Welcome to Dr. Enns’ third presentation on the book of Exodus. In this presentation, he will focus on the Ten Commandments and how we should think about the Law.

We’re moving here towards talking about the Ten Commandments, and we can start really by even starting in chapter 19, which recounts Israel’s arrival at Sinai, and, again, as I said before, this is the beginning of the climax of Exodus. Remember that Israel was delivered for a purpose, which was to serve God, to serve Yahweh. And at Mount Sinai, is where they will learn what that means, and they will learn that through law and through worship. We tend to downplay things like law and rituals that would be performed in the tabernacle. We tend to downplay that in Christianity. Not always, but I think there’s a tendency to do that. But remember, the Israelites arrive at Mount Sinai, in chapter 19, verse 1, three months after the exodus, is what we read. They stay there for a year, and we read that in Numbers 10:11. A lot of stuff happens at Sinai. It’s the focus. Most of the Pentateuch, without counting verses off the top of my head, but at least half the Pentateuch, or more because we have to include Deuteronomy as well, occurs in or around Mount Sinai, so it’s very, very central, and we should try to remember that.

Before we talk about the Law specifically, there is one interesting idea that is put forth here in chapter 19 that I think is worth pausing and talking about very briefly, and it’s chapter 19, verses 5 and 6. These are pretty well-known passages, but let me read them: “If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations, you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be, for me, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words you [Moses], are to speak to the Israelites.”

This raises an interesting theological dimension in Exodus: What is Israel’s purpose for being redeemed? And here, what we read, is they are to be “a holy nation” and “a kingdom of priests.” “Holy” meaning what? They are to be separate. They are to
be a certain kind of people. That is what the Law does. The Law is not what Israel does to prove itself worthy, but the Law is God’s gift to the Israelites, and by obeying the Law and living according to God’s standards in that ancient world, they will be “a holy nation.” They will be different.

The purpose for being different is to be “a kingdom of priests.” Now, what does that mean? It’s not just they’re all a bunch of priests running around, but what does a priest do? A priest mediates God to other people. And Israel is to be a nation of priests, meaning, as a nation, as a holy people, they mediate God to the other nations, the Gentiles. And here we can go back even to virtually the beginning of the Bible, in Genesis chapter 12, verses 1-3, where God promises to Abraham that “all nations will be blessed through you”. The purpose for picking Abraham was to be a blessing to the nations. Israel, as a nation, is supposed to carry out that task of being, if I can use imagery, we read elsewhere in Isaiah and in the New Testament, a light to the Gentiles. God did not redeem Israel so they could be sort of a “God club” and, “we’re in and everybody else is out.” God redeemed Israel for a larger purpose, which is to play a role in redeeming the world to himself. Now, of course, as we move in Israel’s story, we understand that Israel does not do a good job at all of doing that. That’s where Israel’s failure to keep the Law, that’s why that’s so devastating. It’s not just they fail to keep the Law, “Oh, you’re bad people,” It’s when you fail to keep the Law, you make yourself, and more importantly God says, “You make me a laughing stock to the nations. That’s not what I’m trying to do. I’m trying to make you attractive as a people, not because you’re fancy or because you have nice things. I’m trying to make you attractive as a people because you’re holy and you’re right and you’re good and you’re just in order to make this attractive to the nations so that all the nations,” as Isaiah says, “will stream to Jerusalem.”

There has always been a Gentile dimension to the Old Testament. When Jesus came, he was fulfilling that mandate, which Israel was to have fulfilled but did not. That is why we think of Jesus as really embodying what redeemed Israel was supposed to look like. He was obedient even though Israel of the Old Testament was not. Now it is through
Christ, the Holy One, who is himself the priest, that God is now mediated to the people through faith.

