



---

## Walking Away with Jesus

Gary Thomas

**Ted Cunningham:** We want to welcome all our church at home family and say thank you for your patience. And for all of those outside, we're glad that the seats got wiped down and the television is on, so welcome. We're spread out all over the campus. I've seen people in lobbies. We want you to know there is still room at 8:30 and 11:30. We just want 10:00 to know that. There is room in those services if you want to spread out even more. We're glad you're here.

For all of those watching online, we know over half our church is still at home so we're grateful that you are tuning in whether it's now or later, on demand.

As part of our service, we take an offering, and you can give online at home right now with that "Give" button. Also, I know many of you in here and those over at the chapel, outside, spread out across campus are giving online as well. You can set that up. It's pretty easy, but it's definitely safe. We always want to remind you of that. As you leave here today, if you brought your offering with you, there are boxes in the back here and at the Chapel.

It's a special Sunday. Years ago, I had a friend tell me, "Ted, make sure you always share your friends with people." That's what this morning feels like as our guest speaker, Gary Thomas, is here. If you are a student of marriage and family ministry, like I've been for the past 20 years, you know that the authors we listen to, the author we learn from are Gary Chapman, Gary Smalley, and our speak today, Gary Thomas.

Gary is best known for his book, *Sacred Marriage*, but last October, I shared a message called *Walk Away*, and in that message, I shared a lot of Gary's teachings out of this book, *When to Walk Away: Finding Freedom from Toxic People*. Gary's teachings minister to so many from our congregation. I was ministered to greatly by this and we just said as soon as we can get Gary here, we want him to be able to share on this.

He's not only agreed to the three services this morning, but he is sticking around this afternoon and we've invited a small group of people for a filming. He's going to actually film six sessions off of this book for us that's going to be a kind of custom curriculum for our church from Growth Gatherings this fall. You can attend Growth Gatherings online or you can attend them on campus as well. If you want to pick this book up or the study guide for that, you can do that in the Crew building as soon as you leave here today. We have that set up over there. I hope you make your plan to be a part of that.

We thought a message on toxicity is perfect for the election season. Can I get an amen on that one? We are finding freedom from toxic election... No, okay. So, give a nice warm Woodland Hills welcome to our friend, Gary Thomas.

**Gary Thomas:** Thank you. It is an honor to be here. You know that you are served so well by the leadership and the teaching here. I've enjoyed watching Ted online and thrilled that I actually get to be in the Castle, in person to see it for myself, so thank you for having me here.

Have any of you ever done the elimination diet? Do you know what that is? I have a very healthy wife and she's been after me for years to try the elimination diet. Basically, you get these blood tests done. They come back with the results and say, "These foods might be interacting in a poor way with your body; you probably want to stop eating them. And you have to do it for three weeks." The problem with a person like me going through the elimination diet is they give me the list and basically the list could be summarized this way: anything you like to eat, you can't eat for three weeks. I can't believe I'm doing this, but I go ahead and do it to try to be healthier,

In a case of abysmal timing, I did it over my birthday. I forgot that my birthday was coming up. The big thing about my birthday is there's something to look forward to every year on my birthday – I get to eat cake and ice cream. I love cake and ice cream. My priorities are God, family, cake and ice cream, and you all. That's pretty much where it goes. With the fat content and the calories, I don't get to eat it that much, but guilt free on Father's Day and my birthday, I do it.

So, on my birthday, some friends invited us over for dinner. They didn't realize I was doing the elimination diet. I watched five other people eat my cake and Blue Bell ice cream. I was just getting really frustrated. On the way home, I told Lisa, "You have no idea. When this thing is finally over, I'm going to splurge, I'm going to enjoy this like you can't believe." My wife said, "You can't do that. It takes weeks if not months to come out of an elimination diet." Nobody told me that.

She said, "First, you test positive for cranberries, so on the first day, we'll give you some cranberries and then we wait a couple days to see how your body reacts." I don't even like cranberries. I eat cranberries to be polite at Thanksgiving. If I go the rest of my life and never taste another cranberry, I don't feel any poorer for it.

I said, "What doctor from hell thought up this diet?"

But here's sort of the science behind it. The thing is you have these foods that may not send you into the hospital, but they zap your energy. You have congestion. They make you lethargic. You're just not able to be fully engaged in life because these foods are just sort of pulling you down.

