

A Study Guide for

“Fight Fair: Rules of Engagement”

Crosspointe Marriage | Class 7

***Vision:** To build strong marriages with a foundation in Christ.*

***Mission:** Mentor, encourage, and support marriages through Biblical teaching and guidance.*

Ice Breakers

- **Learning to Fight:** Before you ever had your first disagreement as a couple, you already knew how to fight. Where did you learn it — your parents, a past relationship, your personality, or just whatever has worked for you before?
- **Fight Club:** Have you ever tried to fix something broken in your own life by becoming a tougher, more in-control version of yourself, only to watch that “solution” eventually become its own kind of destructive?
- **Old Man or New Man:** Think about the last real disagreement you had with your spouse. Looking back honestly, who actually showed up to that fight?
- **The Rules You Live By:** Most of us wrote a private rule somewhere along the way to keep from getting hurt again — “I don’t ask for help,” “I don’t apologize first,” “I don’t let anyone see me cry.” What rule have you created to protect yourself that might actually be hurting your marriage?

Key Scripture Passages

- **Ephesians 4:17–19** – Paul describes the “old man”: futile thinking, a darkened understanding, alienation from the life of God, a hardened heart, and a conscience so numb it no longer feels what should bother it.
- **Ephesians 4:20–24** – “You have not so learned Christ.” Believers are called to put off the old man, be renewed in the spirit of their mind, and put on the new man, created according to God in true righteousness and holiness.
- **Ephesians 4:25–32** – Paul all but writes a rulebook for fighting fair: put away lying and speak truth, be angry without sinning, do not let the sun go down on your wrath, give the devil no opportunity, and let no corrupt word leave your mouth. Put away bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, evil speaking, and malice, and be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving instead, so the Holy Spirit is not grieved.
- **Ephesians 5:1–7** – Walk in love, as Christ also loved us and gave Himself for us. Love, not being right, becomes the standard for how a disagreement gets handled.
- **Ephesians 5:8–14** – Once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light, exposing what needs to be exposed rather than hiding it.
- **Ephesians 5:15–21** – Walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, understanding what the will of the Lord is, and submit to one another in the fear of God.
- **Ephesians 5:22–33** – Husbands and wives are called into a one-flesh union patterned after Christ and the church: “he who loves his wife loves himself.”
- **Ephesians 6:12** – “We do not wrestle against flesh and blood.” Your spouse was never the enemy; the fight is against something else entirely.

The Big Picture

By the time you said “I do,” you had already been trained in how to fight. Your parents’ home, a past relationship, an old hurt, the culture around you, the friends you keep, the movies you watch, your own personality, and whatever has simply worked for you before — all of it taught you something about how to respond when disagreement shows up. We don’t enter marriage as blank slates who just need a few conflict-resolution tips. We enter marriage already knowing exactly how to fight, and the question this lesson asks is not whether you know how to fight, but who you are allowing to show up when the fighting starts.

Paul calls that trained-up version of you the “old man” (Ephesians 4:17–19): futile in thinking, darkened in understanding, alienated from the life of God, hardened in heart, and eventually so past feeling that we stop noticing what should bother us. Since the old man is all of these things, he cannot be trusted to produce a lasting solution to any real problem, including the ones in your marriage. The movie *Fight Club* pictures this well. A man who senses something is wrong tries to fix his own brokenness by creating a different, more aggressive version of himself, and for a while it feels like it is working, until what he built to regain control ends up controlling him instead. Marriage conflict starts the same way: something really is wrong, and noticing that is not the mistake. The mistake is letting the old man decide how to fix it — through control, volume, withdrawal, manipulation, old accusations, and the need to have the last word — until anger, bitterness, pride, and the need to win are running the marriage instead of Christ. Over time those strategies harden into private rules — “I don’t ask for help,” “I don’t bring it up if I know it will cause an argument,” “I don’t admit I’m wrong until they admit they’re wrong” — and because they genuinely work at keeping pain out, we almost never put them up for review. That is exactly where the danger hides: the rules that protect “me” also prevent “us.”

