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How to Avoid Marital Strife

By Richard Baxter and adapted by Matthew Black

It is a great responsibility of husbands and wives to live in quietness and peace and avoid all occasions of anger and discord. Because this duty is so important, we will consider the necessity of peace in your marriage relationship and then give more specific applications as to how to live in peace in the home.

Why to Avoid Fighting in Marriage

(1) Marital Strife is Painful

Psalm 37:8 | Refrain from anger and forsake wrath! Fret not yourself, it tends only to evil.

Your fighting will be your pain, and the vexation of your lives. It will be like an infection, or a wound, or like a terrible fracture in your own bodies which will cause you pain until it is carefully set and healed. Pride must be put down for strife to disappear. While you are proud you will have no help from God, since “God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble” (Jas 4:6). You will hardly keep peace in your minds when peace is broken because there is no one earth closer to you than your spouse. In every other situation, we avoid hurting ourselves, and if are sick or hurt, we search for the cure, seeing our doctors. We look for immediate relief. Even more so in marriage, we should be extremely careful to avoid any breach of peace and quickly seek to mend it when it is broken. Don’t sin in your anger, but instead mend any strife quickly with a kind and humble attitude.

Ephesians 4:26 | Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.

Surrender your anger to God quickly, remembering he has forgiven you of much more than whatever you might be upset about with your spouse.

Ephesians 4:32 | Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

(2) Marital Strife Turns Your Home into a Prison

Proverbs 10:12 | Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.

Fighting with your spouse tends to cool your love. If you fight often in marriage, it tends to leave animosity in your heart and plants bitterness in your mind, playing your hurt over and over. Wounding each other is separating; and to be tied together by any outward bonds, when your hearts are separated, is inviting yourself to be tormented. You’ll have the insides of adversaries, while you present yourself as allies to those on the outside. Is anything more miserable than that? There is a massive difference between a warm home and a cold prison. I willingly and with delight dwell in the one but am unwillingly confined and tormented in the other. This is the difference between a quiet and an unquiet home life. In marriage, anger and bitterness will turn your delightful home into a despairing prison, where you are chained to those calamities. Don’t turn your home into a prison because of your selfish heart. Seek peace. Lay your life down.

(3) Marital Strife Paralyzes Growth in Marriage

James 1:20 | The anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

Dissension between the husband and the wife brings disorder to all your family affairs. A fighting couple is like oxen which are unequally yoked together. No meaningful work can be done when you are going in different directions, striving with one another. Nothing is done well because of the animosity toward one another paralyzes your walk with God. "We wrestle not against flesh and blood," but against the devil and his minions (Eph 6:12). Stop fighting against your spouse and instead, together determine to fight for your marriage against the wicked one.

(4) Marital Strife Paralyzes Your Walk with God

1 Peter 3:7 | Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

You cannot be fighting and upset with your spouse and worship of God at the same time. When there is marital strife, your prayer life is shut down, and you are not right with God. When your heart is out of sorts, you are not fit to pray together, nor to speak together of heavenly things, nor to be helpers to each other's souls. I need not tell you this, you feel it by experience. Wrath and bitterness will not allow you so much exercise of love and holy composedness of mind, as every one of those duties do require. Worship of God is not only on Sunday or corporate gatherings but every day. There should be no difference between the secular and the sacred. Your sweet talks with your spouse are just as important and worshipful as singing hymns and reading the Bible. Treat your marriage as sacred.

(5) Marital Strife Hurts Your Children and Other Relationships

Luke 17:2 | It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin.

Dissension in your marriage stops you from governing your family aright. Your children (if you have them) and your church family will learn from your example. They will believe they are at liberty to do what they see in you. You may cause your children to sin by your bad example in one of two ways. They may repeat your strife in their relationships and become even more dysfunctional than you are. Or, when they observe your bad example, and they will not respect you when you reprove them. Further, many children with fighting parents carry this hurt and pain with them. Indeed, they may see you guilty of such faults and folly, and you may become the shame and secret derision of your family and bring yourselves into contempt.

(6) Marital Strife Invites Satan to Harass You and Your Family

Ephesians 4:26-27 | Do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.

Your dissensions will expose you to the malice and harassment of Satan and give him an advantage over you to torment you with many kinds of temptations. A house divided cannot stand (cf Mt 12:25). An army divided is easily conquered and made a prey to the enemy. You cannot foresee what abundance of sin you put yourselves in danger of by your pride of needing to be right. Remember that Satan is not just touched with sin but utterly depraved. Humans have much common grace of conscience and morals but not the wicked one. He is as wicked as he can be. Don't invite him into your marriage through your irritations and strife. Put away pride quickly.

By all this you may see what dissensions between husband and wife do tend to, and how they should be avoided.

Everyone agrees that marital strife is painful both personally, in your relationships, and in your walk with God. We all agree that Satan harasses us when we are angry so that we feel quite lost—out of fellowship with God and out of sorts with our spouse. The question is how can we actually avoid strife in marriage?

