



The Orange Series
Part 2 – Fight for the Heart
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Last year at this time, my wife and I became empty nesters. Are any of you empty nesters? It happens really, really fast. I have to tell you... You wonder what it's really going to be like and so far, the first twelve months have been awesome, amazing; they've been really good. It's like #datenighteverynight. It's incredible. There are no babysitters, no kids, no worries. Actually my youngest son has been home for the summer and it's been just great to see him again as a young man and hang out. He goes back to Halifax, Nova Scotia, near Toronto where we live.

So, yeah, we're empty nesters. It goes fast and that's sort of the point of this series. In this little jar, we have 52 marbles. That sort of represents each Sunday for a year. One of the things we often encourage people to do at Orange, which is who I partner with, and here at Woodland Hills is we just encourage people to think about this visually. You need to take a marble out every single weekend and every marble represents a week of the time that you have left with your children. As you saw last week, that means from the time your child is born until the time they go off to college or into life is about 936 marbles.

I promise you it flies by. I'm not very good at math. My kids are good at math, but I'm not very good at math. I just assumed by the time my kids left home, I would be like 85 years old and almost done... like it's time to go to heaven. I never tallied up that I would still actually have life ahead of me and that there would be all these years ahead of me where I would have to build relationships with them as adults.

I think parenting is tough in every phase. It's got its challenges when your kids are 19 and 23. My wife, Toni and I have been married for 25 years this year and we have a 23 year old son and a 19 year old son. We've been incredibly blessed that way. But I'll tell you parenting is challenging in whatever phase you happen to be in. I've been through a few. There are always moments when you just get caught off guard as a parent.

I remember that one of the times where I just got completely overwhelmed by parenting was when my oldest son was about five years old. We were just driving around. He was in kindergarten and I must have had the radio on in the background or something like that because I don't know what prompted him to say what he said to me that day. We were having an everyday conversation just about life and school and what's for dinner. He's sitting in the back seat in his car seat. He's got that booster seat because he's still not even big enough to be in a seatbelt on his own. He says to me through the rearview mirror "Hey Dad, what is sex?"

I'm a lawyer and I'm also a pastor; I'm not usually at a loss for words, but I completely froze in that moment. I knew this conversation was coming, but I thought he would be like 30 or 40 when he asked me. I did not expect it when he was five years old. There was nothing to really prompt that conversation so I didn't even know where it came from. So I paused. I was at a loss for words. I stopped for about 30 seconds, I thought about it, and then I looked in the rearview mirror, looked him right in the eye and said "Son, I don't know." In case you are wondering, I do know. I actually do know what sex is, in case some of you want to come forward afterward to talk with me about it.

I didn't know what to say and parenting is like that, isn't it? You take classes on how to physically have a baby and what's involved in all that, but nobody really prepares you to be a parent and it's full of surprises. There is an awful lot at stake because this goes really, really fast, as I learned last year. You blink and you miss it. You are all at different phases right now. Some of you are where I am or maybe your kids have been gone for 10, 20, 30 years. If you're young, you think they will never, ever leave. No, they will; they'll go. What do you do in the meantime?

Today, I want to talk about fighting. I think every family fights. What I really want to encourage you to do today is before the sun goes down, have a fight in your family. Do you think you can do that? Some of you are like "Already done, man. Already done on the way into the parking lot, we fought about lunch." So you can go home now; you've already had your fight. The reality is simply this. All of us have fights.

Every family fights. But I want to talk about *how* we fight. The question is not whether we fight; the question is *how* we fight. Every single family fights. If you are newlyweds, if you're dating, if you're on your fifth date and you're not even sure you're going to be a family, you've probably already had a fight. If your child is three months old, you've already been angry at him because he doesn't stop crying. Fighting is just a very natural part of life. So the question isn't whether we fight and I think probably romantically you think *Oh, when I find the right person, we will never ever fight* and that goes down the toilet pretty quickly because you fight. Every single family fights and we keep fighting.

What I want to focus on is how to fight. There are different ways to fight. We are actually going to learn from Jesus today because I think he showed us a very different way to fight. There are different things that cause tension in a family; one would be style of parenting. I think there are two basic approaches to parenting. One you might call the "rules" approach to parenting and the other would be the "relational" approach to parenting. I think there are rules parents and relationship parents. Another way to say it is there are truth parents and there are grace parents.

It kind of goes like this: Let's say the issue is curfew is 10:00 tonight. A rules parent approaches it this way. "It's 10:00; not 10:01, not 10:10, not 10:00 eastern time. I mean you better be home, in the door, not in the driveway, at 10:00." How many of you would say you're that kind of parent?