“But you have not so learned Christ” (Ephesians 4:20). Christ does not offer the old man better fighting techniques. He offers a new man, renewed in the spirit of the mind and created according to God in true righteousness and holiness. From Ephesians 4:25 through the opening of chapter 6, Paul lays out what that actually looks like when a disagreement starts, and this class turns it into eight rules of engagement: talk honestly about how you learned to fight, surrender before you ever begin, keep the fight to just the two of you, fight about one thing at a time, refuse to cause permanent harm, keep loving the person you are disagreeing with, let conflict expose your own heart instead of only your spouse’s, and remember that if you are married, you have to fight — just not against each other. The goal was never to win the argument. It is to protect the one-flesh covenant God Himself established.

Group Discussion Questions

- Where did you learn how to fight, and how much of that training do you think is still running the show in your marriage?
- Paul describes the old man as futile in thinking, darkened in understanding, and eventually “past feeling.” Where have you seen that kind of numbness show up in your own reactions during conflict?
- Like the narrator in *Fight Club*, have you ever tried to fix what was wrong in your marriage by becoming a harder, more controlling version of yourself? What did that “solution” eventually cost you?
- What rule have you created to protect yourself — “I don’t ask for help,” “I don’t get my hopes up,” “I don’t apologize first” — and when did you decide you needed it?

- Sometimes the rules that protect “me” also prevent “us.” Which of your rules is your spouse running into most often, and what would it cost you to lay it down?
- “You have not so learned Christ.” What would change in your next disagreement if the new man, not the old man, showed up first?
- Of the eight rules of engagement, which one exposes the pattern you most need to change?
- Rule 4 says only two people belong in a fight. Who have you been recruiting to your side, and what would it look like to talk to your spouse instead of about them?
- Rule 6 puts certain words permanently off limits because you know your spouse’s deepest vulnerabilities. Have you ever used that knowledge as a weapon instead of a trust?
- Ephesians 6:12 reminds us we do not wrestle against flesh and blood. Are you currently fighting against your spouse, or fighting together with them against what is actually attacking your marriage?

Closing Challenge

- Name your training. Write down where you actually learned to fight — your family, a past relationship, your personality, or what has simply worked before — and talk about it honestly with your spouse this week.
- Name the rule. Write down one rule you created to protect yourself, tell your spouse what it is and where it came from, and ask them honestly what it has cost the two of you.
- Surrender before the next fight. Before your next disagreement even starts, tell God out loud that you are giving Him control of the outcome instead of insisting on it yourself.
- Keep it to two. The next time you are tempted to vent to a parent, friend, or coworker about a conflict with your spouse, take it to your spouse, or to godly counsel, instead.
- Retire one weapon. Identify one thing you know about your spouse’s insecurities or history that you have used, or been tempted to use, as ammunition, and commit never to use it again.
- Fight together this week. Name one thing that is actually attacking your marriage right now — stress, an old wound, a besetting sin, an outside pressure — and choose one concrete step you will take as a team against it, rather than against each other.

Personal Action Steps

- Read Ephesians 4:17–24 slowly and ask God to show you exactly what your personal “old man” looks like in conflict.
- Make an honest list of everyone and everything that taught you how to fight before you ever met your spouse.
- List the private rules you made to keep from being hurt again, then ask God to show you which ones protect “me” at the expense of “us.”
- Read Ephesians 4:25–32 as if it were written specifically as a rulebook for your marriage, and identify the single command you break most often.
- Memorize Ephesians 4:26–27 and pray it the next time you feel your temper rising.
- Ask yourself before your next disagreement: “Am I trying to resolve this in love, or am I trying to be right?”
- Identify one thing conflict tends to expose in you — pride, fear, control, or insecurity — and bring it into the light with God before you bring it to your spouse.

