

FEATURING ORIGINAL RESEARCH FROM **Barna**

# THE SPIRITUALLY VIBRANT HOME

THE POWER OF  
MESSY PRAYERS,  
LOUD TABLES, AND  
OPEN DOORS

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# HOMELIFE

## RECOGNIZING THE SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MUNDANE

*But as for me and my house,  
we will serve the LORD.*

**JOSHUA 24:15**

I was standing in my small, white kitchen staring down at a full trash can when I became a man. Often, it's only in retrospect that we recognize these significant threshold moments in life. That was definitely the case here. I'm sure I assumed, before walking into the narrow kitchen that morning, that I was already a man.

I was twenty-five, after all. And I had only two weeks before gotten married. My new wife, Wendy, and I had moved into this small mother-in-law house in Parkland, Washington, and we were both a few years into our professional lives working in

campus ministry. But looking back, I don't think I really crossed that threshold into adulthood until I went to empty the trash one Saturday morning and saw something that stopped me in my tracks.

Unsuspecting, I had simply pulled out the trash to empty it. But looking down into the trash, I saw the unbelievable: yesterday's newspaper (this was back when we still had newspapers) and a few empty cans. My pulse increased. My brow furrowed. I called out, instinctually, "Wendy!" Wendy came around the corner to see what the cause of such urgency in my voice was. "What is it?" she asked.

"What is this?" I asked, with all the conviction and disappointment, I assume, of a strict school teacher. I was pointing down at the trash can.

Wendy looked confused. "What's what?" she asked, shrugging and trying to appear, I surmised at the time, as innocent as she could. I pulled out the newspaper and proclaimed (*declared*, might be a better term) the following:

"In. This. House. We. Recycle."

I know. Compassion for Wendy is very much in order here. You'll begin to notice this is a bit of a theme in our married life.

In my defense I was pretty passionate about doing what I could to tread lightly on the earth, and recycling (newspapers at the very least) was one way I had decided to do that. I really was shocked to see the newspaper and cans in the trash. And I really messed up in how I communicated that to Wendy. And

she really was gracious to me. Today we laugh every time we retell this story from the early days of our married life.

My poor handling of the moment aside, this was a real moment. What kind of household were we going to be? Were we going to be a recycling household? It turns out this was the first of many questions we were going to ask about our common life together. A few months later we moved from Washington to Colorado, and this move brought with it a veritable storm of new domestic questions. Practical questions that got at real issues: Where will we live? How big of a table will we have? Will we have many guests? How do we arrange the living room? What will we do during the holidays? For entertainment? With our money? Will we have a television? What size screen? Where will our computer be? Pets? Roommates? Kids?

We were starting the adult work of creating and shaping our new household. Even though most of these questions had to do with our house (or apartment, to be more accurate during those early years), they were questions about much more than housing. These seemingly innocent domestic questions were ultimately connected to something much deeper: our values, our priorities, our hopes, our emotions, our relationships, our healing, and, in the end, our Christian faith.

People always make domestic decisions based on deeper values. It turns out this has always been the case. How we humans craft our domestic life is intricately connected to how we approach life itself.

## DO WE PUT LOCKS ON OUR DOORS?

The word *house* may conjure obvious and familiar images in our minds (couches and tables, doors and windows, beds and chairs), but that doesn't mean there is something inevitable about the shape of our domestic life. Writer and historian Bill Bryson researched the entire human history of houses and homes and apartments and concluded that “nothing about this house, or any house, is inevitable. Everything had to be thought of—doors, windows, chimneys, stairs.”<sup>1</sup>

Bryson spends 581 pages recounting the fascinating relationship between humans' values and priorities and how they shaped (and shape) their housing. Domesticity has always been an important part of our humanity. As Bryson reflects on millennia of humans and their households:

Houses are really quite odd things. They have almost no universally defining qualities: they can be of practically any shape, incorporate virtually any material, be of almost any size. Yet wherever we go in the world we recognize domesticity the moment we see it. This aura of homeliness is, it turns out, extremely ancient.<sup>2</sup>

As Bryson recounts, a storm off the coast of Scotland in 1850 led to a striking reminder of exactly how ancient the questions of household really are. The storm raged for two days over the Orkney Islands. When it finally subsided, the locals realized that a large, grass-covered knoll they had always used as a

landmark had been stripped of its grass coverings. Revealed underneath were “the remains of a compact, ancient stone village, roofless but otherwise marvelously intact.”<sup>3</sup>

This ancient village, which came to be called Skara Brae, consisted of nine houses still holding many of their last occupants’ household items. These contents, and the structure of the houses and village itself, tell us lots about the people who lived there. This is remarkable given the fact that the village was last lived in thousands of years ago. The shape of their houses (and their mundane contents) tell us much about these people.

In Skara Brae, for example, they found a drainage system in each home—with slots in the walls to wash away wastes. This small, mundane detail tells us something about what they valued—cleanliness perhaps? Every little domestic detail at Skara Brae was purposefully crafted by the original inhabitants and is worth noting:

- The walls were up to ten feet high—leaving plenty of headroom.
- Their floors were paved.
- Their doors had locks.
- They had built-in stone dressers and shelves and water tanks.
- They had covered passageways between the houses that led to a paved, open area where tasks could be done in a social setting.

