

Fighting the Good Fight in Your Marriage

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## The Good Fight

Near the end of his earthly life, the apostle Paul claims victory in Christ. He says, “I have fought the good fight” (2 Timothy 4:7). Paul is not promoting a mean-spirited, blood-thirsty appetite for fighting. The nature of Paul’s fight is *good*. His statement is paradoxical. How can a fight be good? The apostle explains in the next verse of scripture. He says, “Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing” (v. 8).

For married Christians, fighting the “good fight” takes on special meaning. Conflict in marriage is a given. Jesus says, “In the world you will have tribulation” (John 16:33). Nevertheless, the way husbands and wives choose to handle conflict is a key factor in determining the degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction each experience in their marriage. Current research suggests that marital satisfaction may be measured in terms of the ratio of positive to negative couple interactions. According to John Gottman, a researcher at the University of Washington at Seattle, “The magic ratio is 5 to 1.” Gottman explains, “In other words, as long as there is five times as much positive feeling and interaction between husband and wife as there is negative, we found the marriage was likely to be stable” (pp. 56-61).

The Bible teaches this same concept. Solomon says, “Dead flies make a perfumer’s oil stink, so a little foolishness is weightier than wisdom and honor” (Ecclesiastes 10:1, NASU). The power of the negative “outweighs” the positive. The apostle Peter indicates the importance of balancing negative behaviors with positive ones. He says,

Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous; not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that

you may inherit a blessing, for “he who would love life and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips from speaking deceit” (1 Peter 3:8-10).

Commenting on this passage, Stanley et al. state, “He pretty well sums up what we see in study after study. How you treat one another in the moments that make up your marriage has a great deal to do with how many ‘good days’ you are going to see together” (pp. 28-29). Current marital research is only confirming what the Bible has always taught concerning marriage and other close relationships.

### **The Role of Emotions**

Perhaps, the most amazing development of current research on marriage is the overwhelming role that our emotions play in resolving conflict. Typically, couples seeking help with marital conflict are taught more effective communication skills. This approach is based upon the fact that most couples with conflict resolution problems exhibit a lack of effective communication. Communication skills are important. The Bible says, “He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is a folly and shame to him” (Proverbs 18:13). But learning effective communication skills will accomplish little unless couples first learn how to manage their emotions.

When it comes to communication in relationships, the Bible verse cited more often than any other is James 1:19. Here, the Bible says, “So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak.” Actually, this is not the complete statement James makes on the subject. The rest of verse nineteen includes one more admonition. James teaches that we must be “swift to hear, slow to speak” (i.e., a skillful communicator), and “slow to wrath” (i.e., an emotionally mature communicator). James explains, “... for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God” (v. 20). In theory, skillful communicators ought to have few problems

resolving conflict. In practice, effective communication skills are short-circuited by a flood of emotions. In other words, we may have learned wonderful communication skills to more effectively resolve our conflicts, but often we are too angry or upset to use them. Emotions may become a barrier to effective communication.

### **Marital Conflict Styles**

Conflict *style* describes how a person handles conflict with others. Some people work hard to avoid conflict at all costs. Others tend to engage conflict. Among conflict engagers, two roads diverge. One leads to engaging conflict in a volatile manner, motivated by more interest in persuading the other to your side than safeguarding his or her emotions. The other road of conflict engagement leads to handling conflict in a validating manner, motivated by more interest in safeguarding the other's emotions than persuading him or her to your side.

When two people marry and begin a new life together each one brings his or her conflict style into the marriage. Many couples never fight. Perhaps, you cannot imagine such a marriage. But they do exist. Many couples are constantly fighting. You may have little trouble imagining this style of marriage. Some couples engage conflict in their marriages without fighting. This style of marital conflict is often the ideal in our minds, but it may lack the passion and intimacy of the volatile conflict style. One marital style is not necessarily better than another.

Spouses may have matching conflict styles, but often they find themselves with a mismatch of conflict styles. The research shows that any of these three common marital conflict styles (avoidant, volatile, or validating) results in stable and satisfying marriages (Gottman, p. 32). Problems arise in a mismatch of conflict styles. When one spouse is conflict-avoidant while the other is conflict-volatile, problems are bound to happen. For example, a wife who is conflict-

validating may be overwhelmed by her husband, who is conflict-volatile. His constant efforts to persuade her that he is right may be interpreted by her as hostility and meanness. Actually, the husband means no disrespect. He is simply more comfortable engaging conflict with passion, striving to prove his point. The wife may become defensive, since she feels attacked. Her defensive behaviors will often result in defensiveness in her husband. Conflict resolution is over and now the purpose of the discussion is to shift blame. Finally, the negative feedback loop is set, creating a downward cycle of negativity.

