

May 5-6, 2007
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Fighting Fair

We are continuing our sermon series called *How to Get a Family to Function*. So far we have talked about our own personal roles to help our families to work. And we have talked about some keys to communicating.

Today we are going to talk more about communicating. We are going to talk about how on earth we can fight fair. Sam Levenson once said, "Love at first sight is nothing special. It's when two people have been looking at each other for years that it becomes a miracle."

It is amazing to me, how many people I meet seem to think that once they find the person of their dreams, that all of their problems will shrink to a manageable size, and like a fairy tale, they will "live happily ever after." But for anyone that has ever been in a committed relationship, you know that isn't the case.

I think I was in high school when I asked my grandpa Carlson a question that most children and youth ask at some point in their lives. "How do you know when you have found the right person to marry?"

He looked at me and smiled and said, "When you find the person you can argue with."

I said, "What do you mean?"

He said, "You'll find out."

I have come to learn that he was absolutely right. How we argue says a lot about us. How we argue with the person we love, goes a long way to say if our relationship will survive the challenges of living, or if it will eventually wilt under the pressures of life.

In our scripture for today, while we aren't catching Jesus in the midst of an argument, we are catching him at a very difficult time in his life. Rumors have been going on about him throughout the region. His friends have earlier come out to confront him, because they were afraid "He was thinking too highly of himself" as his fame began to spread. Religious leaders who are concerned about his fame are spreading the rumors that he really isn't holy at all. His power comes from satan, the adversary of God.

Finally, his family comes out to confront him, to talk with him and put him back in his place. When told by the crowd that his family was there to see him, he responded in a curious way. He said, "Who is my mother and my brothers? My mother, my brothers and my sisters are those who do the will of God."

I don't know what happened when Jesus really did visit with his family - because we are not told about that conversation. But Jesus did do something, in the face of an argument that I think is very instructive for us if we are going to learn to fight fair. *He understood who he was (as a child of God) and he was focused on his mission. He was to be about living for God.*

As I was thinking about his response, I started to think about conflict and how we can deal with it. Each time we face conflict, imagine that you are holding two buckets. One filled with water and one filled with gasoline. We can choose to respond to the fire of conflict by either pouring gas on

it, causing it to flame up. Or we can choose to pour water on it, causing it to go down. How we respond to conflict really matters. We have a choice.

As I was preparing for this sermon, I went online and discovered some terrific web pages that gave guidelines for disagreeing. This got me thinking about some guidelines I try to live by and I try to encourage others to live by as well. It is clear that words can and do hurt. They can be the life or the death of a relationship. If we can learn to replace hurtful words with helpful words, we can actually allow conflict to build and strengthen our relationships.

Here are my guidelines. **First of all**, physical violence is not acceptable. It is just not.

Second, it is important to be respectful of the person we are disagreeing with. That means it isn't fair to call the other person names, or to use sarcasm, or belittle your partner. Just don't put each other down. Know that if you are hurting your partner, you are hurting yourself. If you do relapse, apologize immediately.

Third, Be willing to fix the problem. Do not personalize it. Attack the problem and not the person. Maintain ownership of your part of the disagreement. Use "I" or "we" statements. Don't blame.

Fourth, Stay focused on one subject. Fighting fair means that you both know what the issue is and you stick to that issue. Fighting is not time to bring up past issues or unresolved conflicts. Handle one problem at a time.

Five, Don't be afraid to use time outs. If the conversation is getting too hot and heated, and tempers are going up. Just take a break and say, "Let's come back at this in three hours." But then come back at it in that set time, when you can be calmer. To not do this, leaves an argument unresolved and that is what makes number four a challenge.

Six, Listen for understanding. Make a real effort to try and understand each other. Try and understand where your partner is coming from. So many arguments could really be avoided if we could just learn to understand where our partner is coming from.

Seven, Don't read the mind of your partner, or expect them to read your mind. When you assume you know what they are thinking or feeling, you don't take time to listen to them. When we begin to think our partners can't change, then we only see behaviors in them that back up that they won't change.

Eight, Seek to solve the problem. Work as a team. Don't bring in others to gang up on your partner. Use this phrase during an argument: "What can we do together to solve this problem? I am willing to do the following . . ." Then state what you are willing to do and do it.

Nine, Be open to asking for forgiveness as well as be willing to forgive. Truth can be spoken in love to each other, when partners are bound together by forgiveness. We all need and want forgiveness. Remember the disagreement belongs to both of you. The solution can also belong to both of you.

Fighting fair means for me that we learn how to communicate with one another, even when we disagree. Disagreeing is not a bad thing. In fact, conflict can lead to a new, better future. But it often becomes destructive, because we don't do it in a way that is fair.

So, I urge you to follow these steps. Stay focused on what the issue is. Be kind to one another. Be open to one another. Once you resolve an issue, let it go.

I want to close today by telling you a story about a woman who had moved to a new workplace. She was telling her friend Alice, how awful her former boss had been, when Alice laughed and said, "Forget him. Why not just enjoy it here. Leave him in your past."

Then she went on to tell the following story about herself. "I'm reminded of the time I moved a few years ago. I was making enough money to hire a professional mover to pack for me. When he asked me what I wanted him to pack, I just waved my arm and said, 'Everything!'

"So, when I got to the new place, I saw that he had taken me literally. Along with my furniture, he had packed up all my trash out of my garbage cans as well. There I was in my new beautiful place, with all my old garbage - including old newspapers, empty ketchup bottles and grapefruit peels. That was when I realized that sometimes it's best to leave the garbage behind."

Alice is right. Sometimes its best to leave the garbage behind. Sometimes it's best to leave our old arguments behind as well and to let them go.

May we learn to live as the people of God, with the people we care most about, our families. May we learn to communicate better with each other, so that even when we disagree, God may be honored and we can learn to problem solve together. Remember, God loves you.

May you learn to fight fair. In the hope Jesus offers us.

Amen