



# TEN RULES FOR FAIR FIGHTING

By Steven & Deb Koster



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It's sad, but true. We always fight with the ones we love. We are imperfect people, and imperfect people screw up and get angry with one another. As every newlywed couple learns eventually, no matter how much we love each other, we will have a conflict with those close to us.

For many of us growing up, fighting was bad. Anger was a no-no. We didn't see occasional anger as a natural part of being together, so we didn't always say what we meant, and we weren't always honest with each other. We were too scared of having a fight.

And the result of avoiding one another is not peace, but distance. You can either face the conflict together and get through it together, or you can retreat from it and stay apart. Retreat enough times, and you'll wonder why you even bother trying to be together.

We should expect to fight with our loved ones from time to time. In fact, fighting well is a sign of a healthy relationship. The real key is not *if*, nor *when*, but *how* we fight. Will we seek to honor the image of God in our spouse, seek to be one flesh, and seek not to let the sun go down on our anger, for example? Or will we seek to annihilate all opposition? The way we fight determines if we build or destroy our relationship, and scripture gives us great pointers on how to fight well.

So, here are our top ten rules for fighting fair and fighting well with your spouse.

# 1 FAIR FIGHTING RULE #1: **No Winning**

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When we fight, remember that the point is to understand each other, not dominate each other or win personal vindication. You are not out to win a victory over the other person, but to build your relationship.

**PROVERBS 17:27** — *A man of knowledge uses words with restraint, and a man of understanding is even-tempered.*

My spouse came to me once and said, "Hey, we bounced a check!" My first reaction was to say, "What? It's not my fault!" and my second reaction was to say, "It's probably your fault!" I was both defensive and blaming. Neither reaction was helpful.

**EPHESIANS 5:28** — *Husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.*

A better reaction would have been to say, "Ouch! That hurts. What should we do about it?" I should have been trying to see things from my spouse's perspective and working for a common solution, not just covering my own rear end. My fear of being wrong, of being at fault, kept me from being constructive.

**MATTHEW 20:25-26** — *The gentiles lord it over each other, not so with you.*

Placing blame and being right might make me feel better, but it doesn't build anything between us. In fact it does rather the opposite. What good does it do to win "victory"? What would I gain by squarely blaming my spouse? Your goal is not to win at the expense of your spouse, but to understand each other better and to honor each other, together looking for a solution forward.

We will fight eventually, and we will fight fair if we seek to understand and build, rather than win!

## 2 FAIR FIGHTING RULE #2: **No Running**

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Conflict is normal. Do not flee away from conflict—it is a natural aspect of a healthy marriage.

Maybe you walk out of the room when the argument is working in your favor. Having vented an angry point of view, you might flee the consequences and response. But that only makes it a moving fight as the argument continues from room to room!

Or maybe you run to hide from facing conflict. You're angry, but you won't say so. It will come out in little ways—the way you won't look at your spouse, or leave the room when they enter, or slam the cupboards a bit too hard. But you can't quite bring yourself to say, "Let's talk about this, I'm not happy about it."

Many of us swallow anger and hide it away. Often we can put it away for a while, but then something happens again and it erupts all over again. Or, we keep hiding it away, pretending that everything is okay while we withdraw emotionally from the relationship.

## 3 FAIR FIGHTING RULE #3: **Shut Up and Listen**

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You can't hear when you're talking!

**JAMES 1:19** — *Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.*

We all want to feel that someone understands us. We want to feel that we have been heard. In fact, our need to be heard is often much greater than our need to be agreed with.

But that probably means we talk too much. As your mother used to say, "You have two ears to listen and only one mouth to speak, so use them in that ratio!" Try

Running and hiding always damages the relationship, eroding and burning like acid.

**EPHESIANS 4:26** — *Be angry, but do not sin in your anger. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry.*

Rather, the healthy approach is to discuss our concerns, preferably calmly and in the moment, to avoid building walls that will separate us. If the time is not appropriate for a heated discussion, then acknowledge the emotional concern and schedule another time to discuss the issue.