There are evangelistic implications of this as well – the evangelistic implications of godly living. Perhaps, we can turn, just briefly to 1 Peter, chapter 2, verses 4-12. I’m not going to read all those because really, the main issue begins in verse 9. Peter says, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,” which is clearly piggybacking on the language in Exodus chapter 19, “people belonging to God that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers of the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.” What I find very instructive here is how Peter is tying what we read in Exodus 19, that in the Old Testament it was Israel, here in the New Testament is the church. We are called by God to be a “royal priesthood,” “a kingdom of priests,” “a holy nation” so that by our behavior we present the Gospel to other people. Not just by what we say, but by what we do. This is, again, why Peter says we should, “live such good lives among the pagans that even though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.” What you believe needs to translate into how you act. This is, I think, very much in keeping with what we read in Exodus. God gives them a law, not just to hamper them, not to shackle them, but to say, “This is what my people are supposed to act like. If you do this, if you obey, then you will be the envy of all the nations; not in a prideful way, but this is the way to get word out that I am who I am and that I am a God worth worshipping.” Of course Israel, unfortunately, does not do that, but Jesus does very finally, very climactically.

Having said that, let’s talk about that Law that’s supposed to distinguish Israel from the nations. We read in chapter 19 that Moses approaches the mountain, and when we read elsewhere, for example, in chapter 24, verses 1 and 2, there seems to be some
sort of division of the mountain, actually a tripartite—a three part division of the mountain. There is the foot of the mountain, where the people are allowed to be. Part of the way up is where Aaron and the priests are allowed to be. And all the way to the top is where Moses alone goes. Commentators have picked up that Mount Sinai, the three part divisions of Mount Sinai, look like the three part divisions of the tabernacle, which we’ll talk about a little bit later. But the tabernacle has an outer court where the people may be, then there is the holy place where Aaron and the priests may go, and then there is the most holy place, the holy of holies, where only the high priest is allowed to go.

Now, what does that mean? Well, Sinai is God’s dwelling place, and later when we look at the tabernacle, the tabernacle is a portable Mount Sinai. It is God’s dwelling place, which in the Old Testament is Mount Sinai. This is where God comes from; this is where his address is. The tabernacle then is a portable version of that. The tabernacle later which we’ll read is patterned after the heavenly tabernacle, and that is very important because it’s from that place, from Mount Sinai, which is that dwelling place of God, that tabernacle, that the commandments come out. So Moses, what he does is he goes, he enters the most holy place, he goes up to the top to receive the law. Here we read of the Ten Commandments which we’re are all very familiar with, and in fact maybe in some cases too familiar with.

What I’d like to do right now is not go through the Ten Commandments, but, there are some issues to keep in mind as we think about the Ten Commandments, and I have several points, five, six or seven points I would like to go through with you in terms of how to think about the Ten Commandments. They seem so easy; there are ten of them; just obey them. It’s not that easy, it wasn’t that easy back then, and it’s not that easy today.

The first point that I think is helpful for us to keep in mind is that the Ten Commandments were given to a redeemed people. They were not given to a people so that they could keep them, and if they kept them, they will be redeemed. To use maybe language we’re more familiar with, the law is in response to God’s grace. It is not the condition for God’s grace, but it is what God does because he is gracious. It was given to
a redeemed people, as I said. I think you’d be hard-pressed to find in the Old Testament where the nations were expected to keep God’s law in the Old Testament. The law was given to Israel for them to keep so that they would be different, so when they get their acts together, so to speak, they will be a light to the Gentiles, a light to the nations. These are Israel’s laws, these are not the laws of the nations around them, and that is I think an important thing to keep in mind because it reminds us of the proper place of law, even in the life of a Christian. We do want to obey God’s standards, but we do so because he has graciously redeemed us, the church, as the people of God. God’s laws connect primarily to us, and not to just everyone around them. We can’t expect or be surprised when people who do not know Christ--elected officials, musicians, Super Bowl Half-Time Shows--we cannot be surprised when they don’t act the right way. I don’t expect them to act the right way. I know they broke a commandment, that’s the least of their worries that they broke one of the Ten Commandments. They don’t know Jesus. That’s the problem.

The laws of God are for God’s people, primarily, and not the standard by which we should pass judgment on other nations. We see this even in the preamble to the Ten Commandments. In chapter 20, the Ten Commandments begin: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” This is the preamble; this is how the Ten Commandments begin. The laws are based on who God is and what God has done. It is because I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery, it is because of that that you now are to keep them. The law follows redemption, in other words.