How to Avoid Fighting in Marriage

(1) By Thinking the Best of My Spouse

1 Corinthians 13:4a | Love is patient and kind.

Keep up your marital love in a constant heat and vigor. Love has two primary positive qualities: love is patient and kind. If you love your spouse, you will always assume the best of your spouse. This means instead of filling in the blanks with what is the worst, like “My spouse doesn’t care about me,” or “My spouse is not competent,” you must fill in the blanks with the best. Assume your spouse is compassionate and competent. They do care. They are not purposely ignoring your needs. They are not incompetent. Yes, we are all weak. We all can be nearsighted, but you must begin to honor God by thinking the very best of your spouse. This is the blazing center of what love is. It is self-sacrifice for an unworthy person (cf Jn 3:16). Love will suppress wrath. You must avoid having a bitter mind because small provocations but instead cover with love. “Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses” (Pro 10:12). You avoid anger against those that you dearly love, thinking the best and covering with so much love. When you love you are not able to proceed to reviling words, nor giving the cold shoulder, or freezing them out with animosity and isolation from them. With love, you avoid any abuse of one another. And if a breach or wound be unhappily made, the healing quality of love can put your strife to death. But when love cools, small matters can cause you to blow up or clam up and breed distaste and hostility toward one another. Keep your care and compassion for each other heated up. Love each other well by always thinking kindly of one another.

(2) By Dying to Self and Pride

James 3:14-16, NLT | If you are bitterly jealous and there is selfish ambition in your heart, don’t cover up the truth with boasting and lying. For jealousy and selfishness are not God’s kind of wisdom. Such things are earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. For wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there you will find disorder and evil of every kind.

Both husband and wife must mortify their pride and passion, which are the causes of impatience. They must pray and labor for a humble, meek, and quiet spirit. A proud heart is troubled and provoked by every word or attitude that seems to tend to their feeling undervalued and unloved. A peevish, upset, irritated mind is like a sore and ulcerated organ, that will be hurt if it is touched. When an inner organ is swollen, you cannot touch the stomach. It’s too painful. He that must live near such a sore, diseased, impatient mind, must live even as the nursing mother does with the child, and makes it her business to rock it, and lull, and sing it quiet when the baby cries. To be angry with the baby will do no good; and if you have married someone with a sick or childish temper, you must resolve to bear with them accordingly. But no Christian should bear with such a malady in themselves nor be patient with such impatience of mind. At once get the victory over yourself, and the cure of your own impatience, and you will easily keep peace with one another.

(3) By Exercising Self-Control

2 Peter 1:5-6 | Giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness.

Self-control is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:23). Self-control is choosing to trust God and please him when you have a thousand other competing desires. It is choosing to “walk in the Spirit and ... not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Gal 5:17). This choice must be always exercised in the Christian life by faith, especially in marriage. Without faith that God is in control, that he is good, and that he will vindicate humility, you will try to defend yourself, and you will make things much worse. Therefore, agree together beforehand, that when one is in the diseased, angry fit, the other shall silently and gently bear the angry spouse until the fit of anger is past and you are come to yourselves again. Choose never to both be angry at the same time. When the fire of anger is kindled, quench it with gentle words and a patient, loving attitude. “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Pro 15:1). Do not cast on oil or fuel, by answering provokingly and sharply, or by multiplying words, and by answering wrath with wrath.

(4) By Holding Your Tongues

Psalms 34:13 | Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit.

If you cannot quickly quench your passion, yet at least refrain your tongues; speak not reproachful or provoking words: talking it out hotly puts much fuel on the fire, and increases the flame. Be but silent, and you will the sooner return to your serenity and peace. Foul words tend to more displeasure and unbearable discomfort of soul. Avoid adding fuel to the fire when foul, unkind, condemning words begin. If you cannot easily calm your wrath, you may at least hold your tongues, if you are truly willing.

(5) By Speaking Softly to Your Offended Spouse

Proverbs 15:1 | A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

Let the sober party condescend to speak fair and to entreat the other. Come in a spirit of forgiveness, repentance, and humility. Say to your angry wife or husband, “You know this should not be between us; love must overcome our strife, and our sin must be repented of. God does not approve it, and we shall not approve of it when this heat is over. This angry, fretful frame of mind hurts our prayer life. This language is contrary to a praying language. We must begin praying together soon. Let us do nothing contrary to prayer now. Sweet water and bitter come not from one spring (Jas 3:11), etc.” Some calm and humble words of reason may stop the torrent, and revive the kind reason which passionate anger had overcome.

(6) By Humbly Confessing Your Sins to One Another

James 5:16 | Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.

Confess your fault to one another, when angry passion has prevailed against you; and ask forgiveness of each other and join in prayer to God for pardon. This will lay a greater burden on you the next time to resist anger and forbear in patience with each other. You will surely be ashamed to do that which you have so confessed and asked forgiveness for of God and man. Remember to put off the old and put on the new. “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph 4:31-32).

If you will but practice these directions, your family peace may be preserved.