Bless your spouse with the concerns on your heart. Allow them the opportunity to bear your burdens with you. Sometimes we think we are protecting our spouse by not sharing our heartache. But we only rob our marriage of genuine intimacy by hiding our hearts.

Running from conflict will never resolve it. If we build up a reservoir of unresolved conflict it will wear us down inside and it will only be a matter of time until it overflows to damage your spouse and your relationship.

less to get your point across and convince your spouse why you are right. Rather, focus on seeing the world from your spouse's point of view.

Can you take the lead and set an example in listening? Can you hit the pause button and tune in to the words that your spouse is speaking? Do you hear what emotion they are communicating?

Chances are good that your spouse wants you to understand their feelings on the issue more than they want you to agree with them. Seek to listen without interruption or judgment, and seek to understand why this concern is important to your spouse.

If you both can't stop speaking at the same time, use an object, like a pillow, remote control, or a salt shaker, to designate whose turn it is to talk. Whoever has the



object gets a turn to talk. The other's job is to listen, trying to hear how your spouse is feeling about the issue. It is better to use a tool and reach some understanding than to interrupt and keep blaming.

## 4 FAIR FIGHTING RULE #4: **Check Your Weapons**

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Words can do real damage. During a fight, it is easy to say things that we can't take back, things we'll regret later. So we should be careful not to attack our spouse with deadly emotional force.

For starters, there are words that should never enter the vocabulary of a Christian when addressing a spouse. We should never stoop to name-calling, cursing, or harmful generalizations. Do not attack your spouse's character or personhood—they are not stupid, lazy, or disgusting. These assassinations are not only unhelpful, but they can also cause deep emotional wounds that are very difficult to repair. Many couples struggle with moving past words that were said to

## 5 FAIR FIGHTING RULE #5: **Keep It Private**

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Our spouse is our priority and center of gravity—we should project a united front to the world. We should never quarrel or reveal private matters in public or with children.

Many couples get into trouble when a spouse chooses to complain to or confide in someone outside of the marriage relationship. Too often people draw family or friends into their drama instead of speaking directly with their spouse about areas of tension.

**MATTHEW 18:15** — *If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you.*

Listening can be very difficult when we feel that we are being attacked, but we grow in our connectedness as we listen to one another and carry our burdens together.

them in anger. Apologizing later does not remove the sting of ugly words that hit a vulnerable place.

**EPHESIANS 4:29** — *Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth, but only what is helpful for building others up.*

When we get to know our spouses deeply, we also learn their weaknesses and vulnerabilities. But we need to be careful not to betray our spouse's trust and exploit their insecurities in the heat of an argument. Our intimacy will be doubly damaged if our spouse feels betrayed. Who would want to continue sharing their souls with someone who abuses their privilege?

Remember, you are not out to annihilate your spouse! Our goal is supposed to be gaining understanding, not beating our spouse into submission.

When we triangulate a third party into our relationship, we undermine the trust within the relationship. We should never complain or share personal information about our spouse or our conflict with coworkers or friends. Belittling your spouse to someone else damages your marriage. Confiding in someone outside the marriage is not only unfair to your spouse, over time it can open doors of intimacy to those outside of marriage and lead to an affair.

So what do you do when your spouse isn't receptive to your concerns? Matthew advises that if we can't get someone to listen then we should bring in a third party. But that third party should not be her mother or his best friend. If a couple needs third party intervention, it should be with a counselor or pastor who is trained to mediate. We muddy the waters of relationships when we draw other family and friends into our marriages and make them take sides.

Kids especially should never be the third party in our marital challenges. We should always keep our children out of our conflicts. It's one thing to model healthy conflict for kids, but quite another to ask them to take sides or "see what your spouse it really like." It is quite damaging for them to be pulled into adults' issues or forced to side between parents—it's a major sign of dangerous dysfunction and that it's time for professional help. If your kids are already taking sides, take pains to remove them from the conflict. Kids need their home to be their

safe haven, and they will suffer wounds if their home becomes a battleground. As much as possible, present a unified parenting front to kids.

