

Introduction:

It was about 18 years ago, but I remember as if it were yesterday. As shocking as it may be to you, I was running with a friend. I had been married about two years and my friend was about to get married. As we were on our warm up walking laps, we were talking about his upcoming marriage and I was offering my expert opinions (remember, I had been married for two whole years). I was about to tell him something about having a fight in his marriage to which he responded with some statement along the lines of, "Look. Fighting means being selfish. If other people want to be selfish in their marriages, that's fine. But we won't be selfish. We're not fighting." And although my expert opinion after two years of marriage wasn't really all that expert, it was expert enough to know that was a pipe dream. Oddly, I have to remind my friend of that conversation. For some odd reason he always forgets that it took place. First, fighting doesn't actually mean selfishness, it just means disagreement. Second, there will eventually be disagreement in every relationship, whether between spouses, siblings, parents and children, or just friends. Fights happen. So, instead of sticking your head in the sand, you probably want to learn how to fight productively. You want to learn how to make your fights count for something. You want to learn how to let your fights improve your relationship instead of destroy your relationship. You want to learn how to FIGHT FAIR.

Discussion:

I. Fools walk into fights.

- A. **Proverbs 18:6** says, "A fool's lips walk into a fight, and his mouth invites a beating" (ESV). Keep in mind that I am using the term "fight" accommodatively to refer to any level of discussing disagreements, not just yelling and screaming matches. However, in order to FIGHT FAIR we need to lay this groundwork. Some people are just foolish, they are disagreeable and looking for opportunities to disagree. They can't allow minor disagreements to pass by, they have to jump in with both feet no matter the situation. That is just foolish.
- B. There will be plenty of disagreements and fights that come up on their own, we don't need to be fools that go looking for them no matter the relationship. Therefore, **Proverbs 17:14** reminds us that "the beginning of strife is like letting out water, so quit before the quarrel breaks out" (ESV). Pick your battles and don't go looking for fights.

II. Imagine the real enemy.

- A. Here is the situation. You're balancing the check book and working on the monthly budget. You discover a payout you don't remember that doesn't fit the budget you planned for the past month. You question your spouse and find out your spouse had an idea about something and spent money you weren't planning on spending. For some, that would be a minor financial blip, for others it could blow the whole monthly budget, but either way you're seeing red because it wasn't part of the plan. It is obviously time to let your spouse have it with both barrels. Your spouse obviously doesn't care about your plans, your financial stability, or even your commitments to each other. This is the third time this has happened this year and you've had enough. It's time to face down the enemy and show your spouse what's what.
- B. In this moment, you need to push the pause button. You are forgetting who the real enemy is. Whether the fight is with a spouse, a child, a parent, a sibling, a friend, they aren't the real enemy. Instead of looking at this person who you can see as the enemy, imagine the real enemy standing over there in the corner. Remember what **Ephesians 4:26-27** says. If you allow anger to take control, you are giving the devil opportunity. The person you are arguing with is not the enemy, the enemy is the devil. And he is standing over in that corner excited and happy that you are about to walk headlong into a fight. Satan wants us fighting in our families. He wants us fighting with our friends. He hates peace.
- C. Consider a couple of proverbs in this vein. **Proverbs 16:28** says, "A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends" (ESV). Also, **Proverbs 26:20** says, "For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases" (ESV). These passages are talking about individuals who slander, murmur, and whisper contention. But we need to recognize who the ultimate deceiver and whisperer is. When you are sitting there running the videotape of your "evil" spouse who doesn't care about family finances, working yourself up into a rage, stop and consider who the ultimate father of all those whispers really is. God is not the one putting that in your head. The real enemy is. Imagine him over there in that corner

and refuse to give him the satisfaction of fueling the fire of your contentions. There is only one person who will be happy if this disagreement or discussion escalates into an all out fight and you don't want to make him happy. So, imagine that the real enemy is in the room and resist him.

III. Glorify God

- A. Few people enjoy conflict. Most of us run from it like the plague until we are pushed so far that we feel like we have to finally stand our ground, and then it isn't pretty. Perhaps we should view conflict in a different light. Rather than something to be avoided or pursued, we should view it as something that simply happens. Whether the conflict is as small as where to have dinner on our first date in 6 months or as big as whose family we'll spend the holidays with, we need to remember the principle that is supposed to govern our entire lives and even our fights.
- B. **I Corinthians 10:31** says, "So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (ESV). Notice the words "whatever" and "all." That includes the conflicts and fights you are involved in. We've already learned that only fools pursue fights, but that doesn't mean we need to run from conflict like the plague. Some conflicts need to be addressed. But we need to keep this our number one goal in any conflict, whether within the family or without. By the time this conflict is done, we want to look back and be able to say that God was glorified by how we handled ourselves in the conflict and how we worked through it.
- C. I was in a discussion which included the Murphy's the other night and Lauren Murphy shared a great line she heard when she was young that has helped her. "It's better to be righteous than to be right." Think about that for a moment as you are about to wade into your next fight. You may go in with guns blazing, displaying all manner of logic, reason, wit, sarcasm, and every tool in your arsenal to prove that you are right as you make your opponent look foolish. But when that is done and you are prancing around your own private boxing ring looking for the applause from the crowd, will God be saying to you, "Well done, good and faithful servant"?
- D. Even in a conflict or a fight, you need to let your light shine so that others may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven (**Matthew 5:16**).

