

**Fighting Fair**  
*Yoked for Life, 1*

As you may know, for the past three years I've been planning the sermon series that pastor HY and I do here a year in advance, during a mini- retreat in June. One advantage of this type of planning is to ensure that we are not getting into ruts, and are covering a variety of sermon *types*- Spiritual Growth, Institution Building, Outreach, Personal Growth, etc. The retreat time is critical in this planning process, as it is a time of reflection, and prayer, seeking God's guidance in this process. These messages are meant for *you, this* congregation in *this* community. I can't just go to the Church of the Resurrection website and copy what Adam Hamilton is doing, as tempting as that might be!

I know I shouldn't be, but I have to admit I'm still surprised to see how well this works – and how timely so many of the topics and messages turn out to be! A case in point is the short series that we're beginning today called “Yoked for *Life*”.

This is a series about Communication in relationships – but focusing on Marriage. I really considered long and hard last June whether or not I wanted to include a series that might be considered so specific that it excludes people – of course, I realize that not everyone in this church is married! But I felt very strongly led to do this, as Marriages are in crisis in our society – and, let's be honest, even within this church. And the timing is coming together in a way that really confirms this decision for me, which I'll get back to in a minute.

(By the way, looking ahead a bit, I felt just as strongly led to include a series which we'll be doing after Lent - an even more specifically focused series on anxiety and depression. I'm learning to trust these leadings... finally! And so, I'm sure there will be something in each of these messages that can be encouraging and even helpful to people who aren't dealing with anxiety, or depression – or, in this case, for people who aren't married. We all are in relationships after all – with families, friends, co-workers, children, and so forth. So, much of what we'll be talking about in the next three weeks can be applied in a general sense to any relationship.)

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On the other hand, I'm going to focus on Marriages without apology, and I know that you who are single will be praying for the seeds in these messages to perhaps take root, and grow into something that will be healing and a blessing to those married couples among us.

When I put this series on the calendar last June I chose this 'slot' more based on the length of the series than the time of year. I knew I had three weeks between the Movie series and the beginning of Lent, and this fit perfectly. It didn't occur to me until very recently that *Valentine's Day* falls right smack in the middle of this, just a happy co-incidence but nice.

And then, Karen Murray came by last Fall and shared with me her passion to run a six week marriage enrichment course in January. It is finishing up, I think, this week – and there are some 37 people enrolled in it, which is awesome! (I'm going to share a video clip from that series in just a moment).

\*\* Then, a month or so ago I came across something brand new. You can read about this on the insert in your bulletin. It's an "On-line Couple Checkup". It is put together by the same people who do the "*Prepare Premarital Inventory*" – a excellent resource that I've been using for over 20 years. You can take this check-up at home, on line, and you will receive a 20 page printout that will be both affirming and challenging – something that can open doors to communication that may have been nailed shut for a long time. We're challenging you to do this. [There is a two-week window for you to do this beginning Tuesday.](#)

BUT, IF YOU ACT NOW.... Seriously, they are having a 'sale' from Tuesday until Valentine's Day and instead of \$30 it is \$20. (See what I mean about things coming together? I'd love to tell you that I planned all this!) So, if you take the inventory you will get a printout sent to you, and if you choose, you can interpret it and act on it by yourselves. (We won't see them, or read them.) And that will be it.

But we are also going to invite all the participating couples to a get-together on Sunday evening, Feb. 26, where I'll give you some help in interpreting your results, and I'll also show you the trends within this congregation (based on your input), and we'll offer some

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further resources. So, when you say (or your spouse says) “Hey, everybody is like us....” you can know whether or not that’s true, at least in this community.

And for those of you who want to follow up even further, Karen is going to be offering the Marriage Built to Last Course (Chip Ingram) once again beginning March 4 @ 11:00 am Sunday School hour.) Why are we doing this? Because this is important!

\*\*The title of this series (“Yoked for *Life*”) is meant to be a play on words... one that is so clever that I have to explain it... which probably means it isn’t as clever as I had originally thought. It refers not so much to a length of time (like, a ‘life sentence’) but the “Abundant Life” that is promised to the followers of Jesus Christ. Something we talk about here frequently is that our Discipleship should be evident in our works – everything we do, really, should reflect the fact that we are being conformed day by day into the image of Christ.