Take your anger and disappointment with your spouse to your spouse, and honor them in front of everyone else. Don't be afraid to get help, but let it be a pastor or counselor who will keep confidences and wishes the best for you both!

## 6 FAIR FIGHTING RULE #6: **Take the Volume Down**

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When we're angry, we use angry voices. Maintaining a calm presence in the midst of conflict is challenging. It is far easier to escalate arguments, increase the volume, and sharpen the intensity of emotion. When pressured, a natural response is to get defensive—we are self-protective creatures! And as a child of God, you deserve to be heard! But escalating anger can become a destructive cycle. It takes intentional effort to redirect the cycle toward peace. Who has the courage to be the hero and take the steps toward peace?

**PROVERBS 15:1** — *A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.*

We should work to lower the volume toward a solution, not escalate the problem. Seek to be the cooler

head and make efforts to cool down the conflict. Remember the goal is to honor your marriage, not win a victory. When we step outside of the emotion of the moment and look at the situation from another's point of view, we begin the journey of empathy. Only then will we approach reconciliation, which is so much sweeter than winning an argument.

**PROVERBS 15:18** — *A hot-tempered man stirs up dissension, but a patient man calms a quarrel.*

Sometimes we just need to hit the pause button on an argument. If things are too hot, it's okay to say, "Let's break for five minutes and try again." Stopping for a breath and trying to listen instead of responding with more anger are important skills to learn. Are you able to take the high road and become the hero in your relationship?

## 7 FAIR FIGHTING RULE #7: **Start Softly**

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How well do you receive constructive criticism? How well do you offer it?

There will be times in all marriages when one spouse needs to challenge the other. But *how* we address hurtful or inconsistent behavior is crucial. If we start

with a critical spirit that is angry, blaming, nagging, and negative, it's going to have a damaging impact on our conversation and relationship. Constructive criticism requires the right motivation and context. If you approach your spouse's behavior from your own perspective, just because you want things done your way, it's easy for negativism to creep into your relationship.

But criticism can be given well when you lovingly call your spouse to accountability by following a few, simple

rules. Use “I” statements that describe your experience, rather than “you” accusations that condemn your partner from the beginning. Address behaviors (when you do this, or that), not character (you’re so mean, or dumb, or lazy). Practice this model: “In this situation, when you do that behavior, I feel....” For example, “When we’re on the freeway with the kids, when you drive fast, I feel unsafe.” That’s a much more productive approach than attacking with “You’re a terrible driver!”

Giving criticism in love can lead to *transformation*, but criticism apart from love is merely *condemnation*.

**EPHESIANS 4:15** — *Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is Christ.*

## 8 FAIR FIGHTING RULE #8: **Say I’m Sorry**

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Can you freely offer apologies, or will you apologize only if you were proven completely, utterly wrong?

No one enjoys admitting his or her contribution to a conflict. But if we are honest, we will acknowledge our faults and strive to repent. Each of us are imperfect individuals trying to live in community, and we are bound to mess it up sometimes. We can hurt each other without even being aware of what we are doing.

Apologizing requires humility, and apology cannot happen when we refuse to admit any portion of blame.

Sometimes we have much that needs confessing, and at other times our contribution is more by omission. Sometimes all we can say is, “I am so sorry that my

So how do we make sure we receive criticism from our spouse well? It’s natural to want to get defensive and justify what we did, but we often need someone to challenge us to reach a greater potential. When a spouse offers criticism of a particular action in a loving manner, we should consider our actions.

**PROVERBS 15:31** — *He who listens to life giving rebuke will be at home among the wise.*

It can be hard to hear what we can do better, but receiving criticism is very healthy and our spouse has the greatest opportunity to encourage us to be better. If you feel compelled to correct, start softly and in the context of love. We will glorify God if we seek to build each other up!

comment hurt you” or “I am so sorry that I didn’t notice how this was impacting you.” Even if we would make the same choices over again in a particular setting, we still need to say, “I’m sorry,” if only to acknowledge our partner’s pain.

