

“Wet Paint”

Deuteronomy 4:1-9; Romans 7:4-13 ¹

Do you remember the last time you saw a “Wet Paint” sign? Do you remember how you responded to it? I suspect that most of us, upon seeing such a sign, feel a strange compulsion to touch the material in question, just to see if it really is wet, or if it still is wet. We may not actually touch it, but the desire is there, isn't it?

We respond in a similar way to many rules and requirements in life. We may not actually break or disobey them, but we want to! It might even be that income tax fraud has as much to do with getting away with breaking rules as it does with saving money; and the little thrill that comes from exceeding the speed limit probably has as much to do with breaking rules as with getting somewhere more quickly. As Robert Frost famously put it, “Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down!”²

Leann Birch, a developmental psychologist at Penn State University, ran an experiment in which she took a large group of kids and fed them a big lunch. Then she turned them loose in a room with lots of junk food.

“What we see is that some kids eat almost nothing,” she said. “But other kids really chow down, and one of the things that predicts how much they eat is the extent to which parents have restricted their access to high-fat, high-sugar food in the past: the more the kids have been restricted, the more they eat.” Birch's study also discovered one reason this happened: the children on restricted diets believed the junk food tasted good primarily because they had been told that junk food was bad for them!³

I like to call this response to rules and requirements “the Wet Paint Syndrome,” and our texts this morning showcase the problem. In our first text, Moses was beginning the first of three final addresses to Israel before they crossed over to invade the Promised Land: “*And now, Israel, listen carefully to these laws and regulations that I am about to teach you. Obey them so that you may live, so you may enter and occupy the land the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. Do not add to or subtract from these commands I am giving you from the LORD your God. Just obey them*” (Deuteronomy 4:1-2).

According to the Gospel writers, Jesus quoted Deuteronomy more than any other biblical book, and the most important theological point in the book is that God expects unqualified commitment and totally faithful obedience from His people. Nothing less is acceptable.⁴

It's important to notice that *God chose and redeemed Israel well before and apart from the giving of the Law*. In fact, the Hebrew word often translated “law” is better translated as “teaching” or “instruction.” That's really what “Torah” means. To say that another way, what we call Old Testament “Law” is not so much a set of restrictive rules as it is principles or guidance for living life as the people of God.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on July 7, 2019.

² From *The Poetry of Robert Frost* by Robert Frost, edited by Edward Connery Lathem. Copyright 1916, 1923, 1928, 1930, 1934, 1939, 1947, 1949, © 1969 by Holt Rinehart and Winston, Inc. Copyright 1936, 1942, 1944, 1945, 1947, 1948, 1951, 1953, 1954, © 1956, 1958, 1959, 1961, 1962 by Robert Frost. Copyright © 1962, 1967, 1970 by Leslie Frost Ballantine.

³ Malcolm Gladwell, “The Trouble with Fries: Fast Food is killing us. Can it be fixed?” *The New Yorker*, March 5, 2001.

⁴ Earl S. Kalland, “Deuteronomy,” *Expositor's Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament* (digital edition).

We need to remember that God's Instruction, as recorded in Deuteronomy and everywhere else in the Bible, was given for our benefit and protection, the same outcomes intended by the statutes enacted by our own legislatures. But wet paint is still wet paint, isn't it?

Some 1,500 years after Moses, the Apostle Paul was wrestling with such "wet paint" when he wrote these words in Romans 7: *So this is the point . . . The law is not sinful, but it was the law that showed me my sin. I would never have known that coveting is wrong if the law had not said, "Do not covet." But sin took advantage of this law and aroused all kinds of forbidden desires within me! If there were no law, sin would not have that power.*

I felt fine when I did not understand what the law demanded. But when I learned the truth, I realized I had broken the law and was a sinner, doomed to die. So the good law, which was supposed to show me the way of life, instead gave me the death penalty. Sin took advantage of the law and fooled me; it took the good law and used it to make me guilty of death (Romans 7:4-11).