That transformation should certainly include all of our relationships on this earth – with friends, with family, and the like. The way we interact with each other will either be a blessing, or it will cause distance in our relationship with God. But of all our relationships, marriage is the closest illustration on this earth of the intimacy that should be the norm between Jesus and his followers. That’s not my opinion, it’s what the Scripture tells us.

Paul writes in Ephesians 5, after he has just introduced the heading of ‘mutual submission’ among all believers (vs. 5:19), and specifically addresses how that looks for both wives and husbands, he then lets us in on a heavenly mystery:

\*\*After all, people have never hated their own bodies, but they feed and care for them, just as Christ does the church—<sup>30</sup> for we are members of his body. <sup>31</sup> “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”<sup>32</sup> ***This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.*** <sup>33</sup> However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

The relationship between husband and wife is the highest and closest example on this earth of the relationship between Jesus and the church. Let’s just think about that a second.

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Is that what is happening in your home? If you look at the Divorce statistics, sadly, one would wonder.

(Let me say this, too, please... it is never our intention here to stigmatize those who are divorced. OK, we understand, it happens, and we care enough to offer help for those who are struggling through this through Divorce Care, Divorce Care for Kids, and Stephen Ministry. That's part of our mission: to care for those who are hurting, without judging.)

But clearly, God's ideal is that Divorce never happen! In Hosea God says, "I hate divorce"! That's pretty clear – and if you think about that passage from Ephesians and understand the deep symbolism that is inherent in marriage, you can see why God hates when a marriage tragically ends. I've never met a person who told me that they 'Enjoyed their divorce'. There have been many who are certain that they had no choice, and they are now relieved, but that never changes the fact that divorce is traumatic, and painful for everyone involved.

The best resolution is reconciliation! But even better is 'preventative maintenance', which is what this series, and these 'extra' things we're offering are about. Because here's a 'news flash': relationships do not automatically get better just because you are a Christian! In fact: (and this is very hard for me to grasp) Divorce rates among conservative Christians are significantly higher than for other faith groups, and much higher than Atheists and Agnostics.

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George Barna, president and founder of Barna Research Group, commented:

*"While it may be alarming to discover that born again Christians are more likely than others to experience a divorce, that pattern has been in place for quite some time. Even more disturbing, perhaps, is that when those individuals experience a divorce many of them feel their community of faith provides rejection rather than support and healing. But the research also raises questions regarding the effectiveness of how churches minister to families. The ultimate responsibility for a marriage belongs to the husband and wife, but the high incidence of divorce within the Christian community challenges the idea that churches provide truly practical and life-changing support for marriages."*

Well, we aim to change that!

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So, let's get practical... quick poll – how many of you who are married have never had an argument with your spouse? If you say 'no, never' then there is probably something wrong – and you have some stuff to talk about. Ok then... check this out:

**\*\* Show video**

The great “Love Chapter” – 1 Corinthians 13 – describes what real, God-like Love looks like. I just want to look at one of those descriptions, vs. 5b

*\*\* (Love)...is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.*

I've seen a lot of Prepare Premarital Inventories in my years, and one thing that I see fairly regularly is a couple with a high score in Communication, but a low – even dismal – score in “Conflict Resolution”. What is apparently happening is that these couples communicate fairly well, *until* there is a conflict or a disagreement, and then ‘all bets are off’, communication tanks, and quickly deteriorates. The couples lack the ability to share negative or critical thoughts, or emotions without having a lot of baggage attached to their words. Its not a safe environment to do that.

Like the humorous vignette we just watched, the conversation degenerates into name calling, to a dredging up of all the past failures of the other, to labeling each other, to other ‘adventures in missing the point’ and .... you know what I'm talking about.

So, for the rest of my time today, I'd like to share something with you that can help if you take the time to work through it. I came across a resource on a very excellent Web site called <http://foryourmarriage.org>, produced by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. There are a host of good articles, quizzes, and such on this site, including one entitled [25 Ways to Fight Fair](#).

If you'd like a copy of this list for yourselves, it will be included as part of this sermon text, on our website, or you can find it on the [foryourmarriage.org](http://foryourmarriage.org) website. (Just for my integrity, some of the brief comments that I'll be sharing as I wrap up this message will be

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my own words, and some are found in the document. But to keep things flowing, I'm not going to be distinguishing between the two...

For the sake of time, I'm going to hit the highlights, and share with you the Top "**6 Ways to Fight Fair**" ... (and again, you can find the entire list of 25 on our Website)

**\*\* 1. "Know Thyself"**

We will never be able to constructively handle anger or conflict without being in touch with our own true feelings about something. Take some time to pray, talk to a friend, or a pastor, a Stephen Minister, a counselor... about whatever it is that makes you angry, so you can begin to work through it.