Here's the thing: none of these details were inevitable. They were all purposeful and tell us something about the values and priorities and habits of the people who lived there. Consider, for example, the fact that all of the houses were the same size and built to the exact same plan. This mundane domestic detail tells us something about their values, perhaps "suggesting a kind of genial commune rather than a conventional tribal hierarchy."<sup>4</sup>

This remarkable find tells us that folks living thousands of years ago did the same thing I did while standing in my kitchen looking into my trash can: they made decisions about their homelife that were intricately connected to their values and hopes and fears and priorities. Even seemingly small housing decisions are important. Consider the fact that archaeologists found at Skara Brae one dwelling separated from the others. This dwelling was much like the others except for one tiny detail: the lock on the front door was on the *outside* of the door. Think about everything that implies. A small, domestic detail that tells us a lot. (I assume this was where they locked up people who refused to recycle their newspapers and cans.)

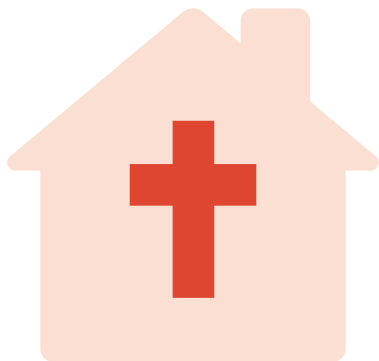
These days a trip to Home Depot may seem as far from your values and priorities and spirituality as possible, but the reality is how we set up and live in our housing matters desperately. It is central to the shape of our life. And for those of us who are Christians, seemingly mundane domestic matters turn out to be central to our discipleship as well.



## DO HOUSEHOLDS MATTER TO JESUS?

As a disciple of Jesus, I take an interest in what interests Jesus. What matters to Jesus matters to me—or at least it should. And so it is noteworthy to me as a Christian that households seemed to matter to Jesus.

Consider the fact that Jesus used the household to describe his kingdom. Many of his teachings and parables about his kingdom drew strongly from domestic language and imagery, causing some scholars to conclude that the household is “the central image that informs Jesus’s explication of the kingdom.”<sup>5</sup> Jesus didn’t talk about his kingdom with imperial or military pictures but with images from everyday households (fig. 1.1), with God as a father.<sup>6</sup> This has led some to conclude that Jesus’ whole life and ministry “demonstrated a household concern.”<sup>7</sup>



**FIGURE 1.1**

Jesus did not try to supplant the traditional household as we see in some other world religions and spiritual movements. Rather, Jesus embraced and valued the household, choosing individual homes as a central tool of his new kingdom. Much of the time Jesus spent in ministry was spent in the context of houses and families.<sup>8</sup> This domestic preference was purposeful and explicit.

It is significant that Jesus pursued his redemptive ministry in a household context. Mark's Gospel seems to emphasize this, showing us how Jesus was willing to speak to whole crowds but that his endgame was always to have people come closer to him, to sit down with him in homey proximity. This shows how reliable and effective the household context is as a sort of redemptive laboratory—a place where we can really be known and know others, a place of unhurried conversation.

This connection between discipleship and the household remained strong in the early church. As Michael F. Trainor points out in *The Quest for Home*, “The earliest Christians were members of households and gathered in houses to ponder the story of Jesus and its implications for their lives in the Greco-Roman culture in the late first century C.E.”<sup>9</sup> The household became the “basic social unit of the church.”<sup>10</sup>

So intertwined were the Christian life and the household that the earliest requirements for church leaders had to do with their domestic life. Do you want to know how to choose a good leader for your local church? The pastoral epistles are clear: look

inside their home (see, for example, 1 Timothy 3:1-13). The mundane, domestic details of life (how someone handles finances, how they parent, how their household is doing) are signals to whether someone would make an apt spiritual leader of a church. They understood the everyday home is one of God's chosen contexts for working in his people's lives.

While God can (and does) interact with individuals in a vacuum, he often uses the household as a reliable laboratory for discipleship. Consider Paul's conversion. We tend to focus on the interaction Paul had with God on the road to Damascus—a bright light and a voice from heaven are pretty memorable. But remember it was actually in Judas's house on Straight Street that Paul's conversion really took seed. As Luke records the events, "Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank" (Acts 9:8-9). God got his attention on the road, but it was three days in Judas's house on Straight Street where God's words began to work on Paul, where he clearly heard what he was supposed to do.

As I reflect back in life I can see that God has certainly worked in my own life outside of my home (through special times of prayer, lonely walks, retreats of silence, corporate worship services—plenty of Damascus Road moments), but it seems the most consistent place of life change in my past

## FEELS LIKE HOME

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The routines, activities, and relationships of a household all work together to create an atmosphere, a certain character or undercurrent that defines the home. When asked to describe their households, most Christians use positive—indeed, homey—language.

