

# HOW TO FIND RELATIONSHIPS THAT ARE GOOD FOR YOU



*and avoid those that aren't*

— Authors of the *New York Times* bestseller *Boundaries* —

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ZONDERVAN

*Safe People*

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# INTRODUCTION

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**H**AVE YOU EVER said any of the following things to yourself?

- How can I learn to pick better friends?
- Why do I choose people who let me down?
- How did I end up with this critical boss?
- How do I attract irresponsible people?
- Why did I invest money with that unscrupulous person?
- What is it about me that draws the wrong types to me?
- Why am I drawn to the wrong types?

If you have, then this book was written for you. It deals with the problem of character discernment, a skill that many of us lack. And yet the ability to determine good character in people is one of God's most vital ingredients for our personal and spiritual growth.

What is character discernment? It is simply being able to tell the "sheep from the goats" in your life, evaluating who is good for you, and who isn't. And those who are good for us we call "safe people," those individuals who truly make us better people by their presence in our lives.

Safe people are individuals who draw us closer to being the people God intended us to be. Though not perfect, they are "good enough" in their own character that the net effect of their presence in our lives is positive. They are accepting, honest, and present, and they help us bear good fruit in our lives.

As therapists, we have observed over the years one simple yet profound fact: We need each other. God designed us to be his hands and feet, to support, comfort, and encourage each other: "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matt. 18:20).

Many people act on that need and reach out for relationship. They reach out when they are lonely or stressed out. They reach out when they want someone to share their joys and successes. They

reach out when they need someone to understand their losses and problems. And they reach out when they need wisdom and guidance.

The problem is, we often pick the wrong people to trust. For many reasons, we will reach out to those who abandon, neglect, damage, or tear us down. Our blindness to who is good for us and who isn't can cause tragedies like depression, compulsive behaviors, marriage conflicts, and work problems. Sadly, your ability to pick out a good car may be better than your ability to pick good friendships.

But there is hope. We believe that the Bible contains the keys to understanding how to tell safe people from unsafe ones. It also teaches how to become safe people for others. In this age of broken relationships, these scriptural principles are both timeless and timely.

### A Bird's-Eye View

Here is an outline of what this book will teach you about safe people.

In Part 1, "Unsafe People," you'll learn who unsafe people are and the twenty identifying traits of unsafe people (chapters 1–4).

In Part 2, "Do I Attract Unsafe People?" you'll get a picture of the origin of the problem: why you currently choose the wrong people, and how to repair this problem (chapters 5–8).

In Part 3, "Safe People," you will learn more about what safe people are and why you need them. You will also receive practical help on successfully meeting and relating to safe people.

We designed this book to help you look both *outside* and *inside* yourself. You will look *outside* yourself as you learn to stand back and critically evaluate the people in whom you are investing yourself. As you use the scriptural principles in this book, you will find that your eyes will become opened to the true nature of others, both good and bad.

*Safe People* will also help you look *inside* yourself. You will find your blind spots and vulnerabilities and understand why you are easy prey to manipulative people, or susceptible to controlling individuals. You'll gain important awareness of your weaknesses and learn how to mature past them. Also, you'll look inside and see the

ways you yourself may be unsafe for others. God wants to help you expose those parts and mature in those areas.

A final word here: As you begin to educate yourself in this crucial area, remember that God understands the struggle to open up, to trust, and to love. Though he is God, he also gets hurt. He deeply desires to bring you into his world of relationship with him and with those who represent him. So as you read this guide to safe people, we pray that you will sense the impassioned concern of God for you in this area. "Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6).

HENRY CLOUD, PH.D.  
JOHN TOWNSEND, PH.D.

# **PART ONE**

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## **Unsafe People**

## CHAPTER ONE

# What Is an Unsafe Person?

AS A COLLEGE student, I (John) dated around a bit, but I enjoyed casual friendships more. Until a friend introduced me to Karen. From the moment I saw her standing in my friend's living room, my world turned upside down.

Karen was an attractive blonde and a committed Christian, with a sly sense of humor that peeked out at unexpected intervals. Intelligent and popular, she was at home in both formal settings and at a Saturday touch football game.

We started dating, and our relationship quickly became exclusive. We dined at cheap student-friendly restaurants. We went out with friends. Sometimes we even studied together. One of our favorite activities was sitting in the campus center, making up stories about the people who walked by. She'd see an FBI agent on the prowl, and I'd add that the agent was actually part of a conspiracy to take the university president hostage.