Other parents are kind of relational. They're like "Well we said 10:00, but you know 10:00ish is fine." Then your daughter gets home a little bit after 10:00 and you're worried and you think maybe her car broke down and you hope she's going to be okay. "Well we don't really have to be sticklers about this."

And then she walks in the door and you're like "Oh, I'm so glad you're okay; let's just have hot chocolate." How many of you are that kind of parent?

Some of you are no kind of parent. You're not playing and that's okay. Do you know what's really interesting? Did you ever notice that rules people marry relationship people? It creates all kinds of conflict because you're like "Well I think it's 10:00" and then your spouse is like "Don't worry; lay off. You're going to turn them off and they won't be our friends." How do you handle that?

Fortunately for us, Jesus is actually going to decide this for us. The scripture actually talks about it. Today, you are going to be really glad you came to church because you are going to find out whether the rules parent wins or the relationship parent wins. We are going to look at a passage from Matthew 22. We are going to see Jesus speaking to a group of religious people and learning how to fight. He actually teaches us how to fight. It's interesting because they are picking a fight with him.

34 Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. 35 One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question... So a little bit of background. It's really important to get the background to this. So the Pharisees and the Sadducees were kind of two denominations of Judaism in Jesus' day. The Pharisees had actually codified the entire Old Testament into 635 laws. Have you ever read through the entire Old Testament? It is hard work. Most people get shipwrecked in the middle of Leviticus. Have you ever been stuck there? It's like Genesis... "I'm going." Then comes Exodus and Leviticus and its "Where's that New Testament," right? They had done the whole thing – 635 laws.

We all know about the Ten Commandments, but if you actually read past Exodus 20, there are like three more chapters of commandments nobody ever talks about. Then you go through the Prophets and the Psalms and you wonder if there are commandments in there. Well, the Pharisees had that all figured out. And they said there are actually 635 commandments in the Old Testament. So they go up to Jesus with a trap, with a question. What they believed was all 635 commands were equally important. So it's a trick question. So they go to him with a question. He had already silenced the Sadducees. The Sadducees was another denomination that tried to trick Jesus. They go in with a question that seems a little bit innocuous, but there are questions that are not really innocuous, sort of like "Was somebody supposed to clean the car today." That's not really a question. They had a question like that for Jesus.

35 One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: So they had been conspiring. They are picking a fight and they say to Jesus... Now you know all the background, so it's a loaded question. They ask him this question. ***36 "Teacher..."*** So they are kind of acknowledging him as a teacher and he claims to be from God, so they'll give him that, maybe. ***"...which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"***

They are all equally important. You know there are 635, so listen to the brilliance of this question. "If you say one or two are more important than the others, then you agree with us and you're basically telling us that we're right. And if you say none is really important, then you are basically denying God and clearly you are not from God." They didn't like Jesus. They were actually the ones responsible, in large measure, for having him killed. So they are trying to nail him and they've got a great question.

“...which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” “You can’t answer that without making yourself look bad or us look great. So go ahead, Jesus, try to answer that question.”

37 *Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”* So Jesus actually does pull one of the commandments out and puts it above the others. Look at what he picks. This is the rules verses relationship thing. He picks love.

38 *“This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”* So Jesus is saying love God with everything inside you. Love him with your heart. Love him with your mind. Love him with your soul. Love him with your strength. And love your neighbor in the same way you love yourself. Basically, Jesus is saying love is the greatest thing which would cause all the relationship people to say “See, I told you,” except you would never say that because you are relationship person. A truth person would say that. “See, I told you I was right.” A relationship person would never say that, but you will die knowing you were correct. Is that good satisfaction for you?

He’s saying it’s really about love. He’s saying “Do you want to know what this thing with God is really all about? It’s not a whole bunch of laws and rules. It’s about love.” But then he surprises everybody. **40** *“All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”* He’s not throwing out the 635 laws. So what does that mean? Is it rules or relationship? Grace or truth? Jesus is saying it’s both. Somehow what we separate, God fuses.

Remember in John 1 it says Jesus came full of grace and truth. You can’t separate them. You know what your kids need and you know what your family needs and you know what your relationship needs. It needs grace and truth. Grace without truth isn’t grace and truth without grace isn’t truth. If you think about it, the rules people... If there is no love in what you say, rules are just cruel. And some of you grew up with that conception of God. It’s like “I’ll never measure up.” You shouldn’t do this and you should do that. “I did that so I guess I just don’t measure up and I guess I really don’t belong and I guess God really can’t love me. I always feel so judged around religious people.” That is truth without grace. That is rules without relationship.