A second point that is, I think, worth bringing up, is: these are not laws that are just designed to make the Israelites into nice people, or good people, people that behave themselves, people that don’t smoke or chew or go with girls who do. There is much more to the Ten Commandments than just making good people. There is actually – I’m going to say a mouthful here, but let me explain it. The Ten Commandments is the integration of cosmic and social order. The Ten Commandments is an act of re-creation. Now, what do I mean by that? It is just like the creation of the physical universe in Genesis 1, where God imposes order into chaos, physical order into physical chaos. In the
Ten Commandments, God is introducing, let’s call it “order,” into the chaos of everyday social living or interaction. This goes for not just the Ten Commandments, but for the book of the Covenant that follows in the chapters right after the Ten Commandments. The giving of the law, therefore, is an act of re-creation. It is establishing moral order in God’s world amid the immorality around it. So there’s much more to it than just “be nice,” it is, you’re actually participating in the re-creative event when you obey God and keep his law.

A third point is, this concerns the division of the law: it seems like the first four commandments relate to a vertical dimension, which is upward towards God – no idols, no false gods, remember the Sabbath, and don’t use the Lord’s name in vain. Then five through ten are considered to be on the horizontal plane, meaning that they have to do with our interaction with others. Now that’s obviously true, and when we think of Moses coming down with two tablets, for example, and we think usually of the first four commandments are on the first tablet and the remaining six are on the second tablet, sort of divide between laws that pertain to God and laws that pertain to other people. There is an element of truth in that, but we should not make that division too strongly, especially in the ancient world. There is always a connection in the mind of the Israelites, if I can speak that way, certainly in the Old Testament, there is always a connection between the vertical dimension of the Israelite and the horizontal dimension of the Israelite. The two are not separate, but they connect intimately with each other. When you break one of the first four commandments, you are not sinning against God anymore than if you were to break commandments five through ten. There is, in other words, a religious vertical dimension to Israel’s law, regardless of which command or law is being spoken of. In today’s world, we might speak of this as the connection between orthodoxy and orthopraxy. How we think about and relate to God (orthodoxy) should affect how we act towards others (orthopraxy, or orthopraxis). And I think too often in our Christian world, at least in the West, the only Christian world that I’m familiar with, we sometimes drive a wedge between what we think about God and how we act towards other people, and biblically that is a very difficult distinction to make and it’s probably a false one.
The fourth point I’d like to bring out here concerns the first commandment, and it’s pretty short. It says, “You shall have no other gods before me.” Now earlier we looked at the polemics between God, and the Egyptian gods, and the plagues. We also saw elsewhere that it seems in Exodus 15, for example, 15:11, that the existence of other gods is somewhat assumed in this ancient culture. I think this first commandment is another example of that. Remember that Egypt was polytheistic. Remember also that where they are going is polytheistic. The only religious world that the Israelites were really familiar with was a world where all nations had there own sets of gods and every location you went to had sort of local gods and they had their own hierarchies, and that was considered normal. Belief in one God was not considered normal. That was very, very unusual. To speak, let’s say, the language of the Israelites, to speak in a way that they would be able to relate to in the ancient world, It would not be effective to say in the first commandment, “There are no gods before me.” That’s certainly true. We don’t get that again until we read further on in the Old Testament. Then those things become a little bit clearer. But here in Israel’s infancy, it says, “You shall have no other gods before me. I am the God worth worshipping. Don’t worship those other gods.” That is something that would have spoken very immediately to an ancient people.

You see this, for example, in places like Psalm 95 verse 3, there are half a dozen places in the Psalms at least that use language like, “For the Lord, Yahweh, is a great God. He is a great King above all gods.” That’s how he shows in the ancient world how great he is: he shows his supremacy over the gods. Again, only later do they fully understand that those gods just don’t exist at all. For this to have any meaning to the Israelites, we have to presume that they assume the existence of these gods. For example, if your small child is trying to get to sleep at night, and it’s not really working out, and they say, “There’s a boogieman under my bed.” It doesn’t matter if that boogieman is real or not, the point is that at their young age in life they think there really is one there. As we all know as parents, if we go in there and say, “Well, there really isn’t one under your bed”, they say, “Yeah right. I know there’s one. My world has boogiemen in it, and they really do exist.” As a parent it might be a wiser thing to say, to assume their worldview
for the sake of discussion, to say, “I won’t let him hurt you. I’ll stay here in bed with you until you go to sleep.” Now that says something to the three year old, or five year old. But to get into a logical argument about the way the world really is, it doesn’t really work. To me, that’s a helpful analogy about what’s going on here. God meets the Israelites where they are, He speaks their language, and he says it in such a way that will draw Israel, I think, closer to Him.

