

24 Guidelines for “Fighting Fair” in Marriage

(adapted from Dr. Paul Meier and Dr. Paul Minrith)

No one is perfect. All humans are selfish at times. All of us exhibit false pride at times. You have married a sinner! Every married couple has conflicts and disagreements. If a married couple claims they haven't had any disagreements in years, one of them isn't necessary. One of them has put his (or her) brain on a shelf and let the other think for both. Many mature, godly adults have admitted privately that it took numerous years of frequent marital conflicts before they arrived at a satisfactory marriage with satisfactory communication.

The following are some proven guidelines for “fighting fair” in a healthy Christian marriage:

1. Sincerely commit your lives to Jesus Christ as Lord.
2. Consider the marriage a life-long commitment, just as Christ is eternally committed to His bride, the Church.
3. Agree to always listen to each other's feelings, even if you disagree with the appropriateness of those feelings.
4. Commit yourselves to both honesty and acceptance.
5. Determine to attempt to love each other unconditionally, with each partner assuming 100% of the responsibility for resolving marital conflicts (the 50/50 concept seldom works)?
6. Consider what all the factors are in a conflict before bringing it up with your mate.
7. Confess any personal sin in the conflict to Christ before confronting your mate.
8. Limit the conflict to the here and now – never bring up past failures, since all past failures should already have been forgiven.
9. Eliminate the following words from your vocabulary:
 - a. “You never” or “You always ...”
 - b. “I can't” (always substitute “I can't” with “I won't”)
 - c. “I'll try” (usually means “I'll make a half-hearted effort but won't quite succeed.”)
 - d. “You should” or “You shouldn't” (a parent-to-child statement)
10. Limit the discussion to the one issue that is the center of the conflict.
11. Focus on that issue rather than attacking each other.
12. Ask your mate if he/she would like some time to think about the conflict before discussing it (but never put it off past bedtime – Eph 4:26)
13. Each mate should use “I feel ...” messages, telling his/her response to whatever words or behavior aroused the conflict. For example, “I feel angry toward you for coming home late for supper without calling me first” is an adult-to-adult message, whereas “You should always call me when you're going to late for supper” is a parent-to-child message that will raise the mate's defensiveness level.
14. Never say anything derogatory about your mate's personality. Proverbs 11:12 tells us that “he who belittles his neighbor lacks sense.”
15. Even though your mate won't always be correct, consider your mate an instrument of God, working your life. Proverbs 12:1 says, “He who hates reproof is stupid.”
16. Never counterattack, even if your mate disobeys these guidelines.
17. Don't tell your mate why you think he/she does what he/she does (unless you are asked), but rather stick to how you feel about what he/she does.
18. Don't try to read your mate's mind. If you're not sure what he/she meant by something, ask him/her to clarify it.
19. Commit yourselves to learning how to deal with your anger. Seek help if this is particularly a problem. This will avoid depression, which results in increased irritability and increased marital conflicts.
20. Be honest about your true emotions, but keep them under control. Proverbs 29:11 says, “A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man holds it back.” Proverbs 15:18 says, “A hot tempered man serves up strife, but he who is slow to anger quits contention.”
21. Remember that the resolution of the conflict is what is important, NOT who wins or loses. If the conflict is resolved, you both win. You're on the same team, not opposing, competing teams.
22. Agree with each other on what topics are “out of bounds” because they are too hurtful or have already been discussed (e.g., in-laws, obesity, etc.)
23. Pray about each conflict before discussing it with your mate.
24. Commit yourselves to carefully learn and practice these “24 Guidelines for ‘Fighting Fair’ in Marriage” and agree with each other to call “foul” whenever one of you accidentally or purposefully breaks one of these guidelines.