By the same token, relationship or grace without rules is meaningless. People like that are just all about love. You let people hurt themselves because you don’t have any boundaries. It’s like saying to your five year old “It doesn’t matter whether you put your hand on the stove or not when it’s hot.” It absolutely matters if you put your hand on the stove. In fact, if you love them, you’ll stop them from doing that. Jesus is saying it’s not rules or relationship; it’s both. It’s not truth or grace; it’s both. The law and the commandments are based on these two commandments about love. So it’s not either or; it’s both and.

Do you know what Jesus is doing in addition to settling that debate? He’s actually showing us a new way to fight. Remember, the Pharisees were picking a fight and they said to Jesus, “Hey, we’re just going to fight you and we’ve got the question that you can’t answer right.” They are fighting him, but he decides to fight very differently. First of all, he answers brilliantly, but we know by reading the rest of the story that he’s actually fighting the Pharisees, but he’s fighting in a very different way.

They are fighting with him... We know from Luke 23 and the rest of the gospels that Jesus isn't fighting with them; he's doing something far more profound. He's fighting for them.

In Luke 23, it records Jesus being nailed to the cross and as he's being nailed to the cross and his accusers are before him – not just the Roman soldiers, but the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the religious leaders – and they are nailing him to the cross. Do you remember what Jesus said as he looked at the Pharisees and as he looked at these people who were in the process of killing him? He said "Father, forgive them because they don't know what they are doing." While they were fighting with Jesus, he was fighting for them. There's a huge difference between fighting with somebody and fighting for somebody.

If I'm going to pick on Ted... And I don't know why on earth I would have a fight with Ted, but if I was going to have a fight with Ted, this is how fighting with works. If I'm going to pick a fight with Ted, I need to win and Ted needs to lose. That's how every fight works; it's a zero sum game. If you actually watch a physical fight like a boxing match, somebody has to win and somebody has to lose. And when you're fighting with your spouse, when you're fighting with your kids, when you're fighting with your parents, when you're fighting with a friend, you need to win, they need to lose. "I'm right and you're wrong." That's how you fight with somebody.

Jesus says "That's how you guys fight because that's the only way you've known how to fight. I'm going to show you a brand new way. I'm not going to fight with you; I'm going to fight for you." So if I fight for Ted, how is that different? Look at what shifts. If I'm fighting for Ted, suddenly I don't want me to win; I want him to win. I want him to win so badly, I might even sacrifice my ego, I might sacrifice my pride, I might even sacrifice some of myself. I might even ultimately sacrifice my life so that he wins.

That's what Jesus did. He fought for you and he fought for you so passionately that he surrendered his life so that you could have life. So the fight I want you to have with your family today is to start fighting for each other, not with each other. There is a world of difference between the two. That's hard because our world only knows... My goodness, elections are coming up. All people do on media is fight with each other, but we have a savior who fights for us.

We as Christians are called to fight for each other. Can you imagine a church, a community, a world in which you fight for your spouse, in which you fight for your marriage, in which parents are fighting for their children, fathers are fighting for a relationships with their daughters, mothers are fighting for a relationship with their sons, parents are fighting for a relationship with each other as spouses, adult children are fighting for a relationship with their now senior citizen parents? Can you imagine a world in which we fight for each other and not with each other?

One of the reasons that so difficult and so foreign is that for a lot of us, we never had anybody fight for us. You'll walk out of here going "I wish my dad had fought for me. He just fought with me. In fact, he's still fighting with me." Now you actually have somebody who fights for you and that's your heavenly Father. He fights for you because he loves you.

It says in the Book of Hebrews that Jesus is actually interceding before God right now for you on your behalf. He is fighting for you. So he calls us to fight for each other. This is important and I want to show you why it's so important. This jar of marbles is a journey and it's a journey that moves quicker than you think. Ask anybody who has kids in their late teen years or early 20s or beyond that. It flies by.

And you as a parent, even as a brand new parent... How many of you have very young kids? You're on a journey and here's the journey you're on. You're on a journey from control to influence. As a parent, you start out when this jar of marbles is full with absolute control. How many of you are parenting pre-schoolers right now? I have a message for you. I have news for you. This is the most control over your children you will ever have. You probably feel like you have no control over your toddler right now. I promise you they don't do anything without you. You spend a lot of time with your kids and you have total control with your kids.

As they get older, as this jar gets emptier, you have less and less control. By the time your daughter is eight, she tells you she wants to go hang out at her friend's house. Eventually, your daughter or son asks to go for a sleepover and there needs to be boundaries around that, but eventually you let them go. Then they move into the middle school years and they want to hang out with their friends a little bit more than they want to hang out with you. Then they eventually get a driver's license and then ultimately they move out somewhere between 18 and the early 20s. You ship them out into school or into life.