The fifth issue that I think is worth bringing out here, is that the commandments themselves, they seem so simple and strait forward, they seem so easy to keep, but they’re not. They’re not specific, if you look at them, the commandments are somewhat vague. The fourth commandment, “Remember the Sabbath day…Keep the Sabbath day.” What does that mean? What does it mean to keep the Sabbath day? Well, it says don’t do any work. Okay, what is work? What constitutes work? You see here, this is why you have the history of Judaism, for example, which is sometimes much maligned among Christians, which I don’t think it should be. We can learn from this history, something even about ourselves. This is why in the history of Judaism there are these long discussions that for us seem so arcane and silly about specifically how to keep laws. It’s a history of legal discussion. Which is to take the law seriously, which is to say, we want to keep the law. We want to make sure we’re keeping it so we have to discuss it. So what exactly is work? What does that mean? I’ve heard similar discussions. I hear them on a regular basis. Even among Christians, where issues come up, for example keeping the Sabbath. Is it okay to go to see a football game on a Sunday? Discussions started coming up, like for example, would it cause you to miss church? Well, if so, is there an evening service you can go to instead? Or is it a one o’clock game, or is it a four o’clock game? And we start having, even there, discussions that are born out of the fact that the commandment itself doesn’t tell you what to do specifically, you still have life situations where you have to exercise wisdom and maturity to know: what does it mean to keep this commandment here? The same goes for the fifth commandment, “Honor your parents.” Always? What if they’re wrong? What if they’re just not good people? This commandment doesn’t make provision for that, but we all know that situations come up
where obeying the letter of the law will get you into a lot of trouble.

Sixth commandment—killing. You know: do not kill, do not commit murder. What if the killing was in self-defense? And here we give into just war theories and things like that also. What if someone is about to kill your family? Can you kill them in self-defense? People say, “yes;” some people say, “no.” To solve that is not at all my interest, but it’s simply to point out that it’s not that easy. Both are thinking of following of God on some level, but it’s not at all easy. The bottom line is, is it really possible? Even at the outset, even if here at the very beginning of the law to live by, the letter of the law. And my response to that is, no it isn’t. You still have to exercise wisdom, and that’s why I want you to encourage you to think of law and wisdom. Such things we read in Proverbs or even through Deuteronomy. Job and Ecclesiastes even seem to be a little but more skeptical, but understand there is a wisdom dimension to understanding law and I think that if we are able to understand law in that way I think is very profitable. I think it’s also a very mature Christian thing to do, and of course, then even as Christians we have to think in terms of what difference does Jesus make now that he has come and how we interact with things like the Ten Commandments. That is a whole issue that the church has been debating now for 2000 years, but all, that is to say, that it’s not all that obvious sometimes exactly what to be doing with the law.

The sixth point that I would like to bring out here is that the Ten Commandments, as they’re given here, are not new laws. We think about the Ten Commandments as revelation, which is true, but revelation does not mean that they were revealed here for the first time, at least I think not for the most part. I don’t think that this is the first time that the Israelites said, “O, I didn’t know idolatry is wrong. I really thought it was ok.” I don’t think they were saying, “O, I thought I could murder anyone whenever I wanted to.” There was an understanding, and this goes back even to the stories of Genesis, that you know it’s wrong. Not only Israelite society, but ancient societies as a whole had law codes. Some of which look a lot like things we find in the Bible. These are not unique to Israel. What makes them unique is that God is saying, “here are my standards for how I want you to act, this is my law,” you’ve heard these before haven’t you, “boom” and he
lays them out. “This is what will mark you as a separate people, chapter 19, as a holy
nation as a kingdom of priests.” What makes the law unique is not necessarily the content
of the law but it’s the point of origin of the law which is that God gave it.