What if the same thing is true, spiritually, of relationships? There are people in your life you interact with and they rob your joy, destroy your peace; some of them under mind your sanity. And you think, for whatever reason, you have to keep engaging in those relationship. It may be out of misplaced guilt, which I hope to deal with here. It may be a weak sense of mission. But whatever the relationship is, you

allow yourself to be in a relationship where who you are is being undercut. What if that's not true? What if we don't have to do that?

I want to present a mind change this morning. That's where Christian transformation begins. You all know this. Romans 12: 2 – ***Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*** We have to think differently to understand what it means to live the Christian faith. One of the mind changes I want to present is **Being holy isn't just about not doing sinful things.** When I was growing up, that's what I thought holiness was. Instead, what if **it's about being set apart for glorious eternal things.** There's a huge difference. Holiness isn't just not doing sinful things. What it's about being set apart for glorious eternal things?

Let me try to make the case. When Jesus was talking with disciples in Luke 10: 2, one of the things he says is, ***“Pray for more workers.”*** Now why would he say that? Essentially, he's saying, “There are not enough of us.” There are not enough people who take what we're talking about seriously and we need to have more of us, which means that all of us who are seeking God and working to build his kingdom, we need to make the best use of all of our time. This is a call on every believer.

In Matthew 6: 33, Jesus says, ***“Seek first the kingdom of God.”*** It's in the heart of the Sermon on the Mount. What he's saying is every believer, whether you're in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade or the 6<sup>th</sup> year after you've retired, whether you're a school teacher, you work for the government, whether you're in business, whatever the situation, the first call in your life is to seek to advance the God's kingdom. Not because you're particularly special or gifted, but because our mission is so important. It's the most important mission proclaiming the glory of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, reconciling people to God, and then God reconciling people to each other. There is no more important work than that. And because of the Holy Spirit within you, everybody who will surrender to Christ, from 6<sup>th</sup> grader on up, can have an incredible ministry.

And then he says, in John 15: 8, ***“My Father is glorified by this that bear much fruit.”*** Not “I don't look at this.” “I don't say that.” “I don't do that.” God is glorified not by what we don't do but what we do, which is bear much fruit. Jesus wants us to see fruitfulness matters.

Unfortunately, **we live in a day where is faithfulness is often defined by piety (avoiding sinful actions) more than it's defined by fruitfulness (doing good works).** If we value fruitfulness as much as Jesus does, most of us, if not all of us, will recognize we have interactions with certain people that keep us from being fruitful. If that's our life aim, just like we have to consider our diet, what we eat, we may have to consider our relationships and reconsider what relationships are keeping us from bearing fruit if that's what we were created to do?

It's not that we don't want to be bothered. As Christians, we live to be bothered. I'm praying all the time for those Holy Spirit inspired moments whether I'm getting onto a plane or going to the grocery store or just taking a walk. “Lord, if there's someone you want me to reach, I'm happy to do that.” But it's about wanting to be most effective and most fruitful and most focused so those encounters honor God.

Here's what I think is one of Satan's most clever traps against the church today. Satan knows he can't keep us from loving. He can't keep us from caring about others because God's spirit makes us care. God pours his love through us and if you picture God's love flowing through us like pure water that can go out and irrigate a field and produce an incredible crop... Satan goes, "I can't stop that from happening. God's love is that powerful. But here's what I can do. I can get them to not pour that water out onto a field that's ready to be irrigated so it produces fruit. I can get them to pour that water straight into the gutter of a toxic person where it will bear no fruit. In fact, where the toxic person will be so resentful and go on the attack, and that will keep them from wanting to pour that water out on other fields that might produce fruit"

So, understanding what it means to deal with toxic people, we have to begin with this: **You were saved for a mission.** Not just for personal salvation, but to do the work of God in this world. I already mentioned Matthew 6: 33. In the heart of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, **"Seek first the kingdom of God."** He's not talking to paid religious workers. He's talking to grandparents and farmers and tradesmen and children, saying, "This is what it is to follow me. You wake up and your first thought is how do I seek first God's kingdom." With the Spirit in you, you can do that at any age.

Then he tells us, in the Great Commission, how to focus on seek first God's kingdom. Matthew 28: 19 you've all probably heard this. Jesus said, **"Therefore, go and make disciples..."** not just converts, but disciples **"...of all nations..."** What does it mean to disciple? **"...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."**

So, Jesus said, "You're looking for people that say, "I want to know what Jesus said and I want to obey what Jesus said," and so we spend our life saying, "Okay, do you want to follow Jesus? Here's what it means to follow Jesus." That's what it means to make a disciple.