- Read Ephesians 5:22–33 and ask what it would mean, practically, to remember you are one flesh the next time you want to “win.”

Memory Verse

“Be angry, and do not sin: do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil.” – Ephesians 4:26–27 (NKJV)

Main Themes

Theme 1: Who Taught You to Fight? — The Old Man (Ephesians 4:17–19)

In life, how do we typically learn how to respond to disagreement or conflict? Most of us can trace it back without much trouble: our parents and childhood homes, past relationships, hurt and trauma, culture, friends, movies and media, our own personalities, our own desires, and simply whatever has worked for us before. Notice what is missing from that list. God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the Bible rarely show up as the source of our fighting instincts. That is the point. We do not enter marriage as blank slates who need to learn conflict resolution from scratch. We enter marriage already knowing how to fight, trained by a version of ourselves Paul calls the “old man.” In Ephesians 4:17–19 he describes that old man plainly: futile in thinking, darkened in understanding, alienated from the life of God, hardened in heart, and eventually so past feeling that we become numb to things that should bother us. Since the old man is all of these things, a logical problem follows: how can he possibly be trusted to create a lasting solution to any issue, let alone the ones closest to home?

Personal Reflection

- Where did you learn to fight — parents, past relationships, culture, media, personality, or what has simply worked before?
- Did God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, or the Bible make your list? What does that tell you?
- When disagreement starts in your marriage, who are you actually allowing to show up to the fight?

Theme 2: Fight Club — Our Rules and a Broken Way to Fix What Is Wrong

Before the movie ever comes up, this lesson asks a more personal question: what rule have you created to protect yourself that might actually be hurting your marriage? Most of us have at least one, and most of them were written after we got hurt. “I don’t ask for help — I just do it myself.” “I don’t bring it up if I know it will cause an argument.” “I don’t apologize first.” “I don’t let people see me hurt or cry.” “If someone raises their voice, I shut down or walk away.” “I don’t get my hopes up, so I won’t be disappointed.” “I don’t admit I’m wrong until they admit they’re wrong.” “If you hurt me, I pull away so you can’t hurt me again.” “I keep things to myself because it’s easier than explaining how I feel.” “I make sure I can take care of myself so I don’t have to depend on anyone else.” Every one of those rules was created to keep something painful from happening again, and every one of them works — which is precisely why we keep them and rarely question them.

At the beginning of the film *Fight Club*, the unnamed narrator is trapped in a life that isn’t working. He has a job and possessions, but he is miserable, disconnected, unable to sleep, and searching for something that will make him feel alive. Then Tyler Durden appears, confident, fearless, aggressive, and unconcerned with possessions or expectations, and together they start a “fight club” to try to control the world around them. For a while it feels like it is working, until what he created to regain control becomes destructive and takes control of him instead. Marriage conflict starts the same way,

because something is genuinely wrong: “I don’t feel heard.” “We aren’t communicating.” “We disagree about money.” “I feel disrespected.” Recognizing that is not the mistake. The mistake is what happens next, when the old man decides he is going to fix it himself: take control, raise your voice, make your case, interrupt, withdraw, manipulate, remind your spouse of what they’ve done before, make sure they understand how wrong they are, get the last word, fight. The very things we use to regain control eventually begin to control us — anger, bitterness, pride, a need to win — until we become so “past feeling” that we don’t even recognize what it’s doing anymore. We simply tell ourselves, “that’s just how we fight.” When we reject God’s way and fight in our own strength, we hand the enemy an opportunity to use our anger, our pride, and our broken patterns to create division. And underneath all of it sits the quiet problem with every rule we ever wrote to keep ourselves safe: we create rules to protect ourselves, but sometimes the rules that protect “me” also prevent “us.”

