

**When Christian couples fight, the question is not, Who's right?,
but rather, What's God trying to teach us?**

Marriage 101 Exam

How to Stop a Fight before It Starts

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Remember this, my dear brothers! Everyone must be quick to listen and slow to become angry. Man's anger does not achieve God's righteous purpose. James 1:19-20

Imagine this exchange between a married couple. Then write a final response that you think might resolve the disagreement:

Spouse A: Honey, remember that great salmon dinner we had a few birthdays of mine ago in San Francisco? I was thinking it might be fun to....

Spouse B: Actually, Sweetie pie, we had steak then in San Francisco. The salmon was on Valentine's Day in Seattle.

A: No, my love, I distinctly remember we both had salmon at the Seattle Space Needle restaurant.

B: (with an edge) Well, I distinctly remember we had the steaks in Seattle.

A: (exasperated) Why do you always have to be right?

B: I don't have to be right. I'm just telling the truth.

A: ?

The bell rings, the gates burst open, and they're off to the races. In a circle.

You're Spouse A. How do you respond to resolve this powder keg of anger before it blows?

Wait—what's this? You're laughing. "Hold on!" you say. "You can't be serious. This is third-grade playground stuff. Mature adults don't act like that!"

I'm absolutely serious. In fact, I absolutely agree with you on both counts.

But for the rest of us who aren't always so mature—who have never seen maturity modeled either in our childhood families or in the larger culture, who want to stop endlessly wounding each other—stretch your imagination and stay with me here.

One day you may be glad you did.

In any case, how's this for a response:

A: (feeling cornered; as anger rises, prays quickly with a measured breath, *Jesus, help!*) Whatever—it really doesn't matter where we ate what. Just saying I'd like to go out with you for salmon sometime soon. Would you like to do that?

With that, it's not hard to imagine a heavenly response:

Father God: (impressed) Well done, my child!

Devil: (depressed) Curses, foiled again!

OK, let's try another interaction which even skeptics may relate to.

Spouse A: You never listen to me!

Spouse B: I know how you feel! (Just kidding; insert snarky emoji)

You're spouse B. How do you respond to A's accusation in order to short-circuit a fight?

But wait again. Maybe this is just too easy for you. Let's up the ante with a challenge: No fair defending yourself.

What about this:

B: That's frustrating, alright, when you don't think the other person is listening to you. Tell me one more time what it is I'm not getting. Help me understand why this issue is so important to you. I'll try my best to listen. (Then demonstrate that by sitting quietly until you can parrot back to your partner precisely what you heard him/her say about your action that's so bothersome.

Still with me? Let's try another round. Test yourself now with the following "invitations" to fight, and consider possible responses listed below:

1. A: Why don't you do simple things I ask you to do? You don't care about anyone but yourself!

B: Well, you're just too picky.

A: ?

2. A: Why do you always pull away when I want sex?

B: Well, maybe I just don't want it every time you do!

A: ?

3. A: Why do you always have to leave a mess everywhere for me to clean up?

B: It's no big deal. The house looks fine.

A: ?

How about these responses to the above:

1. A: (persevering) When you brush me off like that, it's like you don't care about me. That really hurts and makes it hard for me to stay open to you.

2. A: Seems like we've gotten really busy lately. I miss you.

3. A: When the house is clean, I feel fresh and relaxed. I'd appreciate it if we could work together on that.

For those who catch my drift by now and want more, I'll just list here a number of general responses that can help nip a fight in the bud no matter what the topic:

1. I wish we could just respect each other and talk like adults.

2. I'm so tired of hurting each other. I love you. Can we just quit this stupid fighting?

3. When you get angry before we've talked things over, I feel like I have to defend myself right away. I'd rather be talking about the issue and positive things we could do differently.

4. It's OK, there's no need to get angry. We'll work this out. We're just trying to figure out the best way to handle things.

Here are a few more, basic considerations:

If you're dealing in your marriage with addiction, abuse, or adultery, get professional help immediately. Many resources are available for these overriding problems, which most often must be dealt with first in order to "fight fair."

If you sense a tension between the two of you but aren't sure if it's significant enough to confront, try this: **Are we OK?** It's a gracious invitation, so be ready to listen graciously.

Ban inflammatory words like "always" and "never" from your conversation.

When two dogs start to snarl, they basically have two "natural" options: fight or flight? Similarly, we human beings have a self-centered, animal-like sin-nature. Christians, however, have a third, eminently human choice, namely, Jesus, whom God sent to overcome it (Romans 3:21-24).

What's more, Christians know that we have a spiritual enemy, who's determined to separate you from God and thereby, from each other. (Ephes. 6:10ff). When your partner hurts you, instead of lashing back or stomping out, resist those me-first responses. As James exhorts in the opening Scripture above, don't let your self-centered human nature sucker you into fighting each other instead of your common enemy. Make room for Holy Spirit to enter the fray and focus you both on God's healing with His knowledge, wisdom, and discernment (Romans 7:15-8:1, 1 Corinth. 13-14).

Ask AbbaFather to lead you, then dare to be vulnerable and give Him something to bless (Psalm 27). Try to use "I messages" which simply reflect how what the other is doing or saying affects you. In that "mutual respect zone," you can learn to trust God to lead you—and each other to listen.

It's hard work. But trust me—and James: it's nowhere near as emotionally consuming as stuffing your pain and letting angry thoughts drive you farther apart.

Above all, know that your Abbafather is more than able to restore you to each other and Himself. In fact, He wants to use your conflicts to teach you how to love. As you draw closer to Him in your need, that is, you'll experience from Him the love you want to give and receive in your marriage.

In the heat of an argument, that can be awfully hard to believe. But faith is not about trusting your ability; it's about trusting God to do what you can't.

"When a Christian couple fight," as my seminary pastor Rev. Herb Davis, used to say, "the issue is not Who's right? but rather, What's God trying to teach you both?" In that "holy zone" of surrender to Him and each other, He does His finest work.

Give Him a chance.

This teaching taken from "Fire Prevention: How to Stop a Fight before It Starts" in *Loving to Fight or Fighting to Love: Winning the Spiritual Battle for Your Marriage*

by Gordon and Mary Dalbey. Paperback \$16, audio mp3 authors' reading \$12 at www.abbafather.com top left "Books" link. \$20 at amazon.com.

Other Resources (available at abbafather.com)

Pure Sex: The Spirituality of Desire, by Gordon and Mary Dalbey (audio mp3 also)

Sons of the Father: Healing the Father-Wound in Men Today (GD) (audio mp3 also)

"Fathers & Daughters: Healing the Father-Wound in Women," in *Healing the Masculine Soul* (GD) video dvd, audio cd also.

"The Woman as Ally," in *Fight like a Man: A New Manhood for a New Warfare* (GD) (audio mp3 also)

To be published:

Ten Things She Said That Made Me Want to Marry Her (GD/MD)

A Couple's Guide to Spiritual Warfare (GD)

The Adventure of Pastoring: Pioneering the Frontiers of Ministry (GD)