**PROVERBS 28:13** — *He who conceals his sin does not prosper, but whoever confesses them and renounces them finds mercy.*

Apologizing jumpstarts the important work of reconciliation. It shows the other person that we care about them and our relationship more than we care about winning.

Can we humble ourselves and confess our short-comings?

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FAIR FIGHTING RULE #9:

## Forgive Freely

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The other side of saying “I’m sorry” is saying “I forgive you.” Can you allow God’s forgiveness to flow through you?

Sometimes we have no desire to forgive someone. We are not interested in forgiveness; we’d rather brood in our anger a little while longer to be sure our spouse knows how much they’ve hurt us.

But when we withhold forgiveness, the person we hurt most is ourselves. We hold ourselves hostage to our own anger. We define ourselves as a victim in need of vindication. We build up walls of self-righteous resentment. We carry bitterness, which eventually burns our hearts and distorts our view of the world.

Forgiveness breaks down those walls of anger in our relationships, and flushes the resentment away. Forgiveness frees us from the burden of anger.

**COLOSSIANS 3:13** — *Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another.*

God commands forgiveness and it is for our own benefit. Forgiving frees us from anger and gives God the job of establishing justice. In forgiving, we give up our right to retaliation and allow God to be in charge of retribution.

**EPHESIANS 4:32** — *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as Christ forgave you.*

Can we follow Christ’s example and forgive one another? Can Christ’s power work within us? We are told all through scripture to forgive as we have been forgiven. That is often beyond our comprehension! Christ forgave us while we were still sinning. Christ forgave us though he knew the pain that we would cause him. Christ forgave us through great sacrifice. Yet we are so often not ready to forgive. Through God’s strength, this impossible task is within our grasp and it can bring transformation to our relationships.

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FAIR FIGHTING RULE #10:

## Pray Together

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End disagreements with prayer, reuniting with each other before God.

Many couples are uncomfortable with praying together because prayer creates an emotional nakedness. How ironic that for many it’s easier to be physically naked together than to hold hands and pray out loud! But this spiritual vulnerability is a powerful tool for building intimacy in marriage. It’s tough to allow yourself to be vulnerable, but the marriage relationship ought to be a place where you can be comfortable with this openness. Ending conflict with prayer allows God to begin his healing work in our relationships.

**JAMES 5:16** — *Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other that you may be healed.*

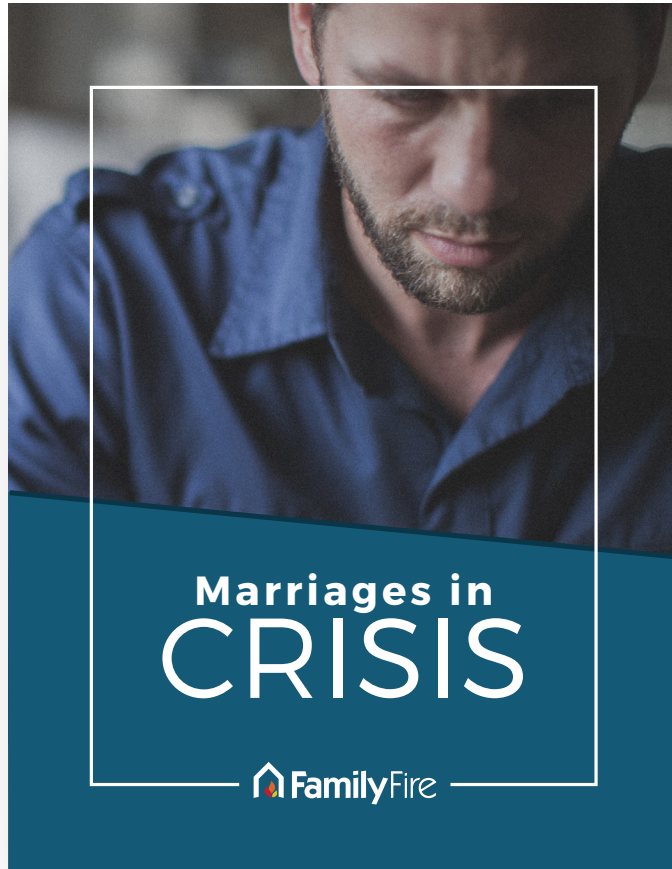
As we pray together, our hearts are open to each other in the presence of God. We benefit from hearing the needs that are weighing heaviest on each other’s hearts. Prayer connects us as a team. When we pray, we turn our struggles over to God instead of carrying the weight of the burden.

