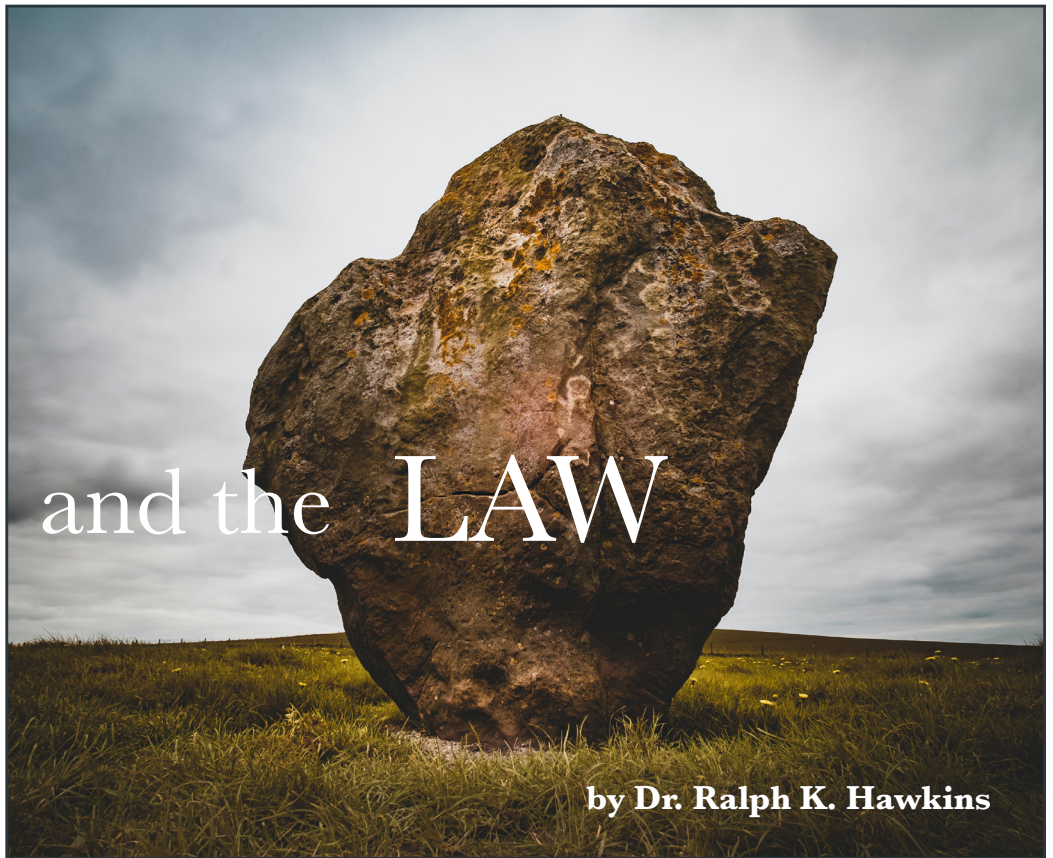




HOPE and the LAW



by Dr. Ralph K. Hawkins

You may have noticed that during the season of Advent, our service begins a little bit differently than at other times of the year. At the beginning of a typical Sunday morning service, there is an Entrance Rite during which the priest and assisting ministers process into the sanctuary; a greeting is pronounced, and then everyone prays the Kyrie (“Lord, have mercy upon us”). During Advent and Lent, however, we add in a Penitential Order that includes either a Summary of the Law or a recitation of The Decalogue. Why do we add the reading of the Law into our services during Advent? The reason has to do with God’s purpose in giving the Law to His people, His people’s failure to follow it, and the answer to that failure that He provides in Jesus Christ.

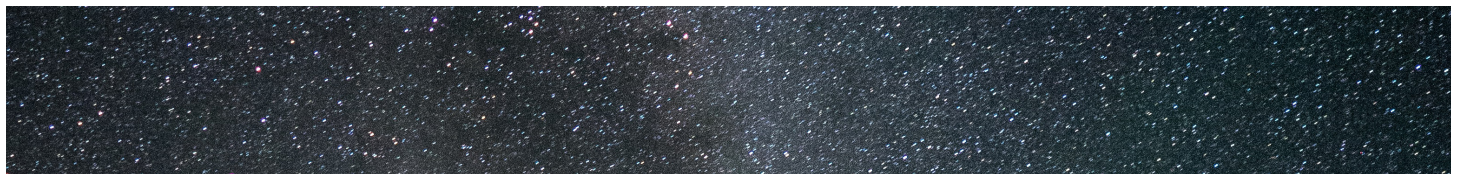
When God made a covenant with the Israelites at Mt. Sinai, the Ten Commandments were its terms (Exodus 20:1-17). The book of Deuteronomy repeats them (Deut. 5.1–21) and elaborates upon them (5:6-26:19). The Ten Commandments and the Covenant of which they were a part were the very foundation of Israel’s national life and identity.