The Apostle Paul mirrors Jesus. His sermon on the Mount is 2 Corinthians 5: 15. He says essentially the same thing. Here's what he said, **"Christ died for all so that..."** so we would just go to heaven? That's not where he stops. **"...those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them."** Paul says you were saved to do a work on earth, not just to be going to a certain place in heaven.

Now, his great commission is 2 Timothy 2: 2. He says to Timothy, **"And all 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."** How do you live for God? You've got to find these reliable people... Christianity is all about producing fruit, so find people that are reliable, and you pour into them and they'll pour into others and that's how we build the kingdom of God.

What this means is Jesus and Paul agree that the focus of Christianity isn't on not doing bad things. The focus of mature Christianity is on investing in good, reliable people. Christianity is a persistent and sacrificial effort to pour out ourselves and invest in reliable people. By extension, that means we're not called to try to get the toxic people or the unreliable people.

I keep using that phrase *toxic people*, so let me define what I mean by that. By toxic people, I don't mean sinners, of course not. We're called to sacrificially reach out and search for people to come to Christ. I don't mean people who are different than you and so they bug you. That's not a toxic person. I don't even mean difficult people. All toxic people are difficult, but not all difficult people are toxic. What's the difference? Well there's going to be a whole session on that and we're going to tape this afternoon, so go to the growth groups and you'll be able to hear it. But let me just summarize it by this. *Toxic people are those who are destroying you. You interact with them and they are taking little bits out of you so there's not much of you left. You question your sanity, you lose your joy, you lose your sense of peace, you lose your self-confidence. To interact with them, you come out a little bit less of a person, less available to other relationships.*

Here's sort of a definition. You can just throw it away. It's mine, so you are completely free to disagree with it. *Toxic people are ruled by selfishness and spite. They are draining instead of encouraging. And they use people instead of loving them. They are often seemingly addicted to self-righteous, rash judgment, and thus frequently fight with people instead of enjoying and appreciating people. They may be jealous of healthy people's peace, family, and friendships, and spend much of their time and effort trying to bring people down to their level of misery rather than blessing others with joy and encouragement. They often want to control you and it may feel as if they basically just want you to stop being you.*

They are the people who drain us, who demean us, who haunt us, long after they're gone. If they're number comes up on your phone, your heartbeat goes through the roof. You're not available with your spouse, your kids because you're still trying to figure out the craziness of that interaction before and you realize this person spiritually, relationally, emotionally, are making you sick. If someone it's getting in the way of what God has called you to do or being the person that God has called you to be, for you, that person is toxic.

Let me give an example. My wife and I have supported this college work for our entire lives because we loved college. It was such a key season for us. I've had some great discipleship with some wonderful ministries out there. It's where we started dating, got engaged, and ended up getting married.

The college experience was wonderful, so I was horrified when a young woman I've worked with described how she lost her first year of college to a toxic person. She had one roommate. The college assigned a third for their suite and that person was named Samantha. Andrea had never met somebody quite like Samantha.

Samantha needed a beef with someone to get out of bed. It's like she wasn't alive unless she could take offence at something someone had done or something they hadn't done. If Andrea and the other roommate so much as went out to a meal without checking with Samantha, she took it as a personal insult and offence. She would come home and want to rail about the latest person who hadn't treated her with the respect she deserved and if they said, "I'm trying to study," she would go all religious, "Well, you're putting work before people. What would Jesus think of that."

But, of course, Andrea was always the one that Samantha said had the problem. She came up to her one time and said, "I've talked to my pastor back at the church. I've described what you are and he's pretty sure you have a couple of demons. But if you'll come home with me next weekend, he knows how to deliver people from demons, so we'll get you all well."

Andrea said, "It's not really something I'm interested in doing." That's the problem. What kind of crazy person is filled with demons and doesn't want to be free of them? And Andrea realized that Samantha had had more conflict in two months than she had had for her entire life, and it was impacting her severely. It was reeking her ability to make other friends because Samantha would glom onto her and other people would recognize the toxicity and just say, "I don't want to be around that."

Andrea started breaking out. She was listless. She couldn't sleep because she would try to get home after Samantha was in bed and then she would try to wake up early so she wouldn't have to see Samantha in the morning.

Her mom became more and more alarmed and said, "Andrea, we've got to get you out of there." Andrea talked to the RA, but they were like, "You know, this is college. Young women just need to learn how to get along with each other." Toxic wasn't even in their vocabulary. Fortunately, her mom stepped in and said, "This isn't healthy. This isn't normal. We've got to get you out."