Over the next few months, our relationship progressed. I was still dumbfounded at how fortunate I was to have Karen, and I thought that perhaps this was the woman God had meant for me to marry. Caught up in my wonder and excitement, however, I missed a few things. A few times Karen couldn't meet me for pizza or a class, and she'd say she was busy and quickly change the subject. I figured I probably "needed too much" from her and never pressed her on it.

One time I dropped by her apartment to surprise her. Hearing voices, I knocked, and said, "It's me." The voices stopped. After



knocking several times, I shrugged and left. Maybe Karen and a girlfriend were having a private talk. *Who am I to intrude?* I thought.

Another time my friend Bill told me he'd heard that Karen had a history of breaking hearts. "Be careful," he said. Certain that Bill was probably jealous or mistaken, I brushed it off.

But most troubling was what we'd do when we were together. When it was what Karen wanted, it was a pleasure. If she needed to hit the books, she made it fun. If it was time to play, she was a riot. But if it was I who needed to study, instead of studying with me she'd get impatient and go out with her friends.

The same imbalance occurred on a deeper level. I was mostly "there" for her; she seldom was for me. Once, when I was in the middle of a conflict with a friend, Karen didn't see me for a few days to "let me sort it out."

One day the truth I'd been avoiding came crashing down on me. I walked into her apartment and caught her kissing another guy.

I remember Karen looking around to see me, a surprised expression on her face. She broke her clutch with my replacement. Then, holding his hand, she smiled and said to me, "I've been meaning to tell you, John, but I knew you'd be the kind of guy who understands."

And I did, in a way. No temper tantrum. I didn't jerk Mr. New's head off, or challenge him to a duel. True to form in my relationship with Karen, I smiled in a hurt-but-mature way, and mumbled something like, "Absolutely, I understand. I'm sure it was hard for you."

Karen thanked me for this gift of "understanding," and I walked away.

I saw her occasionally over the next few months, but our lives began moving in different directions. I took longer than a few months to recover, however. I'd thought Karen and I were much more involved than we were, and I was in shock. I'd talked about thoughts and feelings that no one else was privy to and entrusted her with deep parts of me. I was under the impression that our souls were becoming deeply intertwined in preparation for a lifetime of love, family, fun, and service to God and others.

It took a long time for me to accept the fact that Karen could switch beaus like most of us change socks. In fact, I heard through the grapevine that this scenario repeated itself many times. The relationship hurt my pride and my sense of trust. But even more, I began doubting myself.

What's really funny is that even though I knew how bad Karen was for me, the "catch my breath" feeling didn't go away for a long time. I'd pray about her; friends would counsel me and listen to my grief. I'd see all the character flaws I'd missed: Duplicity. Dishonesty. Irresponsibility. Self-centeredness.

And then I'd see a snapshot of her. Or, even worse, catch her walking down a hall. And I'd be flooded with tender, longing aches that were just as strong as the day we'd met. You could have been walking with me, reading out loud a long list of Karen's Seven Deadly Sins, and it wouldn't have mattered. I'd still be suffering from cardiac flip-flops.

Well, God was good to me, and I grew up in some areas. I finally did marry, and Barbi and I are very much in love. I can't imagine life without her. And I can see all the reasons Karen and I wouldn't have worked out. Yet for years I wondered why I could be so wrong about thinking someone so wrong was so right.

### Is This Your Life?

Now, let's move out of the romantic sphere into all of your relationships. Think for a minute. Have you ever had a relationship with a Karen? Maybe a best friend. A coworker. A relative or church acquaintance. Have you had more than one?

Most of us have. Have you ever been left, used, or hurt? And asked yourself, *What in the world am I doing wrong?* You're not alone.

When we're wounded by people, it's second nature to blame our need for attachment. You may think, *There I go again, trusting people and not God, or Just goes to show you, people can't be depended on.*

Though it's true that people aren't perfect lovers the way God is, Scripture teaches that God created us for relationship with both him and with each other. When at Creation God declared, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18), he was not just talking about marriage. He was declaring the importance of relationships. Part of being made in God's image is having a need to be in relationship.

The problem isn't our need for friendship and connection. That's good, a God-ordained need that he built inside us. But without the proper maturity and skills, that need for support and attach-

ment can get us into real trouble. The real problem is that we are untrained in discerning the character of people.

### **Character Discernment**

One evening I (Henry) spoke to a group of Christian college students about dating and relationships. At the close of the talk, I asked, “What qualities do you look for in a potential date or mate?” The answers went something like this: “I want someone spiritual, godly, ambitious, fun to be with,” and so on. They replied as I had expected. And that disturbed me, for as a counselor and as a person, I know that these are not the issues that cause relationships to break apart.

