

Please take note of the insert in your worship flier. I'm especially hopeful that you'll use the outline today, not only for notes while you're here but as a guide for personal reflection and journaling this week. On the back is a daily guide to help you in your personal study of the Bible. Each day you get a verse and a few questions to help you better understand what you're reading. I encourage you to use these guides to continue the conversation at home.

Over the Thanksgiving holiday, we visited with Steve's mom and her husband, Joe. They live on about forty acres in Tyus, Georgia, near the Alabama line. At least once when we visit, Joe will ask us to walk the fence line with him. It's something farmers with livestock do a lot ... because your animals are only as safe as your fence is sturdy. So ... while we were walking the fence line at Thanksgiving, Joe told us about how ... earlier this year ... he got a guy to come out and do a controlled burn on his property. And ... I don't know ... walking that fence, listening to Joe talk about that project, I realized there were some pretty amazing spiritual principles in there ... about evaluating your life and assessing the weak places and figuring out how to make our lives healthier and more fruitful. So that's where I'd like to go today. I'd like to talk about three principles I picked up on the farm that might help us get in the right frame for starting the new year more productively.

First, walk your fence line and look for gaps. This is straight out of the Bible. We are encouraged to test ourselves ... to be fearless in looking for spiritual gaps and places where the enemy can get to us. Psalm 139:23-24 says (read this with me) - *Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. 24 See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.* Really ... This is about getting our motives right. When our motives are prideful (we want to win) or selfish (we want what we want) ... then God will step back and let us do our own thing. But when our motives are right ... our hearts are pure and

we're after the things God values ... then we can be confident He's in there with us. That we have his power and authority and blessing behind us. That's why David prayed - *Search me, God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts, and see if there is anything offensive in me.* Because he knew he couldn't know himself like God knew him ... and he knew if he was going to succeed, his motives had to be pure. And knowing God is full of grace and mercy, he had no fear about asking God to clean house. So ... if you're hoping to be more effective, more productive, more in tune with God's will next year ... then start with David's prayer. "Search me, O God, and know my heart."

This is why farmers walk their fence line. Not because they like finding problems or making work for themselves, but because they want a better farm. A weak fence is an open invitation to a predator. It's also an invitation for a horse or cow to go where they shouldn't go. We used to live in Kentucky, and Steve drove through a pretty rural stretch to get to work every day. Once he was on this little two-lane road when he came up on this huge pig, standing right in the middle of the road. Steve says this pig was as big as his car. The biggest black hog he'd ever seen. Big as a hippopotamus, standing in the middle of the road! Steve was worried that if it stayed there, a school bus might hit it and the bus would lose that fight. So he got around it and drove to the nearby country store to see if anyone knew anyone who lost a pig. As soon as the guy behind the counter heard what Steve had seen, he picked up the phone, dialed a number by memory and said, "Clem, your pig's in the road again."

Clearly, Clem needed a better fence. Good fences keep the things we value inside and the things that stalk us outside. Good fences reduce anxiety. I heard about a woman who spent most of a night chasing down her horses after a deer broke through her fence. The horses took that opportunity of a gap in the fence to see if the grass really *was* greener on the other side.

The fence, as it turns out, had been developing that gap for a while ... but it finally fell at 3 a.m. So she was out in the middle of the night chasing her horses in other pastures.

That's how it usually happens, isn't it? Always at the worst possible moment. I mentioned a couple of weeks ago that I've noticed that my car's "check engine light" seems to be connected to my checking account. The light will come on when I have the least money to fix it. Same with home repairs and illnesses ... and with my ability to deal with life in general. It seems like the worst things happen when I'm least able to handle them. No wonder God ... who knows us better than we know ourselves ... has encouraged us in scripture to walk the fence lines regularly ... to look for gaps. To be ruthless in shaking the posts and making sure the weak places get reinforcement. It's so we'll be ready when the fences get tested. Lamentations 3:40 says - *Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD.* Paul says it again in 2 Corinthians 13:5 - *Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves.* And he asks this question, which I really appreciate. He asks - *Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?* Paul comes right back to motives. He's challenging us to remember that unless our motives were in the wrong place when we committed to Christ, then we do have the power to overcome our weakness. We don't have anything to fear when we walk the fence lines. We may have have gaps, but we can fix those. We can begin again.

Are there places in your life where the fence has fallen down? If you took FPU, are you still practicing the principles that gave you freedom? If you made good decisions about unhealthy relationships, are you holding those lines? If you fell off in your attendance at Celebrate Recovery, is it time to get back at it? How about your prayer life? Your Bible study? Just for a

moment right now, I want to ask you to walk your fence line ... and on your insert, make a note of any places that might need attention.