The last point I would like to make about the 10 commandments really does not
cconcern Exodus, it concerns Deuteronomy chapter 5, and I would like to read a couple of
verses there which I think we cannot over look when it comes to thinking about how we
can think as the law as well. Deuteronomy 5, takes place if you remember, in the 40th
year in the wilderness: the Israelites are about to enter the promise land. The Ten
Commandments are given in two places in the Bible they’re given in Exodus 20 and there
given here in Deuteronomy 5, I want to read the verses that introduce the Ten
Commandments, and that starts in verse 2 and that goes to verse 4. “The Lord our God
made a covenant with us.” Think about that for a second. “Made a covenant with us at
Horeb.” That’s not exactly true, historically, think about this for a second. Why did the
Israelites spend 40 years wondering the wilderness? Because of rebellion, to make sure
that that previous generation was essentially exterminated, and that God could start over
again. So actually he didn’t make the covenant at Horeb which the Deuteronomy
community here at the end of the wilderness period, he made it with the ones before but
keep reading.

Very explicit, verse 3. “It was not with our fathers that the Lord made the
covenant, but with us. With all of us who are alive here today.” Now let me just say it and
I’ll back pedal in new ones in a hundred different ways, that’s wrong. It is precisely not
with these people that God made the covenant at Sinai, He made it 40 years earlier, but
this language here is so emphatic. Does this writer not know what’s going on, in the
history of Israel? I don’t think that’s really the case at all. I think that rather this is a
statement that the Israelites, who are now about to embark on the journey to enter Canaan
it is as if they themselves were the original exodus community the original exodus
congregation. The original exodus congregation blew it. They should have been the ones
to go but they didn’t. Now God is with Moses, he is really essentially starting over and
what he is doing is he is renewing that covenant with those people here and saying it in
such a way that it may seem odd to us. But the message is crystal clear, it is, “you are the original exodus community as far as I’m concerned, you are the people of God not those back there, but you and in fact, to make it very clear, I made that covenant with you, not with them, I made it with you.”

I think to pay off that is to think that the Ten Commandments are meant to be ours as well, we are to think of ourselves also as that exodus community that went through, and the covenant was made with us also at Mount Sinai, obviously not any literal way but by our connection to the exodus community.

The reality what makes it real for us living today is our union with Christ who is our Moses as Hebrew says, “Christ who’s our priest. Christ who is the means by which we connect to God.” Every generation can appropriate that for themselves, not relying on past generations.

Now in terms of the law, a bit more that we can say, and maybe just a word or two about what is normally called the Book of the Covenant. And this starts after the Ten Commandments in chapter 20:22 and it goes to 23:19, the couple primarily kinds of issues that we can look at. Then I just want to look at one example and try and make a larger point from that one example. One primary issue is that the laws of the Book of the Covenant are very specific in places. In fact, they are so specific in places that you have to think by some specific situations, some scenarios are being accounted for here they’re not general, they’re not principles, they’re just very specific. Not every specific situation can possibly be accounted for in a law code like that. And scholars have pointed out, and I think there is a lot of truth to this: it’s very difficult to run a society on just these laws. So one possible explanation for why this section of the law looks the way that it does is that the Book of the Covenant was never intended to be an exhausted list of all the laws that the Israelites were to obey but a representative list so we should not expect from them an exhaustive direction for how are lives are to be lead. Instead, they are to be understood as representative of maybe something that was originally, who knows, more extensive then this. So that’s one preliminary issue.