IV. Highest goal

- A. Here's another scenario. Your family is hanging out with some friends from church and the topic of movies and entertainment comes up. You are waxing eloquent about boundaries and limitations all Christians should have, naming some shows you know one of your kids likes in hopes to passively aggressively get them to realize how they aren't measuring up in this area. When that child pipes up and says, "Dad, it's really hard to take you seriously on this topic because you like to watch such and such popular show that has some of that same stuff you are condemning in it." The gauntlet has been thrown down. The hackles have just been raised on the back of your neck. You've been challenged in front of family and friends, it is time to show that kid who's boss. It won't be pretty, but someone has to do it.
- B. Push the pause button. Certainly, your child should not have publicly challenged you in front of others. But, then perhaps you shouldn't have been passively aggressively trying to deal with the discussion you should have been having with your child in private. But all of this is beside the point now that the fight is brewing. At this point you need to push the pause button and remind yourself of what you really want in this situation. What is your highest goal for this relationship and this conflict you're about to get into?
- C. Of course, in an ultimate sense, our last point reminded us that our highest goal is God's glory. In this point, I'm thinking about the highest goal we personally have for the relationship that is being threatened by this oncoming storm of a fight.
- D. Keep in mind that this fight you are about to get in will not last forever. You'll have a few minutes of back and forth and then it will be over. You'll go your separate ways, go home, go to bed, sleep, and then wake up and see that person at the breakfast table. At that moment, what will you wish you had most accomplished in that fight that happened the day before? Will you be happy that you embarrassed them, humiliated them, belittled them, browbeat them, left them crawling on the floor in the presence of your intellectual acumen as they had to grovel at your feet and express how amazingly right you were? Or will you wish you had conducted the discussion in a way that made your relationship stronger even if at the end of it you hadn't come to an agreement on the topic at hand yet?
- E. I know in the moment the gauntlet was thrown down, all you could see was the desire to win, be seen as right, be vindicated against the charges of hypocrisy, take vengeance because they challenged you in front of your friends. But tomorrow, what will you wish you had done in this conversation? Will you wish you had deepened the relationship, strengthened it, preserved and protected it? These goals don't mean completely

avoiding the conflict. In the scenario we've outlined, some discussion needs to be had at some point. But these goals do change how we approach the conflict.

- F. **Proverbs 29:11** says, "A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back." I know in the moment that you feel attacked, your spirit is aroused, your vision is blurred, your goals are distorted. But the wise man doesn't simply run the course of that aroused spirit. The wise person backs up, pushes the pause button, holds back. The wise person remembers their highest goal and conducts the conversation based on that. What is your highest goal in this relationship and discussion? What do you really want most? Focus on that and your fight will be fair.

V. Tune in to understand, not find ammunition

- A. Communicating and fighting are like a radio. The radio station is blasting their radio waves as far and wide as they can, but only those who are tuned in to their wavelength can receive the transmission. Have you ever been listening to a station where you're just one notch off of being tuned in? You can hear it, but it's staticky, cuts in and out, and while you get the gist, it is mostly just annoying. You have to be tuned in to get the full appreciation. The same is true if you want to FIGHT FAIR. You have to tune in, but you have to be tuned in to the right frequency and usually we aren't.
- B. **Proverbs 18:2** explains. "A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion" (ESV). Usually, when we are in a fight, we aren't tuned in precisely to understand. Rather, we are only tuned in enough to get the gist of what is being said and then only to find opportunities to jump in and express our opinions. Usually, in fights, we are only listening for ammunition, we aren't listening for understanding.
- C. Remember what **Proverbs 18:17** says. "The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him" (ESV). We all think we are right. We've stated our case to ourselves so many times that we simply can't imagine a reasonable opposing view. But keep in mind your conflict partner feels the same way. And it may just be that they have some questions that your position doesn't answer properly. If you want to fight productively, you have to allow for that time of questioning to challenge what you are thinking. But that will only happen if you tune in to understand what your conflict partner means and not just looking for ammunition to further express your opinion.

