian needs to understand and then take that wisdom to the polls as we take a stand for biblical values and our culture in this year's election. He's writing about the most urgent issues in his publication called Faith Votes. And you can get a free copy when you go to drjamesdobson.org/faithvotes. That's drjamesdobson.org/faithvotes.