Second is that these laws that we read about here are land-locked, and what I mean
by that is that these laws are really relevant for Israel after it takes possession of the land. In other words, these are not desert laws. One example might be in 22:5, “if a man grazes his livestock in a field or vineyard and let’s them stray and they graze in another man’s field he must make restitution for the best of his own field or vineyard.” This is imagery, this is language that pertains to a settled people, not a people wandering through the dessert looking for a place to pitch their tent. These laws, in other words, they anticipate already imminent inference to the land or at least what was supposed to have been imminent interest into the land. Israel’s law was given to them, they were to be given the land and within that land they were to behave in certain ways. The land was given, Israel entered, and in fact, did not act in the ways that God had wanted them to act, which is what brings us to the exile of Israel, eventually, several hundred years later. Now just for the fun of it, let's look at one law, before we move on and talk about the tabernacle a bit and this is in chapter 22, specifically, verse 16, “If a man seduces a virgin, who is not pledged to be married, and sleeps with her, he must pay the bride-price and she shall be his wife. If her father absolutely refuses to give her to him, he must still pay the bride-price for virgins.” Now, the reason I'm picking on that is because in the Bible that I have, the NIV Bible, which is a very good one, but there are certain chapter headings and divisions that are inserted. Clearly they are not part of the Bible itself but these are just helps put in by the editors. But, verse 16 has right before a heading called: “Social Responsibility.” Chapter 22:1 one has a heading called: “Protection of Property.” Now, what I want to suggest is that that heading: “Social Responsibility” before verse 16 should be removed, it should not be there. Verse 16 and verse 17, the law about seducing a virgin, is likewise an example of protection of property. Now, I'm not saying that to be harsh. I'm not saying that because I'm not sensitive to these kinds of things that can even happen today, I have two daughters myself, but I'm trying to understand ancient Israelite society. If you start reading in chapter 22:1 all these laws begin “If a man,” or “If a thief,” or “If this happens, or “If this happens.” All those laws pertain to some destruction of property. If that heading weren't there in the NIV: Social Responsibility, you would continue reading in verse 16 and there again it would be “If a man”, “If her father” in
verse seventeen. The law, or the character of the laws doesn't really change until verse 18. And that's, you don't get “if” laws, if-case laws they call them, “if this happens than this happens,” until verse 18 when you begin to get pretty much just commandments, like you're reading the Ten Commandments. 16 and 17 are likewise laws about the protection of property.

Let's read it again, “If a man seduces a virgin, who is not pledged to be married, and sleeps with her.” What does he have to do? He has to pay the bride-price. To whom? To the girl's father. And she shall be his wife. Why does he have to do that? Because, a man that seduces a woman, that woman is damaged goods and the father will not be able to get the bride-price for her. So, this is protecting the father's property. This is actually not really a law that pertains so much to virgins as it does to the father's right to claim the bride-price when he gives his daughter in marriage. And if her father, verse 17, absolutely refuses to give her to him, he must still pay the bride-price for virgins. What this tells me, the reason I bring this up, what this tells me is that I have to really think hard about how laws such as this apply in our contemporary society; in some cases they may not. Now, we might say well to the letter no, this law doesn't apply, but it's the principle of the law that applies. That may be, it may be that the principle of the law applies here. But that still raises the question, “well what is the principle that's being enacted here?” And I'm not sure I know what that is, maybe others do, I don't think I do.

But also, maybe even a little more subtly to say, let's appeal to the principle of the law seems to me to be a very modern distinction. For example, as these laws were given in ancient Israelite society I don't think Moses would have said “Don't worry about the details, it's just the principle that's important,” absolutely not, the law was the detail. So, I think we have to be very very careful there just to simply say that these laws are principles laid down for us, it's the details of the law that means something. And, in this case, this law assumes a certain understanding of the role that a young daughter, a virgin daughter, plays in an Israelite society.

I think it's very valid for us to ask whether a law such as this is really valid in the post-resurrection Christian world in which we live. That is not to say that the law is bad,
as Paul would say, “far from it.” That's not to say that we can ignore the Bible or take the first five books of our Old Testament and rip them out and throw them out. All it means is that we should try to understand what God did back then and then try to understand how that develops, how that unfolds, with the focus ultimately coming in what God did in Christ and how that changes may be even how we read laws like this. To say, that is to raise the whole issue of course, of the relationship between law and gospel, which I cannot and will not solve other than to say that it has been a topic of conversation for the church since Paul. Paul did spend a lot of time talking about that relationship and I'm not going to solve what Paul didn't either.