

The Discipline of Avoiding

It's a mess out there.

Paul warned Timothy about it. "But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power" (1 Timothy 3:1-5 ESV).

At the end of that toxic list, Paul gives Timothy a simple instruction: "Avoid such people."

Avoid such people. Easier said than done, right?

Our sin-broken world is full of toxic people, the kind whose lives overflow with contempt for God and that which is holy, who have no shame about their noxious behavior. It is difficult to avoid them, though we can mitigate our exposure by avoiding the places they congregate.

But did you catch the last line in Paul's list? "Having the appearance of godliness but denying its power." What does that mean? It means some of these toxic people are in the pew on Sunday! They're in church, right smack dab in the middle of our ministry environment. They are toxic people disguised as Jesus-followers. Avoiding them takes an extra effort on our part. It is a discipline all ministry leaders must develop.

We must remember that Paul purposely went to some of the most toxic places of the Roman Empire to share the gospel, start churches, and make disciples. Obviously we should not interpret Paul's instruction to Timothy to mean that we are to generally avoid the unsaved. I hope there are lost people, both inside and outside of the congregation, for whom you are praying and seeking opportunity to share the redeeming love of Jesus. This is obviously in line with the way Jesus lived on earth and the commission he has given to his disciples.

Yet undeniably there are people we should avoid. Their behavior is so toxic that we must minimize our exposure in order to protect ourselves and to avoid adding fuel to their toxic fires. Here are some of the people to watch out for in our day, particularly in the church.

1. *The Pseudospiritual*. "Pseudo" means "false". Any alleged spirituality that does not comport with the full counsel of God as revealed in Scripture is a false spirituality. It may take the form of legalism, requiring where the Scripture doesn't require or prohibiting where the Scripture doesn't prohibit. It may take the form of licentiousness, using grace and the love of God as a cover for ungodly behavior. It may take the form of secret or special knowledge, alleging a personal revelation from God that justifies the receiver's behavior. It may take the form of a martyr complex, where the person presents himself as pure and always under attack by others. It may take a zillion other forms. The

bottom line is that it leads people astray from real, biblical spirituality and “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). When sound teaching and gentle persuasion fail, you simply must avoid such people. They can’t be reasoned with. They must be “handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme” (1 Timothy 1:20). Don’t waste your time or raise your blood pressure by continually trying to fix the pseudospiritual.

2. *The Googlers.* We have this amazing tool now called the internet, in which any fool can say any fool thing and broadcast it all over the world in an official-looking format. In the church there are people who pick up this stuff, often on some pseudospiritual website, or from some partisan bomb-thrower, and bring it to Sunday school where they share it like it fell down from heaven on stone tablets. These folks are inoculated from reason because if you point out to them the flaws in their thinking, that only convinces them that you have been duped...or are part of the conspiracy! You’ve met these people, I’m sure. They are loaded for bear on why a certain dubious doctrinal position is absolutely correct, or why it is an undeniable fact that a particular politician is the Antichrist. At some point you simply must avoid such people. Don’t waste your time or raise your blood pressure by trying to have a discussion with them. Discipline yourself not to be drawn into these foolish arguments.

3. *The Attackers.* Another wonderful thing about the internet is that you can say the most uninformed, ugly, slanderous things about someone and then find a bunch of other people who will join in with you. This phenomenon is called social media. It weaponizes toxicity. Yes, social media has its positive uses and it may not be advisable for you to avoid it altogether (e.g., BBA has a Facebook page that we use for sharing information). But don’t get sucked into the culture of attacking or responding to attacks on social media. It is not a place for reasoned discussion. It is a place for broadcasting outrage and signaling one’s virtue to the likeminded. At some point you simply must avoid such people. Don’t waste your time or raise your blood pressure by trying to engage them productively. Discipline yourself from the attackers.

4. *The Idolizers.* You know this person, too. She has listened to every sermon Charles Swindoll has ever preached on prayer or has consumed everything Andy Stanley has ever written or uttered about leadership. Now everything her pastor says or does on these subjects is interpreted through the lens of the idolized one, with predictable results. Are you as good a preacher as Charles Swindoll? Probably not. Are you a leadership guru like Andy Stanley? Doubtful. So to the idolizers, you constantly fall short, and some of them are glad to point that out (in the language of pseudospiritual “sharing”, of course). It is toxic for a ministry leader to be constantly compared to some far-off superstar. At some point you have to turn a deaf ear to this stuff. Learn from others, of course, but be who God called you to be in the place where he put you. I’m sure that’s what Charles Swindoll and Andy Stanley would tell you, too. Don’t feel like you have to apologize for not being someone else. Don’t let the idolizers discourage you. Don’t waste your time or raise your blood pressure trying to impress them.

Avoiding toxic people – wisely, appropriately, consistently – is a discipline you must develop as a ministry leader. Toxic people will keep you from *doing what God has called you to do in a way that honors him all the way to the finish line* (a pretty good definition of success in ministry, by the way).

Do what Paul told Timothy. Avoid such people.