Personal Reflection

- What rule did you create to protect yourself, and what happened that made you decide you needed it?
- Is that rule protecting “me” at the expense of “us”? What has it cost your spouse to live with it?
- Which “old man” strategy do you reach for first when a disagreement starts — control, raised voice, interrupting, withdrawal, manipulation, old accusations, or the last word?
- What has your “fight club” solution actually cost you or your marriage over time?
- Have you ever caught yourself saying “that’s just how we fight”? What is that phrase actually excusing?

Theme 3: But You Have Not So Learned Christ — The New Man (Ephesians 4:20–24)

“But you have not so learned Christ” (Ephesians 4:20). The Greek word behind “learned,” *manthanō*, means to learn, come to understand, or be instructed — that old way of living isn’t what you learned when you came to know Christ. He introduced an entirely different way of being human. The answer was never Old Man → learn better fighting techniques → improved Old Man. It is Old Man → Christ → renewed mind → New Man. We learned in the Faith to Love class that knowledge alone doesn’t automatically produce changed behavior; truth must govern our responses through self-control and spiritual growth. Paul says the new man is “created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness” (v. 24), and “walk” (*peripateō*), a word that runs throughout Ephesians, points to a habitual way of life, not an occasional mistake. Your identity fundamentally changes because you now belong to Christ. Two of the eight rules of engagement grow directly out of this: Rule 1, talk about Spiritual Fight Club — ask yourself who is showing up to the fight, the old man or the new man, and honestly discuss how you learned to fight and what old patterns you’re still carrying, because your past may explain how you learned to fight, but it doesn’t have to determine how you fight now. Rule 2, actually talk about it — you cannot change a pattern you refuse to acknowledge. And Rule 3, surrender before you fight, because the fight has already been won — the new man doesn’t begin by taking control, he begins by surrendering to Christ: put off the old, be renewed, put on the new. You cannot fight God’s way while insisting on being in control.

Personal Reflection

- Instead of asking “how do I naturally fight,” ask “how should the person I am becoming in Christ respond?” What answer does that question give you?

- Are you willing to honestly talk with your spouse about how you fight and what needs to change, or do you hide behind “that’s just how I am”?
- Before your next disagreement, are you surrendering yourself to God, or are you trying to take control of your spouse and the outcome?

Theme 4: Do Not Grieve the Spirit (Ephesians 4:25–32)

This section of Ephesians almost reads like a Fight Fair rulebook. Paul addresses truth (“putting away lying”), anger (“be angry, and do not sin”), resolution (“do not let the sun go down on your wrath”), opportunity (“nor give place to the devil”), and words (speak only what builds up and “imparts grace”) — all so that we do not grieve the Holy Spirit. He names the destructive behaviors plainly: bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, evil speaking, and malice, and asks us, in effect, what weapons we are bringing into the fight. He names the replacements just as plainly: kindness, tenderheartedness, forgiveness. That is probably the heart of fighting fair, and it produces three more rules. Rule 4, just two people to a fight — keep the disagreement between the people actually in it, and don’t recruit parents, friends, children, coworkers, or social media to build an army when God is calling the two of you toward unity; seeking godly counsel is not the same thing as recruiting allies. Rule 5, one fight at a time — fight about what’s happening now, not everything that has ever happened, because unresolved anger accumulates until today’s disagreement about the dishes suddenly includes three months ago, in-laws, money, the kids, and “you always...”; if something has truly been forgiven, don’t keep bringing it back as ammunition, and if it hasn’t, it deserves its own conversation. Rule 6, fight without causing permanent harm — knowing your spouse intimately means knowing their weaknesses, fears, and wounds, and that knowledge can make you a safe place or hand you a collection of powerful weapons; fighting fair means those weapons stay off limits: no threatening divorce to create fear, no attacking character instead of behavior, no mocking or humiliating, no weaponizing what was shared in confidence, no contempt, no saying something simply because you know it will hurt. There is a huge difference between “I need you to understand how much this hurt me” and “you hurt me, so now I’m going to hurt you” — the first seeks understanding, the second seeks retaliation. The goal of the fight is to resolve what’s hurting the marriage, not to hurt your spouse enough to win it.