**COLOSSIANS 4:2** — *Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.*

Praying for each other helps you start to pay attention to how the other person is feeling and allows God to soften your heart toward your partner. It’s difficult to stay angry when kneeling with your spouse before the throne of God!

Prayer is our powerful connection to God through which he is able to shape our lives, change our hearts, and influence our behaviors. When together we lay our struggles at his feet, he can work powerfully in our lives.





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# FAMILY FIRE'S TEN RULES FOR FAIR FIGHTING

<p><b>1</b></p> <p><b>NO WINNING</b></p> <p>We seek not to win victory over our spouse, but to build the relationship. Placing blame and being right might make us feel better, but it doesn't build our relationship.</p>	<p><b>2</b></p> <p><b>NO RUNNING</b></p> <p>We will not retreat from conflict since it is a natural aspect of a healthy marriage. Neither will we wallow in anger or give our partner the silent treatment. We will resolve conflict now or at least set a time in the immediate future for discussion.</p>	<p><b>3</b></p> <p><b>SHUT UP AND LISTEN</b></p> <p>We will seek to really listen to each other's pain and struggle without interruption or judgment.</p>	<p><b>4</b></p> <p><b>CHECK YOUR WEAPONS</b></p> <p>We will be careful not to attack our spouse with deadly emotional force. We will avoid exploding, name-calling, cursing, belittling, and harmful generalizations.</p>	<p><b>5</b></p> <p><b>KEEP IT PRIVATE</b></p> <p>We will never quarrel or reveal private matters in public. We will also keep our children out of our conflicts. There is no third party in marriage except God.</p>
<p><i>The gentiles lord it over each other, not so with you.</i></p> <p><i>Matt. 20:25</i></p>	<p><i>Be angry, but do not sin in your anger. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry.</i></p> <p><i>Eph. 4:26</i></p>	<p><i>Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.</i></p> <p><i>James 1:19</i></p>	<p><i>Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth, but only what is helpful for building others up</i></p> <p><i>Eph. 4:29</i></p>	<p><i>If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you.</i></p> <p><i>Matt. 18:15</i></p>
<p><b>6</b></p> <p><b>TAKE IT DOWN, NOT UP</b></p> <p>We will strive to lower our volume instead of raising it, keeping our tone gentle, rather than escalating our defenses.</p>	<p><b>7</b></p> <p><b>START SOFTLY</b></p> <p>We will give and receive criticism constructively in order to build each other up.</p>	<p><b>8</b></p> <p><b>SAY I'M SORRY</b></p> <p>We will freely offer apologies.</p>	<p><b>9</b></p> <p><b>FORGIVE FREELY</b></p> <p>Forgiveness breaks down walls of anger in relationships, and flushes resentment away. Forgiveness frees us from the burden of anger.</p>	<p><b>10</b></p> <p><b>PRAY TOGETHER</b></p> <p>End disagreements with prayer, reuniting with each other before God.</p>
<p><i>A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.</i></p> <p><i>Prov. 15:1</i></p>	<p><i>He who listens to life giving rebuke will be at home among the wise.</i></p> <p><i>Prov. 15:31</i></p>	<p><i>He who conceals his sin does not prosper, but whoever confesses them and renounces them finds mercy.</i></p> <p><i>Prov. 28:13</i></p>	<p><i>Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as Christ forgave you.</i></p> <p><i>Eph. 4:32</i></p>	<p><i>Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other that you may be healed.</i></p> <p><i>James 5:16</i></p>

## ABOUT US

Family Fire is a media ministry dedicated to empowering marriages and families, led by Pastors Steven & Deb Koster. Our goal is to encourage you as we explore together how we should live as members of a Holy Spirit-fed family.

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