

- That's weekend at Duke University. That means that we are honoring the fathers of our sophomore coeds. I mentioned this in the very beginning of the sermon for purposes of clarification, because if the present rate of early student marriages continues we may need to have a special celebration of sophomore male students who have already become dads. Sophomore dads weekend. As a text for the sermon on this special occasion, I have chosen the fifth of the 10 commandments. In spite of the fact that it is almost irrelevant to the life of a 20th century christian. Now here is the commandment in full. Honor thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the land, which the Lord thy God giveth thee. That's found in Exodus 20:12. And is a part of the morning scripture lesson which was read by my Penny Cunningham. Now, there are two reasons why this ancient commandment is almost irrelevant to your and my life today. The first reason is that the problem to which it was addressed, is relatively non existent in our nation today. When we study the circumstances in Moses time, we can see this commandment in a new perspective perhaps different from what we have seen it in. As we have simply read the words. Historically understood, this was not a commandment given for the purpose of properly rearing young children. Since in Hebrew homes of that era the young were strictly required to obey and respect their parents. A mosaic commandment to this effect was really quite unnecessary. It was almost like commanding thy must breathe air. They would do it in any case whether Moses commanded it or not. Actually the problem which existed in Moses time and to which this commandment spoke, had to do with adult children of aged and helpless parents. The custom in some societies of which the Hebrews had knowledge, was to send the elderly and helpless away out of camp. And they were soon set upon by wild beast or they died from exposure to the elements. It is quite evident as we read the book of Psalms that the Psalmist had witnessed such tragedies as this because he was moved on one occasion to pray. Cast me not off in the time of old age. Forsake me not, when my strength failed. Well, you see the mosaic law came to forbid such cruel treatment. It spoke a commanding word to any Hebrew man who might be contemplating the introduction of the this pagan practice into the camp of the Israelites. But it was more than a stern and severe word, more than just a harsh commandment. It had a bargaining dimension to it. An aspect of enlightened self-interest. It seemed to be saying, if you will establish the practice of seeing to it, that your parents are protected and nourished, as long as they can live, this practice will later result in your own life being lengthened. The fifth commandment appeared to be coaxing. Remember, one day you will be old too. So don't turn your elderly parents out of camp now, unless you want to be treated that way yourself. It was an almost commercial quid pro quo. Do A and receive B. Now, do you get the emphasis? Honor thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the land, which the Lord thy God giveth thee. The prospect of ones being cared for himself when he should become old was the sugar coating on the pill of being commanded to feed extra mouths and to cloth extra bodies of persons, no longer able to hold their own in the struggles for survival in that primitive day. This commandment therefore might just as easily have read, honor thy father and thy mother that their days may be long upon the land which the Lord their God giveth them. Except, that the problem which Moses would have faced immediately in that case would have been that many of the non elderly adults of his day would have responded to it by saying so what, who cares? At that point in human history, it apparently was necessary to appeal almost entirely to the motive of self-interest. As Jesus said

later, concerning Moses in divorce. He prescribed what he did because of the hardness of their hearts. The Christ had not yet come in Moses day declaring his doctrine of our need to love because we have first been loved beyond what we can ever deserve or repay. But now you can see how that in 20th century America with its plans for retirement income, endowment insurance policies, homes for the aged and social security to mention only a few. These visions of elderly parents being torn limb from limb by wild animals or starving to death out on a bleak mountainside, do seem just a bit unreal. Nothing at all, which I think or plan or do for example about my parents who are in their middle and late seventies, is done because of any anxiety that I have either about their or my starving to death in old age. The last United States census, showed that 77%, 77% of all people over 65 years of age in the United States are living in homes of their own relatively independent of their adult children. So you can see the difference between Moses day and our day. Now, the second reason why this fifth commandment is almost irrelevant to the life of a 20th century Christian is the fact that we do not live under the requirements of any of the 10 commandments. The Christian is totally free from the mosaic law. Absolutely. It has no required bearing at all upon his actions from day to day. The Christian is not bound by the commandment against stealing. The old Testament command against murder does not apply to the Christian. Laws against drinking and drunkenness do not govern the true Christian's behavior. What the mosaic law says, in prohibiting fornication and adultery does not control what the sincere Christian does on a date. And in similar fashion, the fifth of the 10 commandments honor thy father and thy mother is not a law binding the Christian. Well if at this point you are ready to conclude that the Duke University chaplain has utterly gone out of his mind. You should be cautioned by the reminder that this doctrine comes straight from the New Testament. Indeed, the setting forth of this doctrine, occupies a significant portion of the writings of the apostle Paul, for example and in particular. Paul's theology at this point can at least be stated briefly, if not stated simply. Here it is. God revealed his righteous and holy nature to man. And in the Old Testament law commanded us to be righteous also. But the empirical discovery, which both man and God made is that unregenerate man does not seem to measure up to God's law. This is true, not merely of some humans, but of all men. The apostle Paul wrote to the Romans and here are his words. There is none righteous. No, not one. There is none that seek it after God. There is none that do it good. No, not one. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. So what? So this, Paul continued. So this is my experience of the law. I want to do what is right, but wrong is all I can manage. Now, the conclusion to which Paul came after this very devastatingly, honest exercise in soul searching, was a very gloomy one. He said, therefore, by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight. The whole human race stands under judgment by reason of our failure to be what we were created to be or to do what we were commanded to do. But Paul taught that God not only is infinitely righteous and holy, but infinitely loving as well. We find in 2 Peter, words which would beautifully express, not only Paul's theology, but that of the entire New Testament, just here. The Lord is long suffering not wishing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. And for all persons who recognize their guilt, admit their own inability to save themselves are willing to die to sin and throw themselves on the mercy of God through Christ. There is forgiveness, acceptance, regeneration and a new life here, as well as eternal life hereafter. The apostle Paul taught that this new life in Christ is radically different from the old life under law and judgment. He wrote to the Romans these words, there is no doom now for those who are in Christ Jesus. The law of the spirit brings the life which is in Christ Jesus. And that law has set me free from the law of sin and death. The crucified body of Christ made you dead to the law, so that you might belong to another to him who was raised from dead for when we were unspiritual, the sinful cravings of the body, excited by the

