

**FIGHTING FAIR**  
James 4:1  
By Raymond White

*James 4:1 From whence come wars and fighting among you? Come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?*

Here is some good advice about fighting: First, don't do it. Second, accept that "don't do it" is just wishful thinking. Even in church, sometimes we must *reprove and rebuke* (**2 Timothy 4:2**). And Jesus did drive money changers out of the temple, and if that was not a fight, then I don't know a "fight" is. Fights will happen.

Since we cannot avoid all fights, we should at least learn which fights are serious enough to engage. Then more importantly, we should learn *how* to fight; that is, how to fight fair so we can minimize the carnage. At some point in the heat of battle, damage control becomes the issue.

Here then are a few rules of engagement that are often the difference between surviving a battle and becoming a casualty.

**[1] NEVER HIT BELOW THE BELT**

"There are words the point of which sting the heart through the course of a whole life." (Frederika Bremer). Such words should never escape your lips, especially in a fight when sensitivities are running high. Every married person knows their partner's weak points, the chink in their ego armor. Never strike at that point. Never draw blood. Never cause someone you love to have to say, (**Job 19:2**) *How long will ye...break me in pieces with words?* Some words, once said, will never be forgiven. Avoid those words at all cost. Never, ever speak them.

**[2] ATTACK THE PROBLEM, NOT THE PERSON**

If you must fight, make it clear what the fight is about or it will never end. It is one thing to say, "Get in there and wash the dishes," and quite another to say, "You lazy, selfish pig. You never think about anyone but yourself." The first can be responded to, the second cannot.

Always speak to the real issue. You can attack *that* without attacking each other. And anyways, your spouse is not a mind reader. I know that's a disappointment, ladies, but it's true.

**[3] HAVE REASONABLE EXPECTATIONS**

Accept the fact that you are never going to get all of what you want or deserve. What fights are about is "unmet expectations" — or to personalize it, "You owe me something that you are not giving me." Now, that may be true or it may not. But even if it is true, you may be asking for something that is beyond your partner's ability to give. Some faults should just be endured.

There is much that we disagree about, some very serious (abuse, infidelity, drugs) and some not so serious. Knowing which things are worth fighting for and which are not is critical to the survival of marriages. Pick your battles wisely. Before engaging a battle you should ask yourself, is this the hill you want to die on? There's an old military strategy: "If you insist on

winning every battle, you will lose the war.” I’ll rephrase that: If you fight for everything, you may lose everything.

#### [4] VOLUME MATTERS

Above all, don’t shout!

David O. McKay said, “There should be no yelling in the home unless there is a fire.” (Or alternatively, Ann Landers wrote: “Never yell at each other unless the house is on fire.”)

The reason people shout is because they think that volume demands attention and gains control. Well, shouting does draw attention but it does not gain control, and that’s because it draws attention to the wrong thing. When people are being shouted at, they don’t hear the words, all they hear is the shouting, the emotion, the anger, the rage, and that’s frightening. And when people are frightened, they leave — mentally at first, but eventually physically as well.

Shouting conveys its own message: disrespect. And our natural response to disrespect is to throw it back. And so begins the back-and-forth exchange of fire that escalates into a war.

When there is shouting, there is no conversation, no meeting of the minds, or even conflict of the minds. There’s just shouting, which nobody can talk over, or even think over. Shouting stops communication in its tracks.

Here is the simple rule: To be heard, stop shouting and talk civilly. When you talk quietly, people listen. Then you can have a debate that actually is a debate and something useful may come from it, even if you lose the argument. Argue if you must. Be angry if you must. But don’t shout. Talk civilly. Even angry words will be heard if spoken civilly. The words are sufficient. Leave out the volume and you will be heard.

#### [5] DESIRES IN CONFLICT

The overall lesson (from our key verse *James 4:1*) is that external squabbles begin with internal squabbles.

In psychology, there is a notion of “cognitive dissonance”; that is, holding two beliefs that are in conflict with each other. Well, if that really happens, and it does, then why not also a “desire dissonance”? By that I mean wanting two things that are in conflict with each other.

Here are a few examples: I want lots of chocolate candy, cake, and ice cream, but I don’t want to get fat. Sorry, can’t have both. I want a new car but I don’t want debt. Sorry, can’t have both. I want sex with multiple partners but I also want true love. Sorry, can’t have both.

Here’s a maxim I’ve found useful: You can have anything you want, but you can’t have everything you want. There’s always a tradeoff, and wanting something often pits us against ourselves. That’s fine if we see the humor in the conflict and don’t get crazy. The problem is that in our eagerness to get what we want, we sometimes expand the war zone and drag others into our own private battleground. Then, when we can’t get what we want, instead of blaming ourselves, we blame others, see them as obstacles and the war begins in earnest.

It’s okay to want things; it’s impossible not to. But it’s just not okay to want things so much that we’re willing to wreak havoc.

The solution is simple. Not easy, but simple. When you decide what you really want most of all, hopefully that will be your family. If you really want *their* happiness, *their* love, *their*

peace; so that everything else takes second place and can therefore be sidelined as needed, then there will be nothing left to fight about.