They got her out of there by Thanksgiving. So, Samantha poured all of her attention on the other roommate who was gone by Christmas. The school assigned another roommate and she was gone by Easter. Holidays were very unkind to Samantha. But it's a story of how Andrea lost her first year in college and in a way, Samantha still haunts her. She told me, "If I hear her name now, I still want to hurl." She's never really fully gotten away from it.

I'll just say this. I'm so glad that Andrea hadn't sought my counsel 25 years ago. Now, she wasn't alive 25 years ago, but if she would have, I was so naïve. I wouldn't have thought that you'd even want to mention a toxic person. I had this notion that if I'm surrendered to the Lord, walking in obedience, applying scripture, always responding with love, listening to God's voice that eventually, every situation can be worked out. And I had this notion that if it didn't, if something went wrong, my prayer was always, "God, what's wrong with me?"

The analogy might be let's say somebody just has atrocious breath. They just had garlic, leeks, onions, and gas station sushi, right? And an hour later, they are just breathing on you. I would smell that, and my response would be, "God, would you please heal my nose. There must be something wrong with my nose. I don't want to say it stinks; it's so rude to say their breath stinks..." No, your nose works fine. They stink, right? It's a defense mechanism for you to recognize what's going on and to get away. But it seemed unchristian to me to even think about people in that way. But is it unchristian if Jesus himself taught it?

I've mentioned Matthew 6: 33 twice already and... It's funny, I often quote that verse. In fact, whenever I do, I can see my wife's eyes go back in her head. She told me one time, "You know, Gary, it's possible to preach a sermon without quoting Matthew 6: 33." I said, "I know it is, but it's difficult for me." Because it really kind of defines what my life is, which is getting up and putting God's cause above my own.

But here's how blinded I was. Seven verses after Mathew 6: 33, so just a few sentences, is Matthew 7: 6. Here's what Jesus says in Matthew 7: 6, "**Do not give what is holy... really another way to describe that is kosher. This is kosher food in a Jewish community. "...to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under their feet and turn and tear you to pieces."** So just after Jesus launches a church on the offense – seek first the kingdom of God, all of you go on the offense – he says, but watch out, play a little defense.

There are some people you could give them what is perfectly valuable and holy and pure... If you go back to the first century, pearls were so rare and so valuable. Remember when Jesus said a man who sold all he had for how many pearls? One pearl. That's how valuable they are. And kosher food prepared everything perfectly. He goes, "If you give that to dogs, not only will they not appreciate it or thank you for this great food or thank you for this valuable pearl, they will resent it and they will turn and they will try to destroy you. Now, by saying this, Jesus is essentially saying I don't want that to happen to you. I'm sending you out on the offense, but you need to learn how to play a little bit of defense.

What I've found is Matthew 7: 6 can sort of serve as Rorschach test for believers. Remember those Rorschach test? They would do the ink blocks and a psychologist would say, "What do you see when you see this ink blot?" And it kind of helped them understand where your mind was.

This is a Rorschach test in this way. If you think that Christianity is primarily about being nice – that all Christians are the nicest people on the planet – this seems cruel. You might even think *I don't think Jesus really said this. Jesus couldn't have said that, could he?* But if you think Christianity is about producing fruit, look at Matthew 7:6 and say, "Oh, Jesus, this is gold. Thank you so much. I would have missed this. I could have wasted some much time working with – Jesus' words, not mine – dogs and swine and not do the work that you've called me to do."

When Jesus is assuming an active life of mission, when he prays for more workers, what he's saying is there aren't enough of us that seeking first the kingdom of God. And this work is so crucial, we've got to make the best use of our time.

Another analogy would be like Battlefield triage. A lot of you have heard that phrase. In World War II, as our forces stormed the beaches in Normandy, they were followed by a large number of surgeons. Now there were never enough battlefield surgeons when that many men were being shot up and killed. So, every surgeon had to do what they called triage. They would come up to a soldier and make a quick evaluation. They would look at one soldier and say, "If I spend an hour and a half with him, there is a 5% chance of he lives." If they came to that conclusion, they would shoot them up with morphine so they wouldn't suffer, paint an M on his chest so no one else would give him another dose of morphine, which would kill him, and go on to help somebody else.

Now, from one perspective, it seems cruel that they left him to die, but we can realize why they did that. They could get to 10 to 12 people, maybe 20 people in that hour and a half and save all of them. So, if they wasted their time on somebody who wasn't going to be saved, they were neglecting all the people who could be. There's aren't enough spiritual workers out there. And if we're pouring our time into toxic people, we're withholding our time from the reliable people who will also produce fruit and grow the Kingdom of God.