VI. Focus on interests, not positions

- A. This point expands on the previous one. According to **Proverbs 18:2**, the wise take pleasure in understanding, not just expressing opinions. Too often, we get into fights and spend too much time focusing on the manifesting positions taken instead of understanding what underlies those positions.
- B. Perhaps the best illustration of this comes from William Ury and Roger Fisher's book Getting to Yes. They describe two children arguing over an orange. They fuss and fuss until they finally compromise and divide the orange in half. The first child eats the meat of the fruit and throws the peel away. The other child throws the meat of the fruit away and uses the peel to bake a cake. They focused on their positions. Their positions were simple. "I should get the orange." "No, I want the orange." What would have happened if they had dug deeper to find the interests? Why was each person interested in the orange? One wanted the peel, the other wanted the actual fruit. If they had tuned in to understand instead of just expressing their positions, they could have both had the whole orange, at least the whole of the parts they were actually interested in.
- C. As **Proverbs 20:5** says, "The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out" (ESV). When you are in the fight, don't focus on the positions, focus on the interests or purposes that are producing the position.
- D. Stephen Covey tells the story of a disagreement a husband and his wife had over the purchase of an appliance. If I remember correctly, it was an actual disagreement in his own marriage. He simply could not understand why she was so adamant that they purchase the more expensive brand until he dug deeper and questioned why she was digging in on this issue in an uncharacteristic way. She explained that when she was young her family went through some very difficult financial times. Her dad got a job working for the company whose brand she wanted to purchase. The company had been very helpful, giving him advances and patiently working with him as he paid them back. She wasn't digging in because she didn't care about their finances. She wasn't digging in because she wanted a fancier machine. She was digging in because she wanted to support the company that had supported her dad. Do you think that kind of understanding in a fight might change the way you react? Focus on the interests, not merely the positions.

VII. Answer softly

- A. As I said earlier, I'm using the term "Fight" accommodatively. I'm talking about any level of disagreement or conflict no matter how it is expressed. However, here I want to address what we most commonly think of

when it comes to fighting. We usually think of yelling, screaming, sometimes even physical attack (sadly). If we are going to FIGHT FAIR we will not fight like this.

- B. Many of us are aware of **Proverbs 15:1** even if we aren't aware of the reference itself. "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (ESV). I know it is hard when the emotions are running deep and the stakes are high. However, if we are going to fight in productive ways, if we are going to FIGHT FAIR, we will answer softly when we respond. We will not give full vent to our feelings through tone of voice or the level of volume.
- C. **Ephesians 4:31-32** explains, "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (ESV). Let this passage guide you even in the midst of your fighting. This doesn't mean ignore your emotional state. You probably need to express the emotional state you are in. If you are sad, angry, hurt, lonely, shamed, guilty, afraid, you should express that. However, work on using your words to express those things not on using volume or tone of voice. Answering softly turns away wrath.

VIII. Invent options

- A. If the fight was generated because of jockeying for different positions, but now you have been answering softly, seeking your highest goal, tuning in to understand, and focusing on interests, you are ready to pursue the productive side of this fight.
- B. Instead of continuing as opponents, become conflict partners. That is, become partners in the attempt to resolve the conflict by inventing options that will accomplish all that you both want. This is the practical extension of **Proverbs 18:2; 20:5**. When we tune in to understand and dig deep to draw out the purpose and interests within the heart, we can then practically start working on solutions that accomplish those needs for both sides.
- C. Certainly, there are times when interests are opposed to each other and that becomes a tougher nut to crack. But very often you can pursue options that fulfill everyone's interests. You want to visit family for your vacation, your spouse wants to go to the beach or Disney or to a historical site. Perhaps you can invite your family along as you travel together to one of those locations. Or perhaps you want to spend time with your family, but your spouse doesn't. Those seem like mutually opposed positions and interests. That is, until you dig deeper and find out that your spouse doesn't want to spend time with your family because every time you get around them your attitude changes, the way you treat your spouse changes, you support your family more than your spouse. I bet you are interested in supporting your spouse and helping your spouse be happy. Now you can have a conversation with your family about how you all need to conduct your time together.
- D. Invent options. It takes brainstorming, time, and creativity. But in most cases it can happen. It will definitely take ongoing conversation because either side may not even understand their own interests and deeper purposes and it will take some serious questioning to figure it out. But if you are committed to glorifying God and the highest goal of preserving the relationship, this part of the fight will be important to you.

IX. Reconcile

- A. Of course, if you perfectly handled the fight, there may be no need for reconciliation. You didn't really get separated. You just noticed a disagreement and worked through it fairly and productively. However, if you are like me, even with the best intentions, you didn't handle the fight perfectly. I hope you handled it better than your last fight, but it was probably a mixture of productive approaches and destructive ones.
- B. That means you need to reconcile. As **Ephesians 4:26-27** says, if you allow anger to continue on, you are giving the devil a foothold in your relationship. That means when the conflict is over you need to apologize for your wrongs in the disagreement (**Matthew 5:23-24**). You need to offer forgiveness for the wrongs of your conflict partner (**Ephesians 4:32**). You need to reaffirm your love for your conflict partner (cf. **II Corinthians 2:8**).
- C. Deal with those things now. You don't want them to be ammunition for the next fight. That will just cause a downward spiral that increases fighting and discord. Reconcile as soon as possible and remove the devil's foothold in your relationship.

Conclusion:

Fights happen. How you approach them will make all the difference. How do you fight? Why not make the commitment right now to FIGHT FAIR?