

Fighting Fair
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GFC – 8/20/17

Relationships seem to be falling apart everywhere we turn. People are leaving marriages, leaving churches, leaving friends. This is sad. The saddest part is that most people want to make relationships work – they just don't know how to make them work.

No one wants to go through life from relationship to relationship – from marriage to marriage – but most people don't have the skills to make relationships work.

- Most of us have not had good role models in relationships.
- Most of us buy into the Hollywood mentality that if we are truly in love, relationships will just work by themselves.

So, as soon as the relationship gets difficult – people feel at a loss about what to do and they don't have the commitment to see it through or the skills to make it work.

We are in a series called Relationships: A Mess Worth Making. We've seen that God created us for relationships, but we tend to mess them up. However – we have hope that if we do relationships God's way, they will be blessed up instead of messed up!

If we gain biblical wisdom about relationships, we can make them work. But without these skills – our relationships will suffer.

Today we're going to look at the importance of conflict resolution in a message entitled Fighting Fair! Many conflicts arise from misunderstandings and misunderstanding comes from poor communication. I'll talk about that in another message.

Let me lay some ground work here:

1- Conflict is Inevitable

The question is not: "Will we have conflict?"
 The question is: "How we will respond to it?"

Confrontation is a part of a growing relationship and it can't be avoided. What is important is how we deal with it. If we don't deal with it correctly – it escalates into something worse.

One of the ways some people deal with conflict is by not dealing with it – they avoid it.

Some people try to avoid conflict by avoiding relationships altogether! That's too bad. Relationships are costly, but avoiding relationships is even more costly!

Dozens of studies have shown that people who have satisfying relationships with family, friends, and their community are happier, have fewer health problems, and live longer. Conversely, a lack of healthy relationships is associated with depression and later-life cognitive decline, as well as with increased mortality.

We are encouraging you to persevere in building relationships because science says it's good for you and - more importantly - God says it's good for you! Ecclesiastes 4:9 says:

Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed.

So - we should not avoid relationships just to avoid conflicts! But people tend to avoid resolving conflict because of misbeliefs like:

- Conflicts indicate there's something terribly wrong in the relationship.
- Conflicts are usually destructive.
- It is wrong to express my negative feelings.
- It is better to avoid disagreements and just get over it.
- It is best to keep silent if you know someone is upset.
- It is not my responsibility to correct someone else.
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What's important is that we handle conflict in such a way that it doesn't escalate.

2- There are Levels of Conflict

The first level is conflicting ideas. A conflict is simply "a difference in ideas or interests." Conflicts are part of every relationship. How you deal with those conflicts will determine the level of the relationship.

Don't think it's strange that you have conflicts. Two people raised in different homes in different places by different families will see some things differently. They will have different opinions, ideas and interests. That's OK. The key is learning how to resolve the differences.

When we express our conflicting ideas - that's a disagreement. Disagreements are OK. It's just two people expressing different ways of thinking or looking at something.

However - if it's not done in love - a disagreement can become an argument. An argument is a dispute with intense disagreement. Even Bible heroes got into arguments. In Acts 15:2 some religious leaders tried to make the Gentiles obey Jewish laws and *Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them.*

Saying their dispute was not small is a nice way of saying they had a big argument.

If not resolved - arguments can degenerate into fights. A fight involves attacking and defending. It goes from disagreeing with the other person to attacking the other person. It can include put downs and name calling. It can become a heated verbal exchange or even a physical battle where people come to blows.

James 4:1 says:

Where do you think all these appalling wars and quarrels come from? Do you think they just happen? Think again. They come about because you want your own way, and fight for it deep inside yourselves.

If left unresolved – fights become wars. Wars are ongoing battles - hostile conflicts that will not end without a truce or a peace treaty. People at war are openly antagonistic – they don't try to hide it.

We need to learn to resolve conflicts at the disagreement level so that they don't escalate into arguments, fights or thermonuclear war.