Jesus practiced this in his own life. I think of the example when Jesus talked with the rich, young ruler. Now the rich, young ruler wasn't toxic, this is a different situation, but it shows the model. In fact, one of the gospels states very specific that Jesus looked at him and loved him. There was something about this young man's earnestness that drew Jesus to him, and he made an incredible offer. "If you will just sell all that you have and give to the poor, you can come and follow me." That's the only individual, other than the disciples, that got that personal one on one invitations from Jesus. It's stunning. He's inviting that rich, young ruler to be one of his intimate followers. But we know what happens. The rich, young ruler walks away. One of the gospels say, he walked away very sad because he was very rich. It's sort of the Bible's humor. Usually we think very rich makes you very happy. In this case, it was keeping him from what was better. He walked away very sad because he was very rich and couldn't do what Jesus asked of him.

What did Jesus do with this man that he loved and that he cared about? Let's talk about what he didn't do. He didn't chase after him. He didn't say, "Look, 100% is a whole lot. What if we start at 50%? I'll disciple you up." No, instead it says he turned to his disciples, the reliable people – and said, "Let me explain to you why it's so difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of God." Spiritual triage. If he's not going to respond to the truth, I'm going to pour myself out on those who will.

And he did it with crowds in Matthew 8. It's a well-known passage. A man is filled with demons. Jesus delivers him from all the demons. The demons say, "Hey can we go into the pigs?" and Jesus said, "Sure go into the pigs." The pigs run over a cliff and they all die. The towns people are appalled at what they see happen. Now we can kind of get it; their livelihood has just been demolished. They could have a fire sale on pork chops and bacon, but in a couple of weeks, there is nothing left to sell. And that's what they are focused on. But think about what they had in front of them. Look, you're here on a Sunday morning. What would you pay, how long in line would you stand to see Jesus in the flesh for a weekend? To hear him, to watch him, to get to ask him questions. You'd pull out the credit card... Sorry Dave Ramsey. You do what ever it takes. You'd want to be in that show.

They had that and yet they were so appalled by what Jesus did in Matthew 8: 34, ***They pleaded with him to leave their region.*** They said to God in flesh, "Just go." What did Jesus do? "Look, I'm sorry, I know you think that shouldn't have happened, but first we could talk about why you were raising pigs in the first place and Israel second we could talk about..." That's not what happened. The very next verse is Matthew 9: 1 that says this: ***Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over, and came to his own town.*** He didn't walk away, he sailed away, same principle. He said, "You want me to go, I'm gone."

There are 41 citations I put in the appendix of *When to Walk Away*, where Jesus walked away from someone or let others walk away from him without him following them. Now, they are not all toxic people and because this a synoptic gospel, some are referring to the same instances, but there are plenty of examples where Jesus demonstrated spiritual triage. The time is short, I want to go to the reliable people, the people that want to obey and learn what that means. That's where I'm going to invest my time. I'll call out sinners, but if they are not responsive, I'm going to find others who are. He told his disciples to do the same.

Matthew 10: 14 – ***“If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words...”*** try another 10 Facebook posts, spend another six months focusing just on them... No. He says, ***“Shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town.”*** We've got to keep moving on.

Some of you, more than anything, what you need to hear this morning is this. God isn't honored when you let yourself be emotionally or spiritually or certainly physically ripped to shreds. When someone is destroying your joy, your peace, and your self-confidence, it doesn't honor God even if you are related to them. Why? Because people who are filled with confidence and joy are the ones that God can use. I know it sounds selfish. You say, “Why should I worry if they are stealing my joy?” But the Bible says the joy of the Lord is our strength.

Satan can't steal your salvation but if he can steal your joy and make you weak, then you're not going to be pouring that water out on fields that are ready to be fertilized. So, when you walk away from toxic people, you make yourself more effective. I love those of you that are sensitive. You remove a cause of great pain to God because he hates it when he sees you abused and if that person can't stop abusing you and you walk away, you keep that person from sinning against God by abusing you. But misplaced guilt often keeps us in those situations where we allow that to happen.

Sometimes it's even at the very core relationships this happens. For Esther Fleece, it was her parents. She grew up in a very dysfunctional home. Her dad would always try and bring her in for a character witness when she was a young girl because he was always being sued. Things got so contentious that when she was 12 years old, she was brought into a court room because he mother and father were arguing over who got custody of her.