When I questioned the audience a bit further, asking them about character and relational issues, they were in the dark. They continued to give me broad religious answers and descriptions of people that had little to do with what the Bible actually says about relationships.

People in trouble don’t say broad religious issues are the problem. They say:

- He doesn’t listen to me.
- She is so perfect that she can’t understand my struggles.
- He seems so distant that I feel alone.
- She always tries to control me.
- He makes promises but really doesn’t follow through.
- He is condemning and judgmental.
- She is always angry at me for something I did or didn’t do.
- I tend to be my worst self with him or her.
- I cannot trust him.

And the list could go on. These are the painful complaints that friends and counselors hear from hurting people as they describe their relationships.

When we listen to God address his problem relationships, the list is much more like the second than the first. He says that, among other things, his people are “far away” (Isa. 29:13), “unfaithful” (Josh. 22:16), “proud and perfectionistic” (Deut. 8:14; Ps. 36:2), “unloving” (1 John 4:20), and “judgmental” (Rom. 2:1).

God does not use religious terms and language when he discusses people. He talks about how people treat him and others, and whether or not they get things done as they said they would. In short, he looks at someone's *character*. He is looking at their makeup as a person and the way that that character interacts with him and the world. The Bible is full of "religious" people who could have fulfilled the list the students gave that night. But these people are the ones that Jesus and the Old Testament prophets confronted over and over. They look good on the outside or from a distance, but to get close to them is a nightmare.

We do not get a lot of training in evaluating character. We tend to look on the outside and not the inside of a person (1 Sam. 16:7; Matt. 23:25–28). *So we choose people based on outward appearance, and then experience the inside of them.* We look at worldly success, charm, looks, humor, status and education, accomplishments, talents and giftedness, or religious activity. But then we experience the pain of being in a real relationship with them, and come up very empty-handed.

### **Who Are the Bad Guys?**

My (John's) boys love Saturday morning cartoons. They especially like the superhero-supervillain types, and they enjoy picking out which character is the good guy and which is the bad guy. These shows, of course, make it easy for them: the good guys are clean-cut with heroic features and strong voices. But the bad guys are ugly, dress horribly, and have low, menacing voices.

In real life, the bad guys aren't that easy to pick out. Unsafe people are particularly difficult to spot. Quite often, unsafe people appear winsome and promising, and their character problems are often subtle. So how do we know whom to trust?

While there are many different kinds of unsafe people, many of them fall under three categories: the abandoners, the critics, and the irresponsibles.

#### ***Abandoners***

Abandoners are people who can start a relationship, but who can't finish it.

Ron had recently come to the painful conclusion that, at thirty-nine, he had no significant friendships that had lasted over one year.

"You know, I'll be forty soon," he confided, "and I'd always thought that by that milestone, I'd have several 'anchors': men I'd known for at least a decade, men with whom I'd spend time praying, playing golf, arguing, and trusting with my deepest feelings.

"It hasn't happened yet. I'll meet a guy, we'll get together for lunch, meet the wives, and within a few months, they've lost my number. My slogan for them is, 'Nice guys—where'd they go?'"

Ron was drawn to abandoners. People who can start a relationship—but can't finish it. They begin with statements about companionship and commitment, but they leave us when we need them most.

Often, abandoners have been abandoned themselves. Sometimes, afraid of true closeness, they prefer shallow acquaintances. Others are looking for perfect friends, and they leave when the cracks start showing.

Abandoners destroy trust. Those they leave in their wake are apt to say, "I'll never have anyone who will be there for me." This is a far cry from God's ideal, that we be "rooted and established in love" (Eph. 3:17). And those who continually pick abandoners often become depressed, develop compulsive behaviors, or worse.

### *Critics*

Critics are people who take a parental role with everyone they know. They are judgmental, speak the truth without love, and have no room for grace or forgiveness.

Martha walked out of the church, shaking her head. It was *déjà vu* all over again! She'd been searching for a safe fellowship of Christians where she could grow and serve. For the last year, she'd spent several weeks at various churches, getting to know the attitudes and values of the congregation.

It was uncanny. The last three churches she'd visited were legalistic, rigid, and critical. Their doctrine could be summarized, "If you're a Christian, you should have your act together." And she'd done it again. She'd sat through a sermon on how godly Christians don't sin, and ungodly ones do.