The goal of parenting is not to have 40 year olds living in your basement playing video games, true? If you're a 40 year old, living in your parents' basement, playing video games, I have news for you: It is time to move out. Your parents were texting me this morning. We're not raising children; we're raising adults. It's actually a God-given journey. The goal is to launch them out into life, filled with character, faith, and hope. And we pray Christ; that's the goal.

So you might think you have total control and when your kids are young and you kind of do, but it's gradually a journey where you move from control to influence. By the time you get to my stage, I promise you, all you have left is influence. I have a little tiny bit of financial control right now, but my oldest son goes off the family payroll at Christmas. He's done at school.

So how does it work? I assume you want to be an influence in your child's life throughout their lives. This is why how we fight is so important. I believe that as your child gets older... You end up listening most to the people you love the most. We listen most to those we love the most. That's how influence works. It works relationally. So if you want to have some measure of influence in your child's life, you need to have a great relationship with your son or daughter. What you need to do in order to have that relationship is you have to start when they are very little, building a relationship with your son or daughter. I think one of the keys to whether you have influence or the kind of influence you have in your child's life when they get older all depends on how you fight as a family.

If you're not sure what this means, I just want to encourage you to ask yourself... We are all adults here. You're either teenagers or adults, but we are all moving toward adulthood or we are adults. If you want to see if this is true, ask yourself this question: How much time have you budgeted in your calendar in

the next seven days to spend with somebody you can't stand? Very little; almost none. Why? That's because your journey as an adult has been moving away – sometimes politely sometimes rapidly – from people you don't like and gathering around you a circle of people you admire, people you like. You listen most to the people you love most. So parents, if you want to have influence in your adult child's life, you need to build that relationship. When you fight with somebody, you lose influence. When you fight for somebody, you gain influence.

So how do you get influence? Here's one principle I think we can all relate to you. We need to communicate in a way that gives the relationship value. All you have left is relationship. Eventually, they do move out of the house and all you're left with is a relationship. So how does that work? Well, I think you need to communicate now, in the early days, in a way that gives the relationship value. That kind of sounds like a corporate mission statement. What I mean is how you deal with each other as a family, as father, daughter, mother, son, spouse is so crucial.

A few years ago, I was trying to figure out this phenomenon that I think is pretty universal. It's certainly the case around Toronto and I'm pretty sure it's the case in Branson, Missouri. It's something I really didn't have a name for, so I made up a name for it. I simply call it "family voice." It's a tone of voice that we all use in our family. Are you familiar with what I'm talking about? A family voice is a combination of a tone of irritation, aggravation, and frustration. Do you know what I mean? It's the tone of voice you only ever use with for your family. You know it's a family voice because if you ever spoke that way at work, they would fire you. And every once in a while... If you are in a mall or some public event or a play or something like that, listen for it. Every once in a while, people forget they are in public and you'll hear somebody's family voice break out. It's really irritating and people just kind of look at them. It's frustrating. If you don't think you have a family voice, ask your kids and they will imitate you. They are good at it.

Do you have family voice in your family? Everybody does. I don't know why, but family voice... Why do we treat each other that way? Somebody asked me a few years ago "How do you overcome family voice?" I was kind of stumped because I have a family voice and everybody in my family has a family voice that we use exclusively on each other. I thought *how do we actually get out of that?* It's a good question. So I came up with a solution. Treat each other like you are perfect strangers. If you think about it, the people you are the kindest too are the people you just met and you know the least.

Imagine going home and communicating in a way that gives the relationship value, eliminating family voice by treating the people you live with like perfect strangers. I know there are irritations and flash points. So imagine you ask your 10 year old to empty the dishwasher. Tomorrow morning rolls around and you're getting breakfast ready, trying to get the kids off to school, and you notice the dishwasher isn't empty. Instead of just communicating in family voice, imagine treating your 10 year old and everybody else in your house like you are perfect strangers. You go downstairs and you say "I see the dishwasher hasn't been emptied." And you 10 year old comes down and says "Oh, blessed father, I am so, sorry." Just imagine it. You are all so polite and kind to each other.

Husbands and wives, imagine you're on your first date and you want her to call you back. Just imagine treating her that way every day. Can you imagine? But we don't. That's part of fighting for your spouse, not just with your spouse.