3- There are Six Styles of Conflict Resolution

1. Avoidance –

When we lack commitment to God and people, avoidance will be our primary way of dealing with conflict. The reason this is a lack of commitment is because the avoider is more concerned with keeping a false sense of peace than with speaking the truth. So we sweep things under the carpet. Our fear of conflict outweighs our love for others. However, Proverbs 27:5-6 says:

Open rebuke is better than hidden love! Wounds from a friend are better than kisses from an enemy!

Obviously there are certain situations where it is better to avoid a conflict, but with the avoider this is standard operating procedure. When avoidance becomes a habitual choice, something is wrong. There are certain principles for which every Christian should be willing to take a stand.

2. Capitulation

To capitulate means to give in. Capitulation says "I am wrong and the other person is right." "We've talked it out and I see your point and I agree with you." That's good. However – some people always give in – even when they shouldn't. Some people never give in – even when they should.

Giving in is not a bad way of dealing with certain situations. However, it can become a problem if conflicts are downplayed or smoothed over.

If giving in is the only type of conflict resolution we use then truth will be sacrificed for the sake of peace. Those who capitulate can be viewed as “people pleasers.”

Many people who constantly give in will argue that they are doing the loving thing - but how can we claim to love people when we lack the courage to speak the truth to them. Ephesians 4:15 says:

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Him who is the Head, that is, Christ.

3. Competition

The competitor is an authoritarian person whose goal is to win at all costs – even at the cost losing a relationship. When conflict arises, the competitor’s natural bent is to pursue what they want without regard for the feelings or ideas of others. The competitor uses authority and power to solve problems. He suppresses disagreement through control. The outcome of this style is usually heated emotions and wounded people.

Now – there is a time to take a stand – like when the absolutes of scripture are being violated. For example in Galatians 2:11 Paul said –

When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong.

However, we must differentiate between defending doctrine and defending our choice of tile in the foyer. Paul warned in Romans 14:1 –

Don't argue about doubtful issues.

We have to choose which mountains we will die on. There are some things we should just let go.

4. Compromise

When some people hear the word compromise they immediately think of “selling out” or lowering one’s standards. This is not the application I’m making. The word compromise literally means a mutual promise. In conflict resolution - compromise means both parties are willing to give up something. Compromise implies a willingness for both to sacrifice.

This is especially true in marriage when spouses have conflicting agendas. For example – one spouse may have the goal of getting out of debt and the other spouse has the goal to buy whatever they want no matter how much debt they have. That’s a conflict that can escalate into war if the two don’t get on one page.

That usually means one spouse has to allow more time to get out of debt and the other spouse must spend less than they want. That's compromise.

5. Coexistence

This means neither person gives in. Both decide to agreeably disagree....and they do so peaceably. Let me just say – coexistence works – but not when there are many areas of coexistence or coexistence in major important areas.

6. Counseling

Sometimes we may get stuck and we need an objective third party who can help us sort through our issues. Deb and I have gone to counseling many times throughout our marriage and we recommend it whole heartedly. Many people have the wrong view of counseling – they see it as a last resort. So – when they hear you've gone to counseling – they say, "I didn't know it was that bad." Well – it may not be that bad – it just may be we need help working through an issue before it gets that bad! Proverbs 24:6 says:

In a multitude of counselors there is safety.

Now that we've learned six styles of conflict resolution let me ask you a question...Which do you think most people use? The answer is avoidance.

The Top Reasons People Avoid Conflict
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1. Fear of getting hurt
2. Fear of rejection
3. Fear of losing a relationship
4. Fear of anger
5. Fear of being seen as selfish
6. Fear of saying the wrong thing
7. Fear of hurting someone else
8. Fear of intimacy

We don't have to fear conflict or avoid conflict if we know how to deal with it effectively.

4- To do that – we need to know how to fight fair!

Here are some rules for fair fighting:

- Pick your battles wisely.

Some people make everything a battle.
They make mountains out of molehills.

Every single issue has to have a good guy and a bad guy – when sometimes they’re fighting over a personal preference.