Something else I learned while I was walking the fence line with Joe. We came to a big gap in the fence, and this gap was there on purpose. It was the thruway for the cows from one pasture to another. Joe has an agreement with the guy who owns the pasture next to his, so the cows are able to come and go freely between the two pastures. But on a farm, even planned gaps have limits. Joe pointed out a couple of issues with the gap we were looking at and he said he was going to have to tell the guy that if he didn't take care of those issues, then he would close the gap and the cows wouldn't be able to cross over any more. I immediately thought about the lessons some of us have learned this year from the book called *Boundaries* (I highly recommend it ... by Cloud and Townsend). We learned that good boundaries make healthy relationships. That good boundaries limit evil. That healthy boundaries set us free. Jesus died to set us free from sin, from the devil, from the world around us. And that is what good boundaries give us ... freedom from weakness, the enemy and the world. Too many gaps in your fence ... even planned gaps ... too many things coming and going from your life ... and the whole point of the fence is lost.

So ... what places in your fence need to be repaired ... to keep the predators out, to keep your values in, and to keep the anxiety low? Where have you allowed unhealthy gaps? Are there too many planned gaps ... too many commitments ... too much for you to do well?

While we were walking the fence, Joe pointed out a shallow ditch that ran along the fence line. He said it was a fire break. The farm is about twenty acres of pasture surrounded by about twenty acres of woods. The wooded area is mostly on the perimeter, near the fences. Joe

wanted to burn off the underbrush in the wooded section and he told us that before they started the fire, they had to build in a fire break ... which meant digging a shallow trench about five feet in from the fence all the way around the perimeter of the property. The point of the firebreak is to keep the fire from burning over onto the neighbor's property. What really struck me was seeing the firebreak not *on* the property line but a good five or six feet *inside* the property line. It struck me that if we're going to be respectful of the people around us, we've got to know our limits and live ... not at them ... but inside them. **Build a fire break – not just for you, but for them, too.**

Maybe this is what Paul meant when he taught the Galatians (Galatians 5:25-26) - *Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. 26 Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.* I hear Paul calling us to stay within healthy spiritual boundaries ... in step with the Spirit ... so we don't end up provoking people or becoming envious of what they have. James puts another spin on it, when he talks about the tongue. He says (James 3:2) - *We all stumble in many ways. Those who are never at fault in what they say* (in other words, those who have strong fences and a good firebreak) *are perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.* Then James goes on to say that the rest of us need to learn how to put controls in place so we don't get beyond our limits. And he talks especially about getting beyond our limits in how we talk to each other. He says (James 3:5) - ... *the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.*

When we get past our limits emotionally, we may end up blowing flames in the direction of people who don't deserve to be burned. That's why we need a sort of firebreak ... personal limits that keep us from letting our frustrations bleed onto other people. I think if James were writing to an audience today, he'd make a comment here about email. He would encourage us

to step back from negative emails and refuse to fire off kneejerk responses. What a great forest is set on fire by these sparks!

Take another moment to evaluate your life. What firebreaks do you need to dig inside your fence line? Do you need to set a personal policy for stepping back rather than jumping in when you get negative feedback? Do you need to evaluate your life to see where you've gotten beyond your limits ... and to re-establish new boundaries? Are there relationships that need repair because you've stepped across lines?

One last spiritual principle I learned from the farm: **Practice controlled burns.** After they dug the firebreak a few feet in from the fence line, they set the woods on fire. On purpose! The point was to clear out the underbrush, get rid of dead trees and limbs and stimulate seed germination. I love this idea. This is about getting rid of the stuff that seems harmless, but is actually sapping the life out of us. It's also about getting rid of the stuff we know is hurting us. Jesus said (Matthew 5:29-30) - *If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.* Jesus is talking here about a controlled burn. About getting rid of anything that might start a fire in your life or sap nutrients from the more important stuff. Paul said (Ephesians 4:31) - *Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.* Do a searching and fearless moral inventory and get rid of the sin in your life.

I think our tendency when we're talking about spiritual things is to think only in terms of our relationship to God or Jesus Christ. But the fact is, if our relationship to sin does not get

weaker, then our relationship to God can not get stronger. So, considering your relationship to the weaknesses in your life ... can you say you are further along spiritually than you were a year ago? If not, then what needs to be burned away so you can grow a healthier spiritual life in 2010?

This is where I want to leave you. I want to challenge you to walk your fence line and look for the gaps that need repair. I want to encourage you to dig a firebreak ... well inside your property line, not just for yourself, but for the people around you. And I want to ask you to do a controlled burn. Get rid of the underbrush and the dead wood. Prime your soil for new growth.

Take another moment to consider where you are, and where you'd like to be. Make a few notes. Be fearless. Let me get you started with this prayer: *Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. 24 See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*