Another thing you can do if you really want to increase the relationship in your family – to learn how to fight for each other and not with each other – is to increase the quantity of quality time you spend together. So much of life is just transactional. You have to coordinate all the activities, taking kids here and there and church, etc. That's family. But when do you just hang out. When do you become friends? When was the last time Mom and Dad... I know your kids are young and babysitting is expensive and family doesn't live nearby, but when was the last time you went on a date night? You used to like each other; remember that? You used to really enjoy spending time together. When was the last time you went away for a night without the kids? Invest in that kind of quality time. Invest in that.

When your kids are really young, when you have a lot of marbles left over in your jar and you haven't lost them yet... When you've got all those marbles, you spend an awful lot of time with your kids. If you don't, they take your children away, right? If you abandon your children when they are young, they eventually just take them away from you. So you've got a lot of time with your kids.

But when they get older, it gets more difficult. Then your daughter wants to go to her friend's house to play. Then in middle school, your kids have that instinct where they start to withdraw. They want you to take them to the mall, but they want you go around to the back because they don't want to be seen with you. In the teenage years, they get their driver's license and then you're like practiced empty nesters half the night. They withdraw... and it's a natural thing.

I think one of the best things you could do as a parent is increase the quantity of quality time you spend together. The biggest mistake parents make is when the kids withdraw, the parents withdraw. Watch what happens at the local school. When your daughter or son is in kindergarten and you go to parent/teacher night, you cannot get a parking spot. When they are a senior in high school, you have the entire parking lot to yourself for parent/teacher night. The only people there are the police and the juvenile delinquent people. All the parents have bailed. Your kids are withdrawing and some of that is God-given, but you want a relationship because you still want influence. So you have to fight for that relationship. You have to fight for that influence with your son or with your daughter.

All the research shows the relationship between a father and his daughter is particularly important. I've only raised two sons and I fought for my relationship with them at every stage, but, dads, I think it's really important to date your daughter. Your daughter isn't going to automatically say "Hey Dad, can we hang out?" Teenagers don't do that.

I think one of the best things you can do if you're parenting a pre-teen or a teen girl is you should go home today and say to your daughter "Hey, next Saturday, how about you and I go out for breakfast?"

The first thing she is going to say is "Why? What did I do wrong?" Just tell her you just want to go out for breakfast and she'll go "Why, Dad?"

You go "I don't know. We're just going to go for breakfast."

"No... Why, Dad?"

This is what you tell her "Listen, I don't know. I just heard this preacher and he said we should go for breakfast so get in the car; we're going for breakfast."

That's what you tell your daughter. Then go for breakfast and see what happens. The conversation might be awkward at first and you might not know what to say to her, but that's okay. Just let her talk. Enjoy the time together. Then say "Hey, next month, why don't we do that again?" If you don't think that's important, dads, I just encourage you to talk to any woman seated near you and ask her if she wishes her dad had done that for her. She will tell you yes. Fight for your family. Fight for your marriage. Fight for your relationships.

This isn't just on parents. I know there are a lot of teenagers here. Maybe you're thinking *my parents aren't going to fight for their relationship with me*. Fine, but you're here. Why don't you fight for your relationship with them? Why don't you say to your dad "Hey, how about we go golfing?" or "How about we have breakfast one day?" or "How about we watch a movie together?" Instead of fighting with your parents, why don't you fight for the relationship with your parents? Why don't you fight for them?

Some of you wish you had heard this message 30 years ago. Your kids have been moved out for 20 years. You know what? The reality is some of you don't talk to those kids. You haven't talked to your son or daughter for months, and for some of you, it has been years. Pick up the phone and call your daughter, call your son. And if you need to apologize, apologize and tell them they still matter. Tell them you still love them. Tell her she's worth fighting for. Tell them. You can do that and I can do that because we have a heavenly father who fights for us because he loves us. So today go have a family fight. Fight for each other, not with each other.

Father, I just pray for every family in Christ that's here. I want to pray for every family that was hanging on by a thread on the way in the door where fighting with has become the norm every day, day after day, year after year. Somebody in that family is thinking *I just can't take it anymore. I can't wait to be free of this*. Maybe freedom doesn't come from being away from the family. Maybe it comes from learning how to fight inside the family.

Father, I pray you would give us, as parents, as kids, the courage, the strength, and the determination to fight for each other. Our marriages are worth fighting for. Our daughters and sons are worth fighting for. Our parents are worth fighting for. So help us to fight for each other through every phase.

And Lord Jesus, thank you for fighting for us because when we were still sinners, Christ died for us. You fought for us when we nailed you to the cross because you want a love relationship with us and we thank you for that. I just pray that families would be healed and that eternities would be changed because of the fighting for a change today. In Jesus' name... Amen.