Paul essentially told us that God's Law is like a "wet paint" sign: *I would never have known that coveting is wrong if the law had not said, "Do not covet." But sin took advantage of this law and aroused all kinds of forbidden desires within me! (Romans 7:7-8).*

As we think about this, **it's important for us to remember that temptation itself is not sin.** After all, the Bible tells us that Jesus *faced all of the same temptations we do, yet he did not sin* (Hebrews 4:15). We might even wonder whether, in the Garden of Eden before the Tempter visited Adam and Eve, God's Instruction even had a "wet paint" effect.

There's no suggestion in Genesis that Adam and Eve had any interest in the forbidden tree until Satan raised doubts about God's benevolence toward them: *"Really?" he asked the woman. "Did God really say you must not eat any of the fruit in the garden?"*

"Of course we may eat it," the woman told him. "It's only the fruit from the tree at the center of the garden that we are not allowed to eat. God says we must not eat it or even touch it, or we will die."

"You won't die!" the serpent hissed. "God knows that your eyes will be opened when you eat it. You will become just like God, knowing everything, both good and evil" (Genesis 3:1-5).

In any conflict, it is crucial to know all you can about your enemy, and it's helpful to know that from the Garden of Eden to this very moment, Satan's strategy has been remarkably uniform: he always goes for the "I's." That's the letter "I," not "eye."

Satan always attacks us by tempting us to do what we want to do rather than obeying God's instructions. Satan tries to convince us that "touching the wet paint" will be a lot of fun, that the forbidden fruit actually tastes really good, even when it's killing us.

However long ago that first temptation happened, Satan's methods haven't changed a bit. His two-step strategy continues to be: (1) create doubt about God; God's nature, and God's intentions; and (2), take God-given desires and twist them out of the boundaries God set for them. That's pretty much it.

Jesus told us that Satan *"was a murderer from the beginning. He has always hated the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, it is consistent with his character; for he is a liar and the father of lies"* (John 8:44). The function of a lie is obviously to deceive, and for temptation to be successful, Satan must first deceive us about God and about our desires. Satan does this by so shaping temptation that it causes us to focus on ourselves rather than on God. He "goes for the I's'."

Temptation frequently uses perfectly normal desires but twists them in terms of the manner or timing of their fulfillment. Temptation begins in the mind, with the rationalization that what we contemplate is either not really forbidden or that it isn't really as bad as God says it is. We do well to remember that when temptation confronts us and we begin to rationalize giving in to it, what's really happening is that Satan is trying to block God's grace-filled purposes in our lives, in the lives connected to ours, and in the cosmos as a whole.

While Satan does his best "wet paint" work when we're vulnerable, lonely, tired, sick, and discouraged, he also does "wet paint" work when we're successful, tempting us to violate God's law in order to congratulate ourselves on our success. One of Satan's favorite phrases is "you deserve it." This is a frequent appeal in advertising these days, but it's almost always a lie.

One of Satan's favorite strategies with church-going folk is to try to get us puffed up with thinking about all the bad things we don't do, distracting us from all the paint we've gotten all over ourselves in the colors of jealousy, envy, anger, bitterness, gossip, selfishness, arrogance, and indifference. This strategy is often quite successful, and it puts us in a situation rather like this:

It was a warm summer night, and Pastor Wimmer and his wife were driving along with three year-old Micah in the back seat. "After many miles of driving in the darkness," Pastor Wimmer wrote, "we came to a stop in a remote area. The brightness of the traffic light revealed all the dirt and dead bugs on our windshield, and Micah said, 'Look, how dirty!'

"My wife and I didn't think much about his comment until a moment later when we drove on—away from the light and back into the darkness. Upon reentering the darkness, we could no longer see the mess on our windshield, and Micah quickly piped up and said, 'Now the glass is clean!'

