



Picking Safe People

by Dr. Henry Cloud, Ph.D.

Have you ever wondered why some relationships seem to lead to growth and happiness and others to pain and injury? Have you ever had the experience of meeting someone, finding them attractive and charming, trusting them in some way, and then later were hurt very badly by them? Or, worse than that, have you done that more than once with the same kind of person?

It would be nice if we could all answer “no” to the above questions, for that would mean that we would have avoided a lot of pain in our lives. And it would also be nice if those realities did not even exist so that we did not have to think about them. But the truth is that relationships can have the power to save our lives, or the power to ruin them.

Everywhere you turn, you can find people who can give testimonies of how God brought someone or a community of people to them in a specific time of their life and virtually turned their whole life around. In fact, that is God’s plan, to use good people to deliver his grace to us and cause us to grow. (1 Peter 4:10; Eph. 4:16) God has ordained that we grow and are strengthened in our relationships with each other, as we find people who exercise the gifts that He has given them.

At the same time, you can find others who are in a lot of pain because the people that they have trusted their hearts to have hurt them deeply in various ways. And the reality is that God has talked about that fact as well. He has warned us that there are people that you are to avoid getting into deep relationships with for a variety of reasons. They can hurt you, they can corrupt your morals, and they can lead you away from Him.

David said that he would be very careful to choose who would “minister to” him, and that he would avoid the ones that were hurtful. (Ps. 101) Jesus told us to watch out for people who make “little ones stumble,” and are like devouring “dogs.” (Luke 17:1,2; Matt. 7:6) God is very into reality. He does not sugar coat anything, especially in an area as important as relationships.

These kinds of hurts in the lives of students come in various areas:

- Dating
- Friendship
- Spiritual Relationships

And the problem is that people have the tendency to pick certain kinds of people who hurt them over and over again. We have the tendency to fall into certain patterns of choosing hurtful people out of our own character weaknesses over and over again. How do you do with the following questions?

- Have you ever noticed that the problems or feelings that you are experiencing in your

- dating life are the same ones you had in a previous relationship?
- Do you find that you continue to pick people to fall in love with or become close friends with who hurt you in some way?
 - Do you find yourself wondering “are there any ‘good ones’ out there?”
 - Do you ever go through periods of emotional turmoil that are the results of picking someone who was not good for you?
 - Is “how did I get myself into this?” a frequent thing that you wonder?

If you answer “yes” to many of these, it is time to take a look at the ways and reasons you pick people who hurt you. And be sure that God has an interest in helping you to grow out of the pattern.

People who are honest about these patterns have a chance through spiritual growth to change their tendency to get into hurtful relationships. People who do not see that they play a part in the choosing set themselves up for more pain until they discover what is going on. And the change has to do with two areas. One is learning to recognize the character traits of hurtful people, and the other has to do with dealing with your own character issues that make you vulnerable to that kind of relationship.

Evaluating Character

Many times Christians do not think of evaluating the character of those that they choose to be in relationships with. They often think that to do so would be to be judgmental. (Lk. 6:37) Certainly, we are not to play God and judge someone’s eternal state as the Judge of the Universe will. But we are commanded to judge in the sense of evaluating others in terms of our deciding to have close fellowship with them. (1 Cor. 5:9-13; 1 Cor 15:33)

Instead of looking to the kinds of character traits that God deems important, we look to external things that do not have much to do with how someone ultimately performs in relationships. We look at externals, religious performance, how they appear, instead of what Jesus talked about as the deeper relational aspects of the law such as justice, mercy and faithfulness. (Matt. 23:23) Is someone honest and fair? Are they merciful? Can they be trusted? These are the issues that Jesus told us to look at.

So, the first thing that we have to get over is the feeling that God does not want us to look at these things. It is OK to evaluate people. (Gal. 6:1) He wants us to, to help each other as well as to protect ourselves from evil. (Prov. 22:3)

In the book *Safe People*, John Townsend and I defined a person of safe character as someone who:

- Draws me closer to God
- Draws me closer to others
- Helps me become the person God created me to be

As you think of people to date and become close friends with, or to put yourself under spiritual direction with, think about those issues. Does your relationship with them help you to grow spiritually and get closer to a loving God? Does it help you to become more loving and relational? And does it help you to grow as the person God wants you to be? These are good things to think about as they have to do with the two greatest

commandments and becoming Christlike.

Learn what traits are helpful and hurtful in people. We discussed many in the book *Safe People*, and I also wrote about many in *Changes That Heal*, also by Zondervan. Those would be helpful guides, and there are many others. The important thing is that you learn to recognize things like:

- perfectionism
- inability to connect
- control issues
- judgmentalism
- domineering traits
- defensiveness
- denial
- dishonesty
- other traits the Bible talks about that are destructive.

We all need to know what it is that we are looking to confront and to avoid. If you are going to give your heart to people and trust them, you have to know what you are looking for. Search the Scriptures and other Biblically based materials that teach about relational patterns.

And remember that God wants you to be able to recognize character problems for two reasons. One is to be able to confront each other with the truth so that we can see our faults in a community and overcome them (Gal. 6:1; Matt. 18:15-18.) We are to be redemptive agents in each other's lives. The second one is for your own protection and growth, as we discussed above.

Character Growth

In addition to learning about the character of others, we must find out what it is about us that causes us to make such poor, hurtful choices. The truth is that it is not just a lack of knowledge. We usually make such choices out of our own weaknesses. For example, if we are unable to confront people who hurt us and set good boundaries, we will continually be attracted to controlling, hurtful people. So, in a very real sense, as Proverbs 22:3 says, we bear responsibility for the problem.

Or, if we are so isolated and lonely that we are afraid to end or confront hurtful relationships, we will choose hurtful people to avoid being alone. We need to make sure that we have a good support system in place and are not so in need of any one person. Or, if we are still trying to please some perfectionistic standard in our own heads, we will find perfectionistic people to live out that standard in our lives. Or to live out the role of a person from our past that we are not "finished with."

There are many character weaknesses that we all have that cause us to continue these patterns, and it is part of your sanctification process to submit them to God for Him to change. The problem is for you to identify them and begin to work on them. Remember that to do that you are going to have to do several things:

1. Own the problem. Admit that you have the pattern. This is called confession.

2. Make sure that you have help. God has given you other people to support you in the process and you cannot make character changes in a vacuum. You have to have a safe support system.
3. Identify the problems and the underlying need that drives it. Is it fear? Loneliness? Perfectionism? Then you will know the dynamic you need to work on.
4. Build the skills that are needed to supplant the problem (assertiveness, reaching out to good people and opening up, confrontation, etc.)
5. Practice and fail, going back to your support system to try again.

In the above process, God will deliver you out of the patterns of picking unsafe people to date and become friends with. He wants you also to be redemptive in their lives instead of suffering at their hands. But this is going to require spiritual growth on your part. Submit yourselves to Him and to others, work out the patterns, and your future can be much different than your past.

(For further reading, see [Safe People](#) (Cloud and Townsend, Zondervan publishers), [Changes That Heal](#) (Cloud, Zondervan publishers) and [Boundaries](#) (Cloud and Townsend, Zondervan publishers))

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