Even though Martha understood that all of us sin, whether we are Christians or not, she couldn't shake her real worry. *Why was I attracted to this type again? What's wrong with me?*

Critics are more concerned with confronting errors than they are with making connections. For example, they often jump on doctrinal and ethical bandwagons (which are important) and neglect issues of love, compassion, and forgiveness. They often confuse weakness with sinfulness, and therefore condemn others when they have problems.

Critics tend to point the finger outside, rather than at themselves. They will sometimes become indignant at the trouble others cause, and propose solutions like “think, feel, believe, and act like my group” as the cure-all.

Critics often deeply love truth and righteousness. Because they are clear thinkers, they can be good people to go to for information. But don’t go to them for relationship, for their truth often comes poisoned with judgmentalism.

If you’re attracted to critical people, you may find relief in their clarity of thought and purity of vision. But you’ll also find yourself guilt-ridden, compliant, and unable to make mistakes without tremendous anxiety.

### ***Irresponsibles***

Irresponsibles are people who don’t take care of themselves or others. They have problems with delaying gratification, they don’t consider the consequences of their actions, and they don’t follow through on their commitments. They are like grown-up children.

Jeremy, a friend of mine (John’s), was constantly in financial straits. He was always broke and in a money crisis. He would come to me and ask for a loan, saying, “I’ll pay you back in a few weeks, when things straighten out.”

I cared a lot for Jeremy and felt valued that he trusted me enough to ask. So I’d lend him the money. Time would pass, there would be no repayment, and he wouldn’t mention it. Then, months later, he’d be in another jam and ask for help again. I’d grudgingly agree, he’d promise to pay both loans back, and again, nothing would happen.

Finally, I figured out what to do. I told Jeremy, “From now on, the word *loan* doesn’t exist between us: only *gift*. I know you mean to pay me back, but you don’t change your financial habits enough to pull it off. So when you ask for help, I’ll either give you a gift,

never expecting to see the money again, or I'll just say no to the request."

Jeremy thought I was crazy, but it helped me a lot. That's the kind of thinking you have to have to survive with irresponsibles. If you depend on them to do what they say, you can end up in financial, functional, and emotional trouble.

If you're drawn to irresponsible people, you may be doing the following:

You pick up after them.

You apologize to others for them.

You make excuses for them.

You give them chance after chance after chance.

You pay for their sins and forgetfulness.

You nag them.

You resent them.

Many irresponsibles are caring, warm, fun-loving people. I like irresponsibles. They help me notice what's going on in life today instead of being anxious about tomorrow. There isn't a place in their head for tomorrow! They're often empathic and understanding. But while I like irresponsibles, I just don't trust them. The irresponsible's lack of dependability can cause us many problems, ranging from making us wait for her at a restaurant to losing a crucial business deal because he didn't get the documentation in on time. As Proverbs puts it: "Better to meet a bear robbed of her cubs than a fool in his folly" (17:12).

Because the irresponsible has problems in delaying gratification, he or she often becomes alcoholic, addicted to sexual gratification, and in debt.

You may be providing a safety net for an irresponsible. For some reason, you end up paying for his or her problems. We could be talking about a friend, an adult child, a spouse, or a business relationship. For every irresponsible, there is an enabler, someone who protects them.

These are just three examples of the many types of unsafe people. Think about your present support system. You may be in a relationship with an abandoner, a critic, or an irresponsible.

In the following chapters, we will talk about more specific character traits of unsafe people. And we will contrast them with the godly character traits that safe people have. In this way you will be able to look for danger signals in your relationships—then learn to make wise decisions about how to handle the unsafe people in *your* life.



## CHAPTER TWO

# Personal Traits of Unsafe People

MARY AND DONNA were partners in a successful decorating firm. Over the years, they had “been there” for one another in many difficult times. But one day Mary confronted Donna on a behavior that had been bothering her. “You always interrupt me when we are meeting with clients,” she said. “It makes me feel inferior.”

“Well, maybe you are!” Donna shot back.

Mary stared at her, stunned. “How can you say that?” she asked. “We’re partners! I’ve always worked just as hard as you.”

But Donna could not take the implication that she was not perfect. Unable to hear or even consider the message, she attacked the messenger. When Mary tried to resolve the conflict, her friend ended the relationship and the association.

Mary was devastated. But as she thought back over the years with Donna, she remembered seeing her friend do the same thing with other people. If Donna did not get her way, she would turn on the other person with a judgmental vengeance and literally write that person out of her life. Long before Donna dropped Mary, there were signs that she was an unsafe person. (Mary also needed to look more carefully at how she chose her friends, because she had run into this kind of rejection before. But we’ll talk about our own responsibility for getting into unsafe relationships in chapter 5.)