law were active in our members and made us fruitful unto death. But now we are done with the law so that we might serve in a new way not under the written code as of old, but in the spirit. The true Christian thereby becomes a joyful witness to God's act of reconciliation. And he enters a life of grateful obedience under the beckoning of spirit rather than under the lash of the law. He therefore needs no commandment against murder because he loves his neighbor as himself. And one does not kill a person whom he loves. He needs no commandment against fornication or adultery or lying or stealing and all the rest. Because in answer to God's prior love, he lives in terms of a spirit which knows no harm to anyone and which negate any selfish use of others. Well, if we say that the Christian does not need the sixth commandment that is the one against murder because his Christian life of love takes care of all that. In what way does a Christian life of love take care of what the fifth commandment covers? In other words, what does it mean for a Christian sophomore co-ed to honor her father and her mother? And what does it mean for a father of a duke co-ed to honor his elderly father and mother? I said in the beginning of this sermon that the fifth commandment was almost irrelevant to the life of the 20th century Christian. Almost, but not entirely. The commandment against stealing for example is partially relevant as a school master to bring us to the Christian doctrine of the sacredness of the possessions of others. It is relevant to that extent. The old Testament law which established tithing is not totally useless. If it teaches us to understand and accept the Christian doctrine of the stewardship of our possessions. So now on the one hand, the Christian should not to quickly forget the law. Lest he prematurely sever the umbilical cord which historically and theologically connects the law and the gospels. But on the other hand, he should, by all means not regard the commandments as either a leash to hold or a lash to drive us to any kind of legalism in religion. Now, by this reasoning, we come to see the partial relevance of the commandment, honor thy father and thy mother. We see it as a guide pointing toward a relationship of love and respect and honor. Not circumscribed by any kind of legalism and not motivated by any enlightened self-interest. But motivated by a love which springs from the wholesome experience of having first been loved. And that is the important thing. Now, having come to this point in our thinking we must be very careful. It would be easy as we move forward from here to generalize, to glamorize, to idolize, to over draw, to overstate and to embroider the ideal relationship, which should exist between parent and child. So much so that we would reach the point that we would soon discover ourselves be floating high in the atmosphere on a vast cloud of modeling and reality. I have seen this done. Regard against that. Let us turn our attention now for a couple of minutes to certain stubborn facts. This is a threatening word to some people. A Trinity College student, came up to me in the middle of the week after seeing the now sermon titled for today. And he said, chaplain, I won't be with you in Chapel Sunday. This sermon topic is too threatening. I'll be in my room, listening in on the radio so I can cut out on you if it gets too bad. Are you still with me, buddy? A first of these stubborn facts, is that every son or daughter who achieves personhood, every son or daughter who achieves personhood, who becomes an individual and is enabled to stand on his own feet must go through a transition period. When he or she rebels to some degree against parents, this is normal. This is necessary. This is right. But this is almost always is shocking when it happens so far as the parent is concerned. And parents almost always draw alarming conclusions and generalize from it that the entire younger generation is going to the dogs. Let me read you something. There is a book entitled Kids, Crime and Chaos which was written by Dr. Tunley. And here is a quotation, which he has in his book. This quotation is from a parent. "Youth is disintegrating. "The youngsters of the land have a disrespect "for authority in every form. "Vandalism is rife and crimes of all kind "a rampant among our young people. "The nation is in dire peril." Do you know who wrote that? And Egyptian father who lived

