

Building Fences

By Jason Moore

"I passed by the field of the sluggard, and by the vineyard of the man lacking sense; and behold, it was completely overgrown with thistles, its surface was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down . . ." (Proverbs 24:30-31).

I gained an appreciation for this proverb when brother Henry Horton hired me one summer to help fence some pasture land for his cattle. We cut trees and brush, removed an old fence row, sunk railroad ties for corner posts, drove metal posts, pulled barbed wire, and hung a gate. My shoulders grew numb heaving post hole diggers, hoisting a home-made fencepost driver and plunging a tamping tool up and down to secure each post. Building fences, I discovered, is hard work, not the work of sluggards.

I've since discovered that fence building is also a lost art. There are too few fences in our times and we are suffering the consequences of their absence. Society doesn't erect moral boundaries and casts stones at those who do. We build fences to protect our property, garages to store our vehicles, but we erect few barriers to protect our morality. What's more we've left our children, especially our teens, the most morally vulnerable members of our society, to roam freely without the benefit of protective restraints.

Teens too often have the freedoms of adults without the responsibilities. They wear what *they* want to wear, watch what *they* want to watch, work where and when *they* want to work, sit where *they* wish to sit in the assemblies, study what *they* decide to study in the bible classes, go to college where *they* choose to attend, participate in whatever extra-curriculars *they* like, and drive *themselves* to and from the places *they* wish to frequent. Society offers them a home on the range. Many parents are content, even proud, to abandon them in a land without fences.

It is a sad irony that we build fences for the lesser, but leave the greater to chance. Parents make their children, even their teens, eat their vegetables before desert, because children are more apt to be guided by their belly than their reason. We make education compulsory for our children, even our teens, because what child--what teen--would not rather play than learn? A parent compels his child, even his adolescent son, to wear his coat lest he go coatless and catch a cold. Most parents feel it necessary to build fences for their children and even administer discipline to secure in the way of diet, education, and health, the objects and ends that children would not choose for themselves. Yet in the area of their children's spiritual diet, moral education, and soul's welfare--the care of which is even less understood by a child--many parents leave it to their children to make their own decisions. We make them sit at the table, we make them sit at the desk, we make them put on the coat, but God forbid that we should make them lie down in green pastures.

There is no greater need to build fences for teens than in the area where society has done the most demolition--in their relations with the opposite sex. Once, I heard a farmer tell

another about a neighbor's daughter who had "jumped the fence." That was a euphemistic expression meaning that the young girl was pregnant. She had left the boundaries of her father's supervision and counsel and trespassed in a forbidden field. Fence jumping is all too common in our day. What's worse is that fences have become shorter, and for some teens there are no fences to jump, just wide open spaces. Young men and ladies are allowed to swim together, to dance together, to entertain one another in their bedrooms or home alone. Few rules govern and scarce supervision attends their apparel, their choice of friends and dates, their curfews and their selection of places and events to attend. Automobiles provide youths, bombarded from within and without by all sorts of sexual pressures, a world without fences. A young couple in a car is able in a matter of minutes to leap all the fences that protect their innocence and find a place of privacy in which to experiment with the new appetites and emotions they are experiencing. Are they ready for that kind of freedom?

The bodies of both infants and teens mature before their understanding. When an infant becomes a toddler we "child proof" the house, but when the same toddler becomes a teen we give him the car keys. We fence in the one with the body of a toddler and the mind of an infant, but we unbridle the one with the body of an adult and the mind of a child. We protect the curious toddler from his own appetites, but the equally curious teen who suddenly awakens with appetites of a new order and new intensity is left to grope and flounder on his own. We recognize that the infant has a new mobility, the hazards of which will remain beyond his comprehension for several months, even several years. *Is that any different for the teen?* His body also carries new potential, the hazards of which he cannot fully grasp. He, no less than the toddler, needs time to gain his balance and understand his boundaries, especially in a culture that says there are no fences.

A teen may have the cognitive skills, but not the life experience to appreciate even the physical and psychological, much less the *spiritual* hazards of his new capacities. The toddler has neither the skills nor the tools to build fences. But the teen has only begun to learn the art of fence building, and he has not the experience in building the new kind of fences that sexual desire and virility require. He knows not where to erect them, or how high, or how long. It remains the duty of his guardians to whom God has entrusted his training to build fences for him until he is able to build for himself and accept fully, without parental intervention, the consequences of escaping such defenses. Children who can jump the fence and know their parents will save them from falling, never learn to stop jumping.

Are the memories of adults so short that they forget how strong their own appetites were in their youth? Is parental pride so blind that it cannot see that one's own child suffers the same desires, the same thoughts, the same curiosities, the same shame, the same temptations that the parents themselves and all other victims of adolescence experience? Farmers know that you don't put the cow in the bull's pen until you want her to calve. Parents could learn a thing or two from the farm. Build fences for your kids. Build 'em high. Build 'em wide. Build 'em long. Build 'em strong. Above all, build 'em. Our kids deserve it.