## [6] BUT WHEN YOU'RE RIGHT, THEN WHAT?

It's time for a Bible story — this one about a king and a queen.

In the first chapter of Esther, we read of a lovers' quarrel that escalates out of control and destroys the marriage quickly. In the story, king Ahasuerus and queen Vashti were presumably *in love*, but because of a brawl find themselves suddenly *in hate* in a full-out declaration of war that ends their marriage without any possibility of reconciliation. He was entirely wrong, probably. She was, well, you decide. But the question is not was she right on the issue, but was she right in the way that she handled it.

This is not the story of Esther, she comes later. This is the story Vashti, queen of all Persia, until suddenly she wasn't. How quickly our lives and our marriages can unravel because of a moment's bad judgment and an unwillingness to see a situation through the eyes of our partner whom we claim to love.

*Esther 1:10* On the seventh day [of the party] when the heart of the king was merry with wine [he was smashed] he commanded :**11** to bring Vashti the queen before the king with the crown royal, to shew the people and the princes her beauty: for she was fair to look on.

It is not certain just what the king was demanding of her. "To shew...her beauty" is vague. Was he asking her to make an appearance and smile, or to strip for the guests? I hope he was just asking for a nice smile, but it could be that he was demanding that she appear naked.

There are four reasons to suppose that he was asking her to appear naked: (1) *to show the people her beauty* implies more than her face; (2) *merry with wine* implies excessive irrational behavior; (3) *with the crown royal* vaguely implies *only* the crown and nothing else; and (4) Vashti's explosive reaction implies, though not necessarily, an unreasonable request.

But still, we don't know for certain, and there are hints that the king's request was not so ribald. For instance, the king exhibits no concern that what he is doing might cause offense, it seems to him to be a natural thing to do and not out of the ordinary. Further, he is genuinely surprised and dismayed at the rebuff, so much so that we can reasonably conclude that had he anticipated it, he wouldn't have made the demand. Of course, men do stupid things when they are drunk, but as I said, we don't know for certain. So let's explore both possibilities.

*First:* Let's suppose that the king was asking only for an appearance and a smile. If that's the case, then Vashti did overreact and her hissy-fit humiliated the king and all his guests, and maybe she got what she deserved.

We notice that it wasn't the king's anger that ended the marriage, although he was angry. It was the political situation and the public-ness that forced him to discard Vashti. That implies that had the battle not been so public, he might have forgiven her.

There's a lesson in that: If you are going to squabble with no holds barred, do it privately. Don't have your battle at the office party in the hearing of people that actually matter, and certainly not in front of the kids. A bare knuckles brawl is always bad, but maybe when the heat dissipates, you can both say your I'm-sorries and get past it. But maybe not, not if the brawl was

engaged in public. Sometimes the mere public-ness of the battle is what cements the damage and dooms the marriage.

*Second:* But let's now suppose the worst case scenario and assume the king wanted his wife to strip for the guests. Maybe that wasn't the case, but maybe it was, and *if* it was, then no wonder she had a hissy-fit. It's one thing to compliment your wife in public, it's quite another to show her off as a trophy and make her the butt of humiliation. Compliments are generally appreciated but only to a point. Beyond that point, they can annoy. In the queen's position, any woman would not feel cherished at all, but more like a piece of meat.

Husbands, don't do that. Your wife is not your trophy. Each man should cherish his wife so much that there is no doubt in her mind that he loves her and would protect her in every situation and would never expose her to humiliation or danger for any reason in the world. King Ahasuerus failed to do that.

On with the story —

*Esther 1:11 But the queen Vashti refused to come at the king's commandment by his chamberlains: therefore was the king very wroth, and his anger burned in him. :13 Then the king said to the wise men :15 What shall we do unto the queen Vashti according to the law, because she hath not performed the commandment of the king Ahasuerus by the chamberlains? :16 And Memucan answered before the king and the princes, Vashti the queen hath not done wrong to the king only, but also to all the princes, and to all the people that are in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus. :17 For this deed of the queen shall come abroad unto all women, so that they shall despise their husbands in their eyes, when it shall be reported, The king Ahasuerus commanded Vashti the queen to be brought in before him, but she came not. :18 Likewise shall the ladies of Persia and Media say this day unto all the king's princes, which have heard of the deed of the queen. Thus shall there arise too much contempt and wrath. :19 If it please the king, let there go a royal commandment from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes, that it be not altered, That Vashti come no more before king Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal estate unto another that is better than she. :21 and the king did according to the word of Memucan.*

And so it was done. He divorced her and she lost everything. He later had regrets —

*Esther 2:1 And after these things...he remembered Vashti...*

— but it was too late, the damage was done and was irreparable. And notice how quickly that irreparable damage happened. A lifetime of love can be undone with a single word or deed, all because he did not cherish her — (he cherished her body but not *her*).