The only way that Esther could really survive in such a dysfunctional, abusive home was to pour out her life into this journal. It was her sanctuary, her refuge, the one place where she tried to regain her sanity. So, she would write and write and write and it just sort of lifted her spirits. She's in this courtroom and she told me, “Gary, you have no idea when you come from a dysfunctional home, how horrific it is to have to have people talk about the abuse in your home. The shame you have, the horror, you're embarrassed.”

They were asking her terrible questions and then her father's lawyer lifted up a plastic baggie and inside was her journal. Esther couldn't believe it. Number one, how did he get ahold of it, and two, she was horrified when he began reading from it out loud, in sort of strike against her mom and her unfitness to be her parent. Esther found herself just collapsing on the spot because that journal was her sacred friend and she said, “I will never write another word again.” The judge lifted her up and said, “You've

got to answer these questions. I know this is terrible, but we've got to get through this. You need to at least say yes or no."

Eventually, the court decided neither mother nor father were fit to care for her. She was going to be put into the foster system, but thank God a church rose up and said, "No, that's not going to happen to this young woman." A family adopted her. She was disciplined. She met the Lord. She grew in God and God used her so amazingly. This is the incredible thing about God. He can use our dysfunction to help us grow.

As a young woman, she was starting to get nationally renowned. She was featured in Christianity Today, Time Magazine, USA Today, and she was working with Focus on the Family, helping pastors my age sort of understand millennials. She had a new apartment – her first apartment – and it was so different because home was a sanctuary for her. Again, a lot of us think of home as a place of rest. When you grow up in a dysfunctional home, to have a place where you set it up and you've got your scripture verses and you have happy memories and real, holy relationships that fill that place... It was just so wonderful.

Because she got a national profile, her father found out where she lived. Toxic people don't like to see those that they had under their control succeed. They get a sick satisfaction out of attacking them. The best way to describe it is he began stalking Esther. I'm not going to get into the details, but there is one encounter where he violated that place and now the sanctuary home, her first one, was a nightmare.

Fortunately, a wise church said, "You've got to get a restraining order." Esther said to me, "Gary, what kind of woman puts a restraining order on her dad?" The answer is a woman who is walking in the footsteps of Jesus, who realizes that God has given her an important work that she's bearing so much fruit. So, she did get the restraining order and then when he broke that restraining order, he ended up going to jail.

Here's the fruit that comes from that story and this is why we worship Jesus. If you are watching on line or you're here with a friend and you don't understand why we sing songs to Jesus and we're so in love with Jesus, it's because this is what we are so amazed that God does out of his kindness and generosity. He takes us in our worst state and finds us great victory. And that happened with Esther. Remember the young girl who said, "I will never write another word again"? That didn't come true. God moved her to write a book, an incredible book called *No More Faking Fine*. The power of Lamentation to Bring Spiritual Healing.

I was really fortunate. I was there at a small gathering the publisher put together when the book was released. It was in Nashville at the Country Music Hall of Fame. They had closed the museum and we were in the Rotunda, where they have all the plaques of the people that have been inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame. Esther was brilliant as she presented it. She goes, "See all these songs represented by the people of this museum? How many songs of lament are represented by this museum?" Everybody laughed because that's country music, right? I lost my wife, I lost my dog, my truck has been stolen, my gun is broken... I'm a big fan of country music, but that's often what makes it real. We all laughed.

And then she said, "How many books on Lamentation are in Christian bookstores?" We all got silent and we realized how God took a woman's dysfunction and said, "This is the way to healing and this is the way you bless others." This is a neglected practice in the church. We need to bring it to the forefront. That's what God does. He produces fruit. Esther produced that fruit from walking away, even from her father.

Look, there are foods that if I eat today, they are not going to send me to the hospital, but I'm going to have congestion issues, I'm going to be lethargic, I'm going to be tired, I'm just not going to live my best. The same thing is true with relationships. I'm going to keep going back and they are going to steal my joy, my peace; they are going to steal my sanity and I'm not going to do the work that God has created me to do and set me apart to do. The same I believe is true for you. Looking at the example of Jesus and the words of Jesus, it is a holy thing, and act of obedience to learn when to walk away.

Lord, I thank you that you care for us so well. That though you send us out, you also want to protect us. You've given us kind words of warning. Father, I pray that you would send your Spirit that we could learn how to apply this, how to understand this in a way that honors you.

We pray in Jesus' name... Amen.