"Before the law came," pastor Wimmer reflected, "the dirt within us hid under the darkness. But when God gave the law, its light shined on the windshield of our hearts and revealed the filth of sin we'd collected on our journey. The law, then, is a light that shows us how sinful we really are. It cannot cleanse us or make us whole. But it does starkly highlight the true situation of our souls—and thus can lead us to Christ."⁵

The Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, wrote that "There are, in the end, only two ways open to us: to honestly and honorably make an admission of how far we are from the Christianity of the New Testament, or to perform skillful tricks to conceal the true situation."⁶

So how are we to resist the urge to touch the "wet paint" that presents itself to us in virtually unlimited shades of color, all silently inviting us to touch what God has told us not to touch? One way to think about this is to intentionally counteract Satan's two-step strategy.

The first thing we need to do—and we need to do it all day long every day—is to remember that God's Love, demonstrated in Jesus, proves to us that God's Law has not been given to fence us off from good things, but rather to save our earthly lives from shipwreck and our eternal lives for glory. *This is always true*, whether we see it or understand it in any given situation or not.

The second thing we can do, when Satan tries to get us to take our God-given desires out of the boundaries God has set for them, is to claim God's strategic promise in 1 Corinthians 10:13: *Remember that the temptations that come into your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will keep the temptation from becoming so strong that you*

⁵ William Wimmer, pastor of Grace Chapel Church of God, Benton, Arkansas.

⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, "What Madness," in *Provocations: The Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard* (Plough, 1999), p. 180.

can't stand up against it. **When you are tempted, he will show you a way out** so that you will not give in to it.

The way this works is that in any moment of temptation, almost in the same instant that we become aware of the "wet paint" sign, God also makes us aware of what we need to do to resist its allure. God provides an "off ramp" out of the temptation, an escape route that works best if we take it instantly, reflexively, as we might try to avoid an auto accident. In temptation, as well as on the road, delay sometimes means disaster.

But do you know what? No matter how wise we may become in avoiding "wet paint," the truth of the matter is that every single one of us is covered with paint at this very moment. And Kierkegaard was right: the only two options available to us are to honestly admit how much paint we have on us; or to try all kinds of tricks to conceal that paint.

Every one of us sits this morning with Paul as he cries out, "*No matter which way I turn, I can't make myself do right. I want to, but I can't. When I want to do good, I don't. And when I try not to do wrong, I do it anyway*" (Romans 7:18-19). What in the world are we to do?

Well I'm glad to say that there's some Good News here! The Bible tells us that *If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth. But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong* (1 John 1:8-9). Here's one description of how that works:

Marvelous grace of our loving Lord, grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt,
Yonder on Calvary's mount outpoured, there where the blood of the Lamb was spilt.

Dark is the stain that we cannot hide, what can avail to wash it away?
Look! There is flowing a crimson tide; whiter than snow you may be today.

Marvelous, infinite, matchless grace, freely bestowed on all who believe;
All who are longing to see His face, will you this moment His grace receive?

Grace, grace, God's grace, Grace that will pardon and cleanse within;
Grace, grace, God's grace, Grace that is greater than all our sin!⁷

My friends, just as a jeweler works to remove microscopic flaws from a diamond that no ordinary person would ever notice, so God is at work in your life and in mine to remove our sin and to make us able to contain his glory. C. S. Lewis wrote that God intends to make you and to make me into "dazzling, radiant, immortal creatures, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine."⁸

I expect that you know how good it feels to bathe away the filth of sweat and dirt after a hard day of working in the yard; but do you also know the wonder, the relief, and the release of being cleansed by Calvary's crimson tide? "*So this is the point,*" Paul wrote. "*The law no longer holds you in its power, because you died to its power when you died with Christ on the cross. And now you are united with the one who was raised from the dead. . . . Now [you] can really serve God, not in the old way by obeying the letter of the law, but in the new way, by the Spirit*" (Romans 7:4, 6).

Thanks be to God for this marvelous Gift!!!

⁷ Julia H. Johnston (1849-1919), "Grace Greater than Our Sin."

⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 85.