A personal preference in marriage is something like this: Do we squeeze the toothpaste from the middle or the bottom? You know what? That’s not a hill to die on. Get two tubes of toothpaste so both of you can squeeze it however you want. Don’t allow the little foxes to spoil the vine. Don’t let little things become issue between you and your friends.

You may know someone who believes all dogs go to heaven and they want to convince you of that. Hey – there’s no absolutes about dogs like there is about cats – we know all cats go straight to hell when they die – just kidding all you cat lovers.

The point is this – if someone believes that – I don’t have to believe it and I don’t have to waste my time and ruin our friendship by fighting with them about it all the time. Let it go!

- Deal with 1 issue at a time, rather than everything you can think of.
- Don’t bring up past history that has been resolved.
- No low blows - don’t make it personal.
- Focus on the problem, not the person
- Focus more on yourself than the other person.
- Give up trying to change the other person / control behavior
- Don’t be abusive – verbally, physically
- Use “I” statements rather than “YOU” statements
- Avoid absolutes - Don’t use words like “Always” or “Never”
- Call a time out if it gets too heated – (don’t forget to resolve it later)

Ephesians 4:26-27 says:

When you are angry, do not sin, and be sure to stop being angry before the end of the day. Do not give the devil a way to defeat you.

- The number one rule is this – Don’t try to win. If one wins, both lose. The best resolution is win / win.

Learning to fight fair keeps conflicts from escalating into wars. Once a conflict has become a war we may be tempted to give up on the relationship. We may feel like it is hopeless. The truth is:

5- There is a solution to every relational conflict

No relational conflict is un-resolvable – if both parties are willing. But until we learn how to resolve conflict we won’t be able to love each other the way Christ commands us to.

The Bible teaches that the greatest commandment is to love God and the second is like it; love your neighbor as yourself. For most of us the second command is more difficult than the first. Maybe this is because God is always loving. People often are not.

As a matter of fact most of us are anything but loving when it comes to conflict. Anger, bitterness, hurt, and shame spill over in symptoms like irritability, rage, depression or withdrawal. The painful emotions that have built up inside of us can go away. But for that to happen we must learn how to resolve conflicts.

And to resolve a conflict there are two keys we must apply – mutual confession and forgiveness. James 5:16 says:

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

Ephesians 4:32 says:

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Confession is for when we've wronged someone. Forgiveness is for when we've been wronged by someone. Confession rids us of guilt and forgiveness rids us of bitterness and resentment. Both are essential to conflict resolution.

Here's an important truth in conflict resolution –

6- The ball is always in your court

Whether you wronged someone else or were wronged by someone else – biblically – it's your responsibility to initiate resolution. Matthew 5:23-24 says:

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

Jesus is saying here that reconciliation is so important that if you are in the middle of worshipping God and remember you've hurt someone, go get it right – then continue worshipping. If we've wronged someone – it's our responsibility to initiate reconciliation. Here's the hard part - if someone wrongs you – it's still your responsibility to go to them. Matthew 18:15 says:

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.

God is showing us how important the ministry of reconciliation is.

All of us hurt and get hurt – so we need to be experts in reconciliation, which means we must understand how to confess and how to forgive.

It's impossible to go through life and not get hurt. If that's your goal – you will never build relationships. Because relationships are messy – but by God's grace, they can be a fulfilling part of our lives when we learn to fight fair!

So, if you want your relationships to have a fighting chance - instead of fighting IN your relationships – start fighting FOR your relationships.

Instead of fight or flight – stay and pray!

Instead of speaking fighting words – speak God's Word!

Instead of a fight to the death – fight for life!

Even if you just can't fight the feeling – choose to fight for healing!

Instead of fighting fire with fire – fight fire with the living water of the Holy Spirit.

Instead of fighting people – fight the true fight! Fight the good fight!

Instead of fighting like the devil – actually fight the devil!

He's our true enemy and everything he does is to try to divide us – but we will fight Him and we will overcome in Jesus name!