But there is a flip side. Most women, I think, would say, and maybe rightly, there *is* no flip side. He was entirely wrong and she was entirely right not to cater to any of his irreverent request. But there *is* a flip side. Yes, he was entirely wrong. But the problem grew out of control because her explosive outburst showed that she had no respect for him at all. He was, after all, the King of Persia, and she owed him that respect anyway. But she had none to give. And in her moment of anger, she failed to consider her options — there might be a way out of the mess

Was there a way out for her? Well, your imagination is as good as mine, What if, for example, Vashti had showed up in a bikini? Might that have assuaged the king and the crowd? We don't know. She didn't try. In her righteous anger (and she was right) she didn't care to do anything but rub his nose in it and snub him in public. And her lack of respect, her unwillingness to forgive a moment of bad judgment, to calm down long enough to consider options, cost her.

Was she in danger of being gang-raped? Maybe. At drunken parties, things can get out of hand, but Queens have body guards and she could have brought hers to insure her safety.

Am I blaming her for his bad judgment? No. He was wrong, she was not, that's settled. What I *am* saying is that who was right and wrong had nothing to do with the outcome, and it was in her own best interest to show restraint and explore possibilities. Being right doesn't always help, and many marriages die because somebody was right and rubbed it in.

Suppose she *had* shown up in a bikini, and suppose the king had said to her, "But I *told* you to show your beauty!" She could have replied, "But I *am* doing that, just as you ordered. Would *you* like a more private showing in my room? Right now? For your eyes only?" That might have sobered him up quickly.

Who was wrong in this tragic story? Him, certainly. Her, maybe. Certainly we would sympathize with Vashti if we could listen to her defend her action and rail on her husband's unreasonable demand. But in the real world, the issue is not always who's right and who's wrong, the issue is sometimes *survival!*

For men, the lesson is obvious: Cherishing your wife certainly means protecting her. But for women, the lesson is not quite so obvious.

Still, there is this: The next time you get into a tit-for-tat with your spouse — ("you did this, you said that, nay-nay-nay") — give it a rest, calm down, and think! You may have an escape, and like any battle, escape is what matters. And keep in mind that even if you are right, and Vashti was, does the current crisis justify the war you are engaging?

Oh, there are times when a battle is called for, certainly spousal abuse for example. But if you are ever at that crisis moment, you must decide, *carefully* decide, does the current line of scrimmage demand a call to arms? Remember, the cost may be high.

In the book *Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell, the author points out convincingly that the greatest single predictor of a doomed marriage is not anger but scorn. A man will often endure his wife's anger, but he will not long endure her scorn. Vashti's refusal amounted to scorn. And if the queen's example became public and became a habit throughout the kingdom (women do follow their queen's lead), the divorce rate would rise. That was their fear.

The king and his counselors considered that a real threat to the kingdom, so the king decided to nip that possibility in the bud and he divorced his queen, which he didn't want to do.

Extreme? Perhaps, especially since the mess was his fault. But extreme things happen, and we need to be able to deal, not just with problems, but with really bad problems. That's why it's important to stop, take a timeout and a deep breath, and evaluate what's really going on and what your options are. A rash response can have devastating consequences as Vashti found out. Think before you act. Do not let rage determine your behavior, *even if your rage is justified*.

Above all, remember that even in the heat of an argument, even an argument where you *are* right and the other person *is* wrong, respect matters! Anger generally comes not from a collision of opinions but from disrespect.

I wonder if Vashti had regrets. If we could ask her now, today, what would she say? Would she wish for a do-over to make a different decision, or would she rail about the injustice done to her? When I get to heaven, I'll ask her. But maybe she'd decline the interview.

I read a study that concluded that while men suffer a deeper sense of loss from a divorce in the short run, the sense of loss clings to women much longer. In other words, men get over it and move on, women carry those regrets much longer, often for the rest of their lives. Keep that in mind when you're heading into your next argument.

Years ago I was teaching the Book of Hosea in a Sunday school class. The subject was marriage; specifically, forgiving infidelity. One elderly sister in the class, Amy, began sobbing. We all turned our attention to her as she told us her story. She said, "Decades ago, my husband confessed to me an infidelity and begged me to forgive him. But I was so angry that I would not. Instead, I divorced him. I have regretted that decision ever since. Today I would take him back in heartbeat. I am so lonely."

I shared Amy's story not to underscore the blessedness of forgiveness, although it does that, but to illustrate how long lasting are the consequences of decisions made in a fit of anger. That the anger may be justified, as Amy's and Vashti's were, doesn't soften the consequences.

Do you really want to get your marriage right, and keep it right? — men and women? Then take to heart these words from a man who had only six months to live. Knowing he was soon to die, Randy Pausch wrote this: "Somehow, with the passage of time, and the deadlines that life imposes, surrendering became the right thing to do." *The Last Lecture*, p136.

Thank you, Randy. There are few wiser words than those. They will survive you.

Finally, here are four more wise words, magic words, that will get you past the temptation to put your spouse in his or her place. The magic words are: "You may be right." Memorize those words, and use them — often.