Unsafe people have personal traits that make them extremely dangerous to other people. They act as if they “have it all together.” They are self-righteous. They demand trust. And when their facade of perfection is stripped away, they blow up, like Donna, or disappear.

As you read through the next two chapters, you will learn about twenty traits of unsafe people. This chapter describes eleven personal traits of unsafe people; the next chapter details nine interpersonal traits of unsafe people. These traits are warning signals, and if you observe them in any of your relationships, you should proceed in that relationship with caution and much prayer.

This chapter and the next can teach you much by “negative example.” For every negative trait mentioned, there is a corresponding positive one. Look at the positive trait, and you will have a good working definition of a safe person. Safe people, for example, admit their weaknesses. They are humble. And they prove their trustworthiness over time. Keep these positive traits in mind when you read Part 3: “Safe People.” And watch for these traits in your relationships as well. As you learn about these twenty traits, you will hone your character discernment skills and learn to distinguish the safe from the unsafe.

**1. Unsafe people think they “have it all together” instead of admitting their weaknesses.**

Over lunch one day, my friend Sally described a friendship to me. “I really love and admire Julia, but . . .” she sighed. “Something’s just not right with our friendship.”

“What do you mean?” I (Henry) asked.

“I guess it is that she doesn’t have any needs,” Sally explained. “I feel like I am always the one with the problems. I talk about problems in my marriage and in the rest of my life, and get really vulnerable, but she never does. She seems to have it all together, and I feel like the totally weak one.”

“What is it about this that bothers you the most?” I asked.

“I guess it is that I do not feel like she needs me,” she said.

When someone “has it all together,” that person’s friends will suffer these predictable results:

- *Feeling disconnected.* Intimacy is built on sharing weaknesses, and friendship involves sharing vulnerabilities.
- *Feeling “one down.”* There is an implied superiority in the one that has no need for the other.
- *Feeling weaker than one actually is.* The vulnerable one plays the “weakness” role in the relationship. There is no balance, for she is not allowed to be strong.

- *Feeling dependent on the “strong one.”* The weaker one thinks she needs the stronger one to survive.
- *Feeling anger and hostility at the “together” one.* The vulnerable person grows tired of the “together” facade of the stronger person.
- *Feeling the need to compete to reverse the role.* The weaker person feels stuck in her role and fights to change it.

The “weak” one may try to be the “strong” one in some other relationships to compensate for her lack of strength in this relationship. Instead of suffering through only one bad relationship, she may end up with several unbalanced, unsafe relationships. She would do better to balance elements of strength and weakness in each of her relationships.

This pattern also keeps the “strong” one from growing spiritually and emotionally. We grow in part by confessing our faults and weaknesses to each other (James 5:16; Eccl. 4:10). If we are always being strong and without needs, we are not growing, and we are setting ourselves up for a very dangerous fall.

## **2. Unsafe people are religious instead of spiritual.**

I remember when I (Henry) first became a committed Christian. For a long time, I really looked up to people who were religious. I admired their dedication to God and their Bible knowledge. They seemed so strong and “together” that I wanted to be like them.

For about five years, I hung around these kinds of people. During that time I grew a lot and learned a lot of theology, but unknowingly, I also was getting farther and farther away from being a real person. I became more and more “religious,” and less and less of what I now understand to be spiritual. I was losing touch with my vulnerability, my pain, my need for other people, my sinfulness and “bad parts,” and many other aspects of what it means to be a person.

The wake-up call came when I had a series of failed relationships. I had to begin to look at why I could not get close to people and trust them at a very deep level, and why I knew more and more about God but felt farther and farther away from him.

My graduate school training required some therapy, so when I got into a group where people were real, they started confronting me in the areas where I was faking it. I learned to open up about my

pain and inadequacies, and I got closer to others as I was more vulnerable and needed them more. As the safe people around me loved me just like I was, I learned to open up about my struggles, sinfulness, and imperfections. And I started to really grow as a person and learned a lot more about God than I had known when I had been so “religious.”

After that, I was able to recognize people who weren’t “real,” although they seemed very spiritual. And I found that I was able to pick better friends, people who really knew God and his ways instead of a lot of religious language and activities, truly relational people who were able to understand and love others and were honest about themselves and about life.

### **3. Unsafe people are defensive instead of open to feedback.**

I was organizing a conference with a colleague I’ll call Jay. We each had different responsibilities. Jay was responsible for securing the site, for making sure an overhead projector and flip chart were available, and for shipping books to the workshop.