2000 years before Christ. Let me read you another one from a man who wrote many many years later. "Our youth loved luxury. "They have bad manners. "They have contempt for authority "disrespect for older people. "Why children nowadays are tyrants. "They no longer rise when their elders enter the room, "they contradict their parents. "They chatter before a company, "they gobble their food and terrorize their teachers." You know, who wrote that? Socrates. Only 500 years before Christ. Well, parents do get alarmed. Sometimes properly, so. But generalize, usually beyond the particulars. Now we need to go another step further and recognize another stubborn fact. And that is that many parents, frankly do not deserve the respect of their children. Either the father or the mother or both have been unfaithful to their family responsibilities. A few years ago, I spent a week on another campus. I heard a young woman describe how her mother was a fashionable prostitute. Her father was a prosecuting attorney who often was successful in getting men sent to the roads for drunkenness, but who himself frequently came home drunk in a taxi cab and gave his children a very hard time all evening. Some parents, perhaps they don't know any better, will threaten to withdraw their love from their small children, if the children do anything to displease them. This is extremely damaging to a small child. More than a few child psychologists have pointed out that the young have two needs which are very important to their welfare. But which often run a foul of each other in a home where parents do not understand these two basic needs. The first is a need to express their hostilities. And the second is a need to feel that they are loved. Now, the problem arises at the point that parents often require things of small children which the small children resent. Go wash the dirt out of your ears, pick up your toys. Don't pet that strange dog. Turn down the volume on the TV, eat your spinach, come in out of the rain. Now the child does not want to obey any of these instructions. And if required to do so he will certainly feel hostilities which he will wish to express. The wise parent will require that the instructions be obeyed, but will allow the child to express any hostile feelings which this requirement generates. But when an unwise parent leads the child to believe that he will stop loving him, if he says anything unpleasant or does anything which displeases the parent, the child generally will outwardly conform in order to retain the love of the parent which the child desperately needs. But will store up a treasure house full of bitterness of hostility and resentment, which will have to be dealt with later on. If that child ever matures into a happy and well adjusted person. When a student editor begins to hunt for flaws and inconsistencies in the college administration, and when he finds nothing but flaws and inconsistencies most psychiatrists would agree on what the probable explanation of this is. They contend it is less likely that the college administration is actually cruel and crotchety. And it is more likely that the editor is revealing a poor relationship to his own parents. And he probably has a hatred of his father which he's transferring to the college administration. Several years ago, I asked a student editor, what he understood the Latin phrase in loco parentis to mean. He replied, "It means that students "have parents at home "and deans and other administrators "at college who substitute for parents. "And that both sets of parents are local." Now, what is far more helpful than having the maturing young person vent his startup wrath on persons who had nothing to do whatever with the origin of his wrath, is to have him deal with it constructively and creatively in a counseling relationship with a trained pastor or therapist. Very often I sit in my office and listen to a torrent of hot words, being poured out by a student who is trying to find a wholesomeness of being and a sense of justice which will permit him to believe in the fairness of God and the possibility of integrity on earth. So I listen, I listen to some acid denunciation of parents without any trace of disapproval or criticism. Until the story has been fully told, and the young woman or the young man feels that in some sense he has had his day in court for the first time. But if without such an opportunity this young woman is told by the church that in addition to

being saddled with a prostitute mother and a drunken hypocrite father she has the religious duty to honor both of them. She is placed in an emotionally impossible situation which may destroy her indeed. And I do not propose to do that or be a party to it. Honor thy father and thy mother. Always? How and in what sense? Well, for many of you this is no problem at all. You have a fine relationship with a fine set of parents. You may even be in almost complete agreement with your parents on most of the questions of life. You respect them. You love them. You agree with them. You honor them, you are sensitive to their needs. But let me suggest that you still can honor your father and your mother, if you don't agree with them. And even if you do not fully approve of what they do, if you honor someone you regard him with respect for what he is. Furthermore, if you yourself rise to the highest achievements of which you are capable you bring honor to those who made you what you are. And the two people who are of course, basic to what you are are your father and your mother. And in achieving your highest possibilities you do honor your father and your mother. I commend to you the example of the late John F. Kennedy President Kennedy, loved his father deeply. He respected him. He listened to him and he learned many things from him. He radically disagreed with him on almost all the answers to political questions. Still, he honored his father and his father knew that he did. Not primarily because he became president of the United States. But primarily because he followed the light of his conscience. And he did the right as God gave him to see the right. And so let me suggest that you too, all of you, Honor thy father and thy mother. Eternal God, our heavenly father, we thank thee for the example of divine parenthood which thou has set for us. May those of us who are parents, follow thy example, and those of us who are sons and daughters honor both thee and our earthly parents. And now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.