While modern readers often think of law as something that restricts or stifles, that was not how the ancient Israelites thought of Old Testament Law at all. Instead, they thought of it as God’s gracious provision, and they often praised it for its beauty and for the guidance it provided. In the Psalter, for example, the Ten

Commandments are a frequent theme. Two of the psalms, Psalms 19 for example, are “Torah psalms,” and are essentially hymns about the Law. It uses several synonyms for the Law to weave a tapestry of praise for God’s instructions. Its author waxes eloquent about the beauty of the Law:

The law of the Lord is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the decrees of the Lord are sure,
making wise the simple;
the precepts of the Lord are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is clear,
enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the Lord is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the Lord are true
and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.
(7–10)

Ancient Israel’s sages were deeply influenced by the Ten Commandments too and referred to them often in the various books of the Wisdom Literature. The entire book of Proverbs, for example, is full of praise of the Law in general and references to the Ten Commandments in particular.



For example, the sages advise that those who are wise “will heed [the] commandments, but a babbling fool will come to ruin” (Prov. 10:8), and that “Those who despise the word bring destruction on themselves, but those who respect the commandment will be rewarded” (13:13). Unfortunately, even though God had given the Law to his people as a gracious gift, they failed to keep it. The books of 1-2 Kings, which give an account of Israel’s national experience, tell how they continually rebelled against God and violated the terms of their covenant with Him. The people of Israel “sinned against the Lord their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt” by worshipping other gods and adopting the customs of the nations around them (2 Kings 17:7–8). They “despised his statutes, and his covenant” and “they rejected all the commandments of the Lord their God and made for themselves cast images of two calves” (2 Kings 17:15, 16). Likewise, the inhabitants of Judah also “did not keep the commandments of the Lord their God” (2 Kings 17:19), but went after other gods and embraced the customs of the nations around them. In the end, Israel and Judah both abandoned the covenant and its Ten Commandments. This was a rejection of their very identity and it led to their demise as kingdoms.

The Major Prophets frequently talk about Israel’s violation of the Ten Commandments in order to demonstrate that Israel had broken the covenant God had made with it. The first four commands, which focus on the relationship with God, are most frequently cited. In the eighth century B.C., Isaiah charged that the land was “filled with idols” (Isa. 2:8) that the Israelites worshipped (2:20). Jeremiah, too, charged the people with breaking the first commandment by worshipping “images” and “foreign idols” (Jer. 8:19), and he insisted that only strict obedience to the covenant and to the Ten Commandments would prevent the Lord’s destruction of Judah and Jerusalem. God took Ezekiel on a tour of the Temple (Ezek. 8–10), during which he revealed to the prophet that these violations were not just individual but also national.

The prophets also point to Israel’s violation of the last six commandments in their indictments of Israel. The prophets metaphorically point to the breaking of the sixth commandment when they exclaim that the people’s hands are full of blood, that they have committed bloody crimes or that they have defiled the land with blood. The seventh commandment, the prohibition of adultery, is cited frequently in the prophets. The prophets used adultery as a metaphor for Israel’s unfaithfulness to God. It was apparently also a problem in Israelite society. In his famous Temple Sermon, Jeremiah listed it among the sins of which the Israelites were guilty (Jer. 7:9). Later, in a letter to the exiles in Babylonian, he wrote that adultery was one of the sins for which they were being punished (Jer. 29:23). In the Major Prophets, the last three commandments – stealing, bearing false witness and coveting – are the least frequently mentioned. Jeremiah mentions stealing in his Temple Sermon (Jer. 7:9). In Isaiah, it is most frequently the leaders who are charged with lying. Jeremiah does accuse the people of deceiving their neighbors (Jer. 9:5), but he, too, levels his harshest accusations of deceitfulness against Israel’s leadership, the scribes and the prophets.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul argues that the Jews stood under condemnation for having failed to keep the Law (Romans 2:17-3:8). All humankind was, in fact, guilty before God, since what could be known about God was made plain to them, and yet they rebelled against Him (Romans 1:18-32). All humankind, both Jews and Greeks alike, were “under the power of sin” (Romans 3:9). Paul concludes that

There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one” (3:10-12).

Instead of meting out His wrath on humankind for our sinful rebellion, however, Paul explains that God sent His own Son, Jesus Christ, to take the penalty for our transgression upon Himself. He proclaims that

when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross (Colossians 2:13-14).

Paul explains further that Christ is “the end of the Law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes” (Romans 10:4). Praise God!

During Advent, the prayer book’s Penitential Order provided two ways for us to use the Ten Commandments. It contains a liturgy in which each command is read and, after it, the people respond, “Lord, have mercy upon us, and incline our hearts to keep this law” (see BCP, 100-101). The other was the reading of a Summary of the Law, based on the words of Jesus in Matthew 22:37-40. During that penitential season, the use of the Ten Commandments in the liturgy allows all of us – priest and people alike – to examine our consciences and prepare for the coming of Christ.