The night before the event, Jay called me. “Do you have any extra copies of your books you could bring along?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I thought it would be good to sell your books at the workshop.”

“But you were supposed to take care of that!” I replied.

“I had too many things to do,” he said.

Trying with all my might to hang on to my patience, I said, “But we agreed that shipping books to the conference was *your* responsibility.”

“You always concentrate on the things that go wrong,” he said angrily. “You never tell me about the things that I do right. Who are you to say that you always do things right?”

Jay is an example of a unsafe person. When I confronted him on his lack of responsibility, he became defensive and started making excuses and attacking me.

The conversation with Jay was in marked contrast to a phone call I had had a couple of weeks before with a friend. That day my heart pounded as I picked up the phone to call a friend. I had noticed some things about him that troubled me, and I knew he needed to be confronted, but I knew that our relationship could suffer if he didn’t take it well.

I expected him to be very defensive and hurt. But to my surprise he said, “Really? Tell me how I do that.”

I proceeded to explain to him why I thought what he was doing was destructive. “Gosh,” he said, “I never thought about that. But I can see what you are saying—it’s certainly a weakness of mine. Can you help me to get out of that pattern?”

I was really relieved to hear his openness, and of course I agreed to help. But at a deeper level, I felt closer to him and very respectful of his response. I could see that he was more interested in doing what was right than appearing “right” in his own eyes.

This is one of the marks of a truly safe person: they are confrontable. Every relationship has problems, because every person has problems, and the place that our problems appear most glaringly is in our close relationships. The key is whether or not we can hear from others where we are wrong, and accept their feedback without getting defensive. Time and again, the Bible says that someone who listens to feedback from others is wise, but someone who does not is a fool. As Proverbs 9:7–9 says: “Whoever corrects a mocker invites insult; whoever rebukes a wicked man incurs abuse. Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you; rebuke a wise man and he will love you. Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still; teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning.”

The Bible is clear about the need to be able to hear rebuke from others (Matt. 18:15). Confrontation helps us learn about ourselves and change destructive patterns.

All close relationships hurt, because no perfect people live on the earth. But the safe people are the wise ones that can hear their sin and respond to our hurt. In short, they can “own” where they are wrong. If, however, someone has the character trait of defensiveness, when we need to confront him, we are going to be stuck with all the hurt that his natural imperfections cause in the relationship. Someone who does not own his need to change does not change, and the hurt is likely to continue.

#### **4. Unsafe people are self-righteous instead of humble.**

The Pharisees of Jesus’ time were notorious for taking pride in their own righteousness. In fact, Jesus told a parable that poked fun of their attitude:

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.”

But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.

(LUKE 18:10–14)

The tax gatherer did not see himself as righteous. Instead, he sought grace humbly, for he knew that only through God’s grace could he be loved and accepted. The Pharisee, however, saw *himself* as good, and *others* as bad. He believed—wrongly—that all “badness” was outside of himself.

Unsafe people will never identify with others as fellow sinners and strugglers, because they see themselves as somehow “above all of that.” This “I’m better than you” dynamic produces a lot of shame and guilt in people who are associated with this type of unsafe person. It significantly blocks intimacy because the two people are never on “even ground,” which is where human intimacy takes place. It sets up comparison, competitive strivings, defensiveness, and alienation.

Psychologists call this dynamic a “not me” experience: People have a character structure that does not allow them to see certain realities as part of themselves. They project things onto others and cannot own their own flaws. Unfortunately, many Christians have this mentality about sin in general. They will talk about the people “in the world,” as if they are somehow not able to identify with them.

##### **5. Unsafe people only apologize instead of changing their behavior.**

“But he’s really sorry this time,” she said. “When I confronted him with what I knew, he cried and said he was so heartbroken about what he had done. I could tell he was really torn up about it.”

My counselee was referring to her husband, whom she had discovered had been seeing another woman. She was being taken in by his “true pain” over what he had done and his promises never to do

it again. However, he had made similar “confessions” countless times before. Each time, he was “so sorry.” He cried and made very short-lived 180-degree turnarounds. This was the fourth time that he had been involved with another woman. And each previous time, he had been “sorry.”

The truth is, however, that sorry is as sorry does. The Bible’s word for this is *repentance*, and it means a true turnaround. But unlike the “spins” that this man had made, a true turnaround is one that lasts. That does not mean that there is perfect behavior after that point, but that the change is real and that it bears fruit over time.