In addition to this, determine through honest inner searching whether your anger lies primarily (or only secondarily) within the marriage relationship. Spouses might be struggling with poor health, role insecurities at work, fear of death, anxiety about the future, or all sorts of unresolved issues. It can be reassuring when a couple realizes that their relationship may not always be the principle problem, even though the real problem still causes anguish, its not 'us'. In fact, we're allies!

**\*\* 2. No Winners**

During a calm, clear moment – when you are not in the middle of an argument! - agree together that neither partner should ever "win" a fight. Think about it: if one wins, the other loses. That builds resentment. And the result is that both have then lost because the relationship is damaged. I'll say it again: Couples should never seek to 'win' a conflict. Even when one spouse is wrong, permit him or her salvage self-respect. It can be done! (If one or the other has a need to 'win', I'd suggest there are deeper issues going on.)

Agree that no issue is resolved until each partner has had an opportunity to express his/her feelings, ideas, and information about it. One or the other stomping your foot and saying, "And that's final!" is *not* a resolution, no matter how loudly you say it. This is one of those statements that proves how uncommon 'common sense' is.

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**\*\* 3. Ease Up!**

Establish ground rules that permit either partner to “cool off” before trying to resolve anger. You know how you work, it may be necessary for you to take a walk or engage in some other physical activity in order to allow anger to diminish. In a time like that, a spouse can identify the issue at hand more clearly and organize his or her thoughts, thus keeping the fight more on focus. In addition to that -

Be sure, however, that you just don’t push this thing off indefinitely. After cooling off, pin down a time and place to continue. For example, you agree - after the news goes off and in the living room, tonight, we’re going to talk about this – not in the bathroom doorway while brushing your teeth!

Don’t insist on a fight when your spouse is tired or unable to handle the strain. A *fair* fight requires two ready participants. If one isn’t ready, then the other may just be looking to ‘win’, and we already saw that this is destructive.

**\*\* 4. Be Clear as to what the Fight is About**

When a number of issues are accumulating, deal with them one at a time. Make an issue agenda, understanding that this may take some time. Make sure both of you agree to get past, insult rituals, and angry displays, which accomplish nothing. Shooting broadside like a roaring cannon *prevents* resolution.

Don’t simply say, “You never show me respect.” Rather, be clear and specific; and use ‘I statements’, not ‘YOU’ statements... Like this, “I felt hurt when you said” ...or “when you said that, your tone of voice felt condescending.” (*I* statements cause much less defensiveness.)

Don’t center on less important or extraneous issues because you really don’t want to deal with the *real* ones. “The potatoes are too salty tonight!” might be a minor irritant that covers the unspoken, “*I don’t think that you understand all the pressure I’m under at work!*” and I don’t know how to tell you.

**\*\* 5. Don’t Hit Below the Belt**

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Everyone has vulnerable areas. Don't use your confidential knowledge of your partner's weaknesses and sensitivities to hurt him/her. Why would you do that? But many do...

Avoid telling your spouse that he/she is neurotic, depressing, or a bore, frigid, cold, and etc. Rather, try something more like this, *"I'm feeling a little tense inside, honey, because you seem moody and depressed. I'd like us to talk about it."*

**\*\* 6. Fight With the Spiritual "Weapons" God Has Offered Us**

Marriage is a spiritual relationship and prayer is the source of our spiritual strength. Principles of human behavior – things like these 25 ways to fight fair' are important, and useful, but couples should remember that we have other ways to deal with problems and issues. And truly, it's a cliché for a reason: "Prayer changes things".

Forgiveness is a key as well. This goes back to # 5 (don't hit below the belt) by "keeping no record of wrongs", but it also means that at times we need to realize that not *everything* requires a response. The famous theologian Kenny Rodgers once wrote, "You gotta' know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em... know when to walk away."

(Something like that!) There are times when we can unilaterally forgive – i.e., we 'let it go'. It is not necessary to bring up every violation, every instance of human behavior that doesn't conform to our standards. You need to be careful about 'avoiding' issues (see #3!) but recognizing that we're all human, that we all have moments of weakness and imperfections means that at times we'll just let some things 'roll off'. Isn't that how God treats us?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://foryourmarriage.org/25-ways-to-fight-fair/>