

How to Fight Fairly  
Matthew 18:15-20

When I meet with a couple for premarital counseling, one of the sessions will be about learning how to fight fairly. Fighting fairly is essential to a marriage (or any other relationship for that matter.)

Some people say, "Rather than teaching them how to fight fairly, why don't you just teach them not to fight?" The answer is, because no matter how much people love one another, there will be differences. No one is so perfect that he or she will not say something or do something the other finds offensive. And no two people are so compatible that they will agree on everything.

No matter how much people love one another, sooner or later they will have issues. In fact, I would say that the secret to a successful marriage, or, again, any successful relationship, whether it be a business relationship, a friendship, or a church fellowship, is learning how to resolve issues.

You can learn how to fight fair, or you can fight dirty.

There are two ways to fight dirty.

One way is to simply walk away from the fight. There is the story of a couple who were celebrating their 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary. A reporter got wind of this and decided to do a human interest story on them. He went to the house and interviewed the couple. He asked them the secret of holding a marriage together so long. The husband said, "First, you have to be healthy enough to live a long time. Second, you have to avoid arguments." The reporter asked, "What do you do to take care of your health?" The husband said, "I take a lot of long walks." The reporter said, "Okay. How do you avoid arguments?" The husband answered, "When she says something I disagree with, I go for a walk."

Well, that may make for a long marriage, but it doesn't make for a loving marriage. You can be sure that every time he took one of his long walks, he left behind a frustrated, angry and lonely woman, and that their relationship never grew in depth or satisfaction.

There is nothing wrong with taking a walk or going shopping or doing whatever you need to do to take a deep breath and think things over before you say something. However, if you never deal with the issues, they will just keep pushing you further and further apart.

Someone has said, "A friend is someone you can argue with and still be friends." There is a lot of truth in that. It is in dealing with the issues that people get closer. When they fail to deal with the issues, the unresolved issues push them apart.

Jesus says, "If a brother sins against you, go and talk with him." Don't ignore it. Don't avoid talking about it. Don't walk away and say, "I will have nothing more to do with that person," without even trying to deal with the issues.

Talk about it.

So, walking away from a fight is one way of fighting dirty.

The second way to fight dirty is to go into a fit of anger and attack the other person. It is never right to try to win an argument by inflicting so much pain that the other person simply says, "Uncle." That's bullying. It's very difficult to form a close, loving relationship with a bully. Being abusive is dirty fighting and destroys relationships.

Okay, that's how you fight dirty. Now, how do you fight fair?

To fight fairly, you have to identify clearly what the issue is and to help the other person understand why it's an issue for you. Then the two of you need to look for a resolution that you can both live with.

You have to start with two questions: First, what did you really say or do? Second, why did you say it or do it?

You have to start by asking what really happened, because very often we discover that whatever we thought was said or done that was offensive to us was never actually said or done in the first place. Many arguments are the result of misunderstandings. We can solve so many problems just by getting the facts straight.

When we have the facts straight and what we thought was said or done actually was said or done, then we ask, "Why?" What was your spouse's or your friend's reason for saying such and such or doing such and such?

And listen carefully. Try to put yourself in the other person's place. He or she had a reason for what they did. And, at least at the time, they thought it was a good reason.

If you think that they did it because they are just evil, and they enjoy causing as much chaos, destruction, pain and confusion as possible, you might as well just end that relationship right then and there. Who wants to be married to the devil? Because that's what you're dealing with here, at least in your mind.

No. Ordinary people want to do the right thing. They are trying to do the right thing. At the time, this person that you love thought he or she was doing the right thing.

So, be clear about what was done and why it was done. When you can say, "Okay, you did such and such for such and such a reason," and the other person says, "That's right. Now you understand," you are ready to move on to the next step.

The next step is to say, "Okay, now I understand you. Now please understand how I feel about this." And then, very carefully, state your position. And use "I" language, not "you" language.

Don't say, "You said that because you are mean-spirited, and you enjoy making my life miserable." Don't even say, "You hurt me by saying such an unkind thing." Say, "When you said that I am just like my mother, I felt that you were not respecting my uniqueness as a person. I need for you to respect me as the person I really am. Evidently I did something that bothered you. Let's identify what I did and why it bothered you and leave my mother out of this. If you have issues with my mother, go and talk to her about them. Don't project them on me." Then go on to deal with the real issues without attacking one another.

State clearly what you are wanting and needing from the other person. Listen to his or her wants and needs. Look for solutions that meet both of your needs.

That's the way to fight fair.

It takes two to have a fair fight. If you are fighting fair and the other isn't, stop fighting and find a counselor or an arbitrator, someone who doesn't have a dog in this

hunt and who has skills in refereeing a fair fight. That's what Jesus was talking about when he said that if your brother will not listen to you, go and get one or two others to join in the conversation. If that doesn't work, the next step is going to a formal setting.

Many people have a difficult time fighting fairly. It goes against our lower nature. Our instinct to being hurt is "fight or flight." Our first impulse is either to fight to the death, or to run for our lives. It takes a lot of prayer and self control not to resort to fight or flight and rather to sit together and talk as civilized human beings and look for solutions that bring life and not destruction. It takes a lot of courage.

It involves recognizing that there is a difference between assertiveness and aggression. Assertiveness is being willing to say, "This is what I want from you." Aggression is saying, "If you don't give me what I want, I will make your life a living hell."

Fighting fairly is absolutely essential if we are to grow in our love for one another. There is no alternative. The closer we come to each other, the more likely it is we will have conflict. We have to learn how to deal with conflict in a constructive, Christian manner, in our homes, in our marriages, in our businesses, in our communities, in our nation, and in the church.

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