Personal Reflection

- Which item from Paul’s list — bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, evil speaking, or malice — is the weapon you reach for most often?
- Are you talking to your spouse about the problem, or talking about your spouse to everyone else?
- Is there a word, threat, or old wound you have used as ammunition that needs to be permanently retired from every future disagreement?

Theme 5: Walk in Love (Ephesians 5:1–7)

Paul’s standard for a disagreement becomes Christ Himself: “walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us.” That is covenant language, the same kind this class series has built on from the beginning. During disagreement, the question isn’t merely “am I right?” It’s “am I loving my spouse like Christ while I’m trying to resolve what’s wrong?” Rule 7 follows directly: fights don’t have to be long, or even have to start. You can be factually correct and still behave completely contrary to love, and love, not victory, is what fighting fair is actually protecting.

Personal Reflection

- In your last disagreement, were you more focused on being right or on loving well?
- What would it look like to let a disagreement end, or never start, simply because love mattered more than winning?
- Where have you been factually correct but relationally unloving?

Theme 6: Walk in Light (Ephesians 5:8–14)

Paul contrasts darkness and light and tells us to “walk as children of light.” Conflict has a way of exposing things we’d rather hide: pride, selfishness, fear, control, insecurity, resentment, the need to be right. Rather than hiding, denying, blaming, or defending those things, bring them into the light. This connects directly back to Words Matter: what comes out of us during an argument may reveal something deeper already stored in the heart. Conflict doesn’t just reveal what’s wrong between a husband and wife. Sometimes it reveals what’s wrong within one of them.

Personal Reflection

- Look back honestly at Rules 1–7. What has recent conflict exposed in you — pride, fear, control, insecurity, resentment, or the need to be right?
- Where have you been hiding, denying, blaming, or defending instead of bringing something into the light?
- What might change if you treated conflict as a light on your own heart instead of only a spotlight on your spouse’s?

Theme 7: Walk in Wisdom (Ephesians 5:15–21)

Paul tells us to “walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise” and to “understand what the will of the Lord is.” For fighting fair, that means not every thought needs to be spoken, not every issue needs to be addressed immediately, not every disagreement deserves the same intensity, and not everything worth discussing is worth fighting over. Wisdom simply asks, before you speak or react, “what is the wise response here?” And then verse 21 provides the transition directly into marriage: “submitting to one another in the fear of God.”

Personal Reflection

- Which of your recent conflicts was actually worth the intensity you gave it, and which one wasn’t?
- What is one thing you’ve said recently that wisdom would have kept quiet?
- What would it look like this week to ask “what’s the wise response?” before you react?

Theme 8: One Flesh — Marriage (Ephesians 5:22–33)

Who is this person you are actually fighting with? Paul’s answer is important: they aren’t just another person, you are one flesh. The entire progression of Ephesians lands here, at home. Paul has already told believers to put off the old man, control their anger, guard their words, reject bitterness, forgive, walk in love, walk in light, and walk in wisdom, submitting to one another — and only then does he talk about marriage. We sometimes jump straight to “wives submit” and “husbands love,” but Paul has spent the preceding passage describing the kind of people husbands and wives are supposed to be becoming in Christ first. Then comes the one-flesh principle: “he who loves his wife loves himself” (v. 28). If I defeat you, who exactly did I beat? If we are one flesh, there is something almost absurd about trying to destroy my spouse’s position so I can declare myself the winner.

Personal Reflection

- If you “won” your last argument, what did you actually gain, given that you and your spouse are one flesh?
- How would remembering “he who loves his wife loves himself” change the way you argue?
- What would it look like to fight for your spouse’s position instead of against it?