To repent means to change one’s mind and to turn around and be transformed. Before Jesus’ ministry began, John the Baptist sternly preached repentance to the Jews: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? *Produce fruit in keeping with repentance*. . . . The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3:7–9, emphasis mine).

A wife of a well-known Christian leader once said to me, “I cannot remember in twenty-five years of marriage that I have mentioned something hurtful that my husband did that he ever did again. When he says he is sorry, he means it, and he changes.” What a testimony that was!

Repentant people will recognize a wrong and really want to change because they do not want to be that kind of person. They are motivated by love to not hurt anyone like that again. These are trustworthy people because they are on the road to holiness and change, and their behavior matters to them.

People who apologize quickly may act like they are sorry or as if they are interested in holiness, but they are really leading someone on. They may say all the words, and some are taken in by their tears and “sorrow.” But in reality they are more sorry about getting caught. They do not change, and the future will be exactly like the past.

Again, the issue here is not perfection. People who are changing still are not perfect and may sin again. But there is a qualitative change that is visible in people of repentance that does not have to do with guilt, getting caught, or trying to get someone off their back.

The prognosis for change is always better when it is not motivated by a “getting caught” episode, but by real confession and coming to the light about what is wrong. Sometimes, when someone is “caught,” he will repent and change, but that repentance can only be tested over time.

The general principle is to look for whether the “repentance” is motivated from outside pressure or from true internal desire to change. Getting caught or adapting to someone’s anger is not a long-lasting motivator. Eventually the motivations must be a hunger and thirst for righteousness and love for the injured.

**6. Unsafe people avoid working on their problems instead of dealing with them.**

Many people are familiar with the Twelve Steps of the recovery movement. Using these steps, people suffering from addictions work through their problems, and in a systematic way; they begin to develop character.

Unsafe people, however, resist any form of character growth or maturation. Unsafe people

- do not admit that they have problems, or they think they can solve the problems by themselves.
- do not submit their life and will to God.
- do not confess when they have wronged someone.
- do not forgive people who have hurt them.
- avoid facing relationship problems directly and openly.
- do not hunger and thirst for righteousness.
- treat others with a lack of empathy.
- are not open to confrontation from others.
- are not in a process of learning and growing.
- do not take responsibility for their lives.
- blame other people for their problems.
- do not want to share their problems with others to help them grow.

People who are uninvolved in character growth can be unsafe, because they are shut off from awareness of their own problems and God’s resources to transform those problems. Instead, they act out of their unconscious hurts, and then hurt others.



## **7. Unsafe people demand trust, instead of earning it.**

The husband who demanded trust from his wife after an affair is a glaring example of someone who feels entitled to trust. But there are other examples that are not so glaring. I knew a man named Donald who demanded trust from his boss. When Donald's boss asked him to account for his work hours, Donald got so offended that he quit the company and complained to others about the "offense."

Some people feel that they are entitled to trust. We often hear of someone saying, "So you don't trust me." Or "Are you questioning my integrity?" Or "You don't believe me." They get defensive and angry because someone questions their actions, and they think they are above being questioned or having to prove their trustworthiness. But none of us is above questioning, and to take offense at it is very prideful.

Even the most trustworthy man of all time—Jesus himself—did not demand blind trust. He told the Jews who were challenging him, "Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may learn and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father" (John 10:37–38). In other words, Jesus told them to test what he said by his actions; his miracles proved his words to be true.

If, like Jesus, we are truly trustworthy, we would welcome questioning from our loved ones on our "trustability." We would want others to see our deeds and actions so that they would feel more comfortable. We would want to know what gives them suspicion or fear and try to do everything to allay those fears. Above all, we want to make people feel comfortable with us.

In a sense, we should always be open to an "audit" from the ones we care about. If we are truly serious about growing, we want to know if we are unknowingly doing something wrong (Ps. 139:23–24). Hidden sins and problems are destructive to us, and if we long to grow, we would want them exposed and healed.

We will often get questions in seminars from a spouse who has done something wrong but is angry because his or her spouse won't "trust me even though I have said I'm sorry." They have to be confronted and reminded that trust has to be earned and trustworthi-

ness has to be demonstrated over time. It is a sad commentary that some husbands and wives are more disturbed by the fact that their spouse won't trust them than they are at whatever they had done to create that level of mistrust.

In short, we are not in any way "entitled" to perfect opinions of us by others. Those opinions are earned. Be wary of people who say, "How dare you question my integrity!"

**8. Unsafe people believe they are perfect instead of admitting their faults.**

Unsafe people are on a mission to prove that they are perfect. Using their work, family, abilities, or religion, they try to project an image of perfection, and their image becomes more important to them than the relationships they are in. If someone threatens their image, they will attack that person, for they must keep up their image at all costs.