### **Destructive Behaviors to Avoid**

Criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stone-walling are some of the destructive behavior patterns couples must avoid. John Gottman goes so far as to call these behaviors “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,” emphasizing the catastrophic nature of these ways of interacting (p. 72). Couples experiencing troubles in their marriage are probably exhibiting one or more of these four destructive behavior patterns.

The first two destructive behaviors, criticism and contempt, tend to elicit the last two destructive behaviors and *vice versa*. There is a reciprocal effect. Criticism and contempt from a wife may elicit defensiveness and stone-walling (i.e., withdrawal) from her husband. Defensiveness and stone-walling in a husband may elicit more criticism and contempt from his wife. Thus, the downward, negative cycle develops.

For example, a husband may want to express to his wife his frustration with her habitual tardiness. He may say to her, “We are always late because of you.” He presents a criticism. Feeling criticized or blamed, the wife may become defensive, perceiving that she is being attacked. The grade school girl inside of her may want to say in reply, “Well, I’m rubber and

you're glue, whatever you say bounces off me and sticks to you!" An adult woman would not likely use those words. Instead, she may reply, "Well, if you ever helped me with the children, then I would have more time to get ready!" The husband, in turn, *ups the anti* and becomes more critical. He says, "You're impossible to talk to! I don't know why I waste my breath!" The wife, in turn, becomes so infuriated that she walks out of the room (i.e., stone-walling/withdrawal). The husband is left fuming, and begins to feel contempt for his wife. He thinks to himself, "Fine, turn your back and walk away. I don't even like to be around you anymore."

The high divorce rate in the United States is not hard to understand when couples operate according to these destructive ways of interacting. Nevertheless, we are free moral agents with the ability to choose how we interact with others. The writer of wisdom says, "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Proverbs 15:1). We may turn back the tide of criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stone-walling by adopting behaviors that counter patterns of hostility and destructive interactions.

### **Positive Behaviors to Adopt**

Instead of criticism, husbands and wives may adopt a softer approach (Greenberg & Johnson, p. 225). A critical spouse may learn to turn criticisms into complaints. A complaint simply states the problem without placing blame or impugning the character of another. For example, a wife may say to her husband, "You're an idiot!" That is criticism. This wife must learn to turn her critical statements into complaints. Thus, she may decide to say to her husband, "Honey, I know you didn't mean to forget to pick up some milk on the way home, and I know you're tired, but we really need some milk." Clearly, the former statement may lead to defensiveness in the

husband. The latter statement will not only avoid a downward cycle of negativity, but may actually move the couple toward a resolution to their problem.

Instead of defensiveness, husbands and wives may choose to speak nondefensively. Again, John Gottman says, “The single most important tactic for short-circuiting defensive communication is to choose to have a positive mindset about your spouse and to reintroduce praise and admiration into your relationship” (p. 181). Simply put, a defensive attitude engages in what the Bible calls “evil surmisings” (1 Timothy 6:4, KJV). A defensive spouse engages in this type of negative mind reading. The apostle Paul admonishes Christians to counter this negative way of thinking with positive thoughts (See Philippians 4:8). Having a positive attitude toward someone helps us avoid interpreting his or her statements as an attack. Therefore, defensiveness is reduced and conflicts may be resolved without falling into a downward cycle of negativity.

### **Calm Down**

Perhaps, emotional intelligence is the most important element in fighting the good fight in your marriage. Spouses need to learn to watch for the warning signs of escalating negative emotions. One way to prevent such escalation is to set an appointment for conflict resolution, involving an agenda and a time-limit.

Another method is to agree to *time-outs* when either spouse feels too upset to continue the discussion. Whoever calls the *time-out* must commit to initiating the discussion again within a previously agreed upon time-frame (e.g., twenty-four hours). Effective *time-outs* must last a minimum of twenty minutes.

A third method, which may seem odd at first, is for each spouse to monitor his or her heart rate. Gottman says, “Under normal circumstances, the average man’s resting heart rate or pulse is about 72 beats per minute (BPM), while a woman’s is higher, about 82 BPM” (p. 116). Gottman goes on to say that when either a man’s or woman’s heart rate rises 10 beats per minute or more, “physiological arousal makes it hard to focus on what the other person is saying, which leads to increased defensiveness and hostility.” You may check you heart rate by placing your index finger and middle finger together two inches below your right ear and then moving your fingers one inch over to the left. Count the number of beats you feel for fifteen seconds. Then, multiply the total beats you counted by four. The product will be your heart rate measured by beats per minute.

### **Conclusion**

On a personal note, the Modesto Bee featured an article about my great-grandparents just before their eightieth anniversary. The reporter asked my great-grandmother what had held them together for eight decades. She replied, “Being willing to give in... If we don’t agree on something, one of us will give in. I’m wrong lots of times. Sometimes, it’s him.” That’s eighty years of marriage talking. They truly have “fought the good fight” in their marriage. They did it, and so can you.

## **Bibliography**

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