Theme 9: Spiritual Fight Club — You Have to Fight (Ephesians 6:12)

Rule 8 is the one that ties everything together: if you are married, you have to fight — you just need to make sure you are fighting the right enemy. You have to fight the old man. You have to fight against bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, evil speaking, and malice. You have to fight to walk in love when your feelings don’t want to. You have to fight to bring things into the light instead of hiding them. You have to fight to choose wisdom instead of reaction. And you have to fight to protect the one-flesh covenant God created. “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood...” (Ephesians 6:12). Your spouse is flesh and blood. You’ve got a fight, you just have to make sure you’re fighting the right one. Your spouse isn’t the enemy. Stop fighting against each other and start fighting together for your marriage.

Personal Reflection

- What are you actually fighting against right now — your spouse, or something trying to work against your marriage?
- Which of the six fights in Rule 8 — the old man, the destructive behaviors, walking in love, walking in light, walking in wisdom, or protecting the covenant — do you most need to enter this week?
- What would it look like this week to fight together instead of against each other?

The Big Idea

Fighting fair does not mean avoiding conflict or pretending that disagreement is proof something is broken. Every marriage has disagreements; the question this class asks is who shows up when they happen. Left to yourself, the old man shows up — trained by your family, your history, your culture, and your own instincts — and he is futile in thinking, darkened in understanding, and eventually numb to what should bother him. He cannot produce a lasting solution to anything, and every attempt to fix your marriage in his strength, through control, volume, withdrawal, manipulation, old accusations, or the last word, eventually becomes its own kind of fight club, controlling you instead of the other way around. The private rules work the same way. We write them to keep from being hurt again, they do exactly what we built them to do, and then one day we notice they are also keeping out the one person we promised to be one flesh with. The rules that protect “me” also prevent “us.”

Christ does not offer the old man better technique. He offers a new man, renewed in the spirit of the mind, created according to God in true righteousness and holiness. That new man puts away lying, controls his anger, guards his words, and refuses to grieve the Holy Spirit. He keeps the fight to two people, one issue at a time, and every off-limits weapon stays off limits. He keeps loving even while resolving what’s wrong, lets conflict expose his own heart before it exposes anyone else’s, and asks what is wise rather than simply reacting. And he remembers, every time, that the person across from him is not another person to defeat but one flesh to protect.

If Paul were speaking in today’s language, it might sound something like this:

“Stop being who your past trained you to be. That old way of fighting isn’t what you signed up for when you came to know Christ. Let Him renew how you think, and put on who you actually are now. Tell the

truth instead of building a case. Get angry if you need to, but don't let it turn into sin, and don't let it sit overnight. Don't hand the enemy an opening. Watch your words — say only what builds the other person up. Don't grieve God's Spirit by holding onto bitterness, rage, or contempt. Be kind instead. Be tenderhearted. Forgive the way you've been forgiven. Keep it between the two of you. Fight about today, not the last ten years. Never say what you know will wound and can't be unsaid. Keep loving, even in the middle of the argument. Let the fight show you your own heart before it shows you theirs. Choose wisdom over reaction. And remember — you're one flesh. You were never each other's enemy."

Fighting fair happens when:

- You stop assuming you already know how to fight and let Christ retrain you instead of your past.
- You recognize the old man's strategies — control, volume, withdrawal, manipulation, the last word — for what they are.
- You name the private rules you wrote to protect yourself, and lay down the ones that protect "me" at the cost of "us."
- You surrender to Christ before the disagreement even starts, instead of insisting on controlling it yourself.
- You keep every disagreement between the two people actually in it.
- You fight about what's happening now, not everything that has ever happened.
- You retire every weapon that could cause permanent harm, no matter how effective it feels in the moment.
- You keep loving your spouse even in the middle of resolving what's wrong.
- You let conflict expose your own heart before you point at anyone else's.
- You choose wisdom over reaction, and unity over winning.
- You remember you are one flesh, and you fight together instead of against each other.

Fight Fair: Rules of Engagement