Love, however, depends in part on our ability to own and share our faults. The one who is forgiven much, loves much (Luke 7:47). "Perfect" people cannot internalize grace, so they will not feel loved at a deep level. Therefore, as Jesus pointed out, they do not have a lot of love to give to others. All they have is their "perfection," and that is pretty shallow and not very nourishing. In addition, relationships with perfect people are very hurtful, because they dodge any "badness" that appears in the relationship. They will fight, blame, and point fingers—anything that will put the badness onto the other person so that they can remain blameless.

**9. Unsafe people blame others instead of taking responsibility.**

Safe people take responsibility for their lives. Unsafe people don't. When we become aware of our problems and character issues, God holds us responsible for dealing with them and facing the tough changes that we have to make. Instead of doing this, however, unsafe people will often choose to blame other people, their past, God, sin, or anything else they can find. This tendency to blame others first appeared in Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:12–13), and we have continued it to this day. It is called externalizing our problems.

In other words, we give the responsibility of whatever we are saddled with away to some outside agent.

“I did it because I had to.”

“I had no choice.”

“I can’t change because my mother abandoned me when I was five.”

“You are ruining my life.”

“God has it in for me.”

And on and on.

If I walk out of my office today and get hit by a drunk driver, that will not be my fault. But it will be my responsibility to deal with the outcome. I am the one who has to go to the doctor and get surgery. I am the one who will have to go to the physical therapist. I am the one who will have to grieve. And I will be the one who has to work through the anger and do the forgiving. *Those things are all my responsibility, even though I did not choose to get hit by a drunk driver.*

Unsafe people do not do that hard work. They stay angry, stuck, and bitter, sometimes for life. When they feel upset, they see others as the cause, and others as the ones who have to do all the changing. When they are abused, they hold on to it with a vengeance and spew hatred for the rest of their lives. When they are hurt, they wear it like a badge. And worst of all, when they are wrong, they blame it on others.

Denial is the active process that someone uses to avoid responsibility. It is different from being unaware of sin. When we are unaware, we do not know about our sin. Denial is more active than that. It is a style and an agenda, and it can be very aggressive when truth comes close. People with a style of denial and blaming are definitely on the list of unsafe people to avoid.

## **10. Unsafe people lie instead of telling the truth.**

In a relationship, honesty is the bedrock foundation of a safe relationship. To the degree that there is deception, there is danger. Often we have heard spouses and friends talk about someone that they “thought they knew,” only to find out that this person was living a whole other life they did not know about.

I was talking to a friend yesterday whose entire well-being in finances is gone now because he was deceived in a business relationship. He invested the majority of his money with a con artist.

And there are many whose emotional and spiritual security has been wiped out for the same reason. They invested all they had with someone who was deceiving them and found out that their relationship, or their family, or their faith was built on smoke and mirrors. They trusted someone's love to be real, and found out that the person was deceiving them all along to get things from them.

We are all deceivers to some degree. The difference between safe and unsafe "liars" is that safe people own their lies and see them as a problem to change as they become aware of their deception. Lying gives way to truth, confrontation, humility, and repentance. Unsafe people see deception as a strategy to cling to and to manage life and relationships. They defend instead of give up their lies. And there is no way a relationship can prosper and grow if one person is a liar.

### **11. Unsafe people are stagnant instead of growing.**

Each of us has both fixed aspects of our character and things that we can change. For example, a naturally aggressive person will probably not change to be naturally passive. But that person can learn to channel that aggression in acceptable ways. This kind of change is part of the sanctification process that we undergo as we place ourselves under the lordship of Christ.

Safe people know that they are subject to change. They want to mature and grow over time. But unsafe people do not see their own problems; they are rigidly fixed and not subject to growth (Prov. 17:10). These people can be dangerous, and they will only change when there are enough limits placed on them that they are forced into great pain, humility, and loss. Without this confrontation, unsafe people will remain defiant and unchanged.

### **Reminder**

One of the things that we want to emphasize throughout this book is that no one is perfect. Safe people will at times stumble and be "unsafe" for, after all, they are sinners too. So do not expect perfection.

Instead, when you are measuring someone's character, look at these traits in terms of degree. Everyone lies at some time or in some way. But not everyone is a pathological liar. Look for degrees of imperfection. If a person seems willing to change, forgive him graciously and work with him. But if he resists you, proceed with caution.

# ***SAFE PEOPLE***

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