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Comfortable: 69%  
Loving: 67%  
Safe: 65%  
Peaceful: 55%  
Casual: 54%  
Joyful: 51%  
Playful: 41%  
Nurturing: 38%  
Old-fashioned: 25%  
Intellectual: 22%  
Artistic: 14%  
Messy: 14%  
Tense: 9%  
Crowded: 6%  
Secretive: 6%  
Sad: 4%  
In crisis: 3%



FIGURE 1.2

has been in that messy, humbling, in-your-face laboratory of the household—like when I was taking out the trash as a newlywed—more of a Straight Street moment.

This highlights the importance of the home and the overall atmosphere of the home. Do our homes have an overall atmosphere that is conducive to the discipleship work God wants to do inside us? The latest research underscores just how important the overall atmosphere of a home is. We'll get into the research in more detail in chapter three, but for now notice in figure 1.2 the words that are the most common descriptors of the atmospheres of Christian homes (with more common answers indicated with a larger font).

- 1.** Which words would you use to describe the atmosphere of your own household? Which two or three words would be the biggest?
- 2.** Which two or three words do you *wish* described the atmosphere of your home?
- 3.** In your experience, what changes the atmosphere in a home over time?

The atmosphere of our homes matters because this is where much of our discipleship growth occurs. Where has God most consistently formed my character, healed my heart, and taught me the values of his kingdom? In my home, through marriage, parenting, hospitality, close friendships, chores and routines

and tragedies and parties and unhurried conversations and inviting people over for a meal.

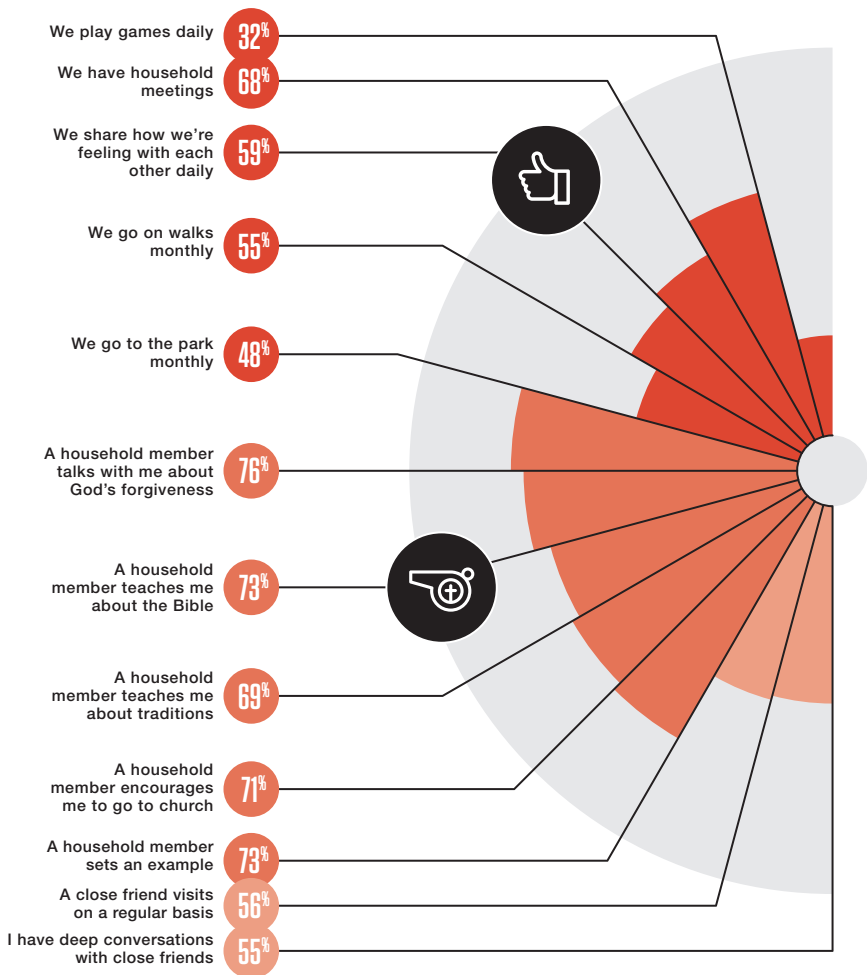
It turns out the household is not only connected to our deeper values and priorities (as we see in Skara Brae), but it is also connected to God's real discipleship work inside of his followers (as we see in Jesus and the early church). As Tish Harrison Warren put it so memorably, "The crucible of our formation is in the anonymous monotony of our daily routines."<sup>11</sup> The household is the ideal place for us to work out our Christian discipleship.

### **WHAT ABOUT ME AND MY HOUSEHOLD?**






This all means that we may need to reexamine the spiritual significance of our own mundane household moments. As Warren put it, "If I am to spend my whole life being transformed by the good news of Jesus, I must learn how grand, sweeping truths—doctrine, theology, ecclesiology, Christology—rub up against the texture of an average day. How I spend this ordinary day in Christ is how I will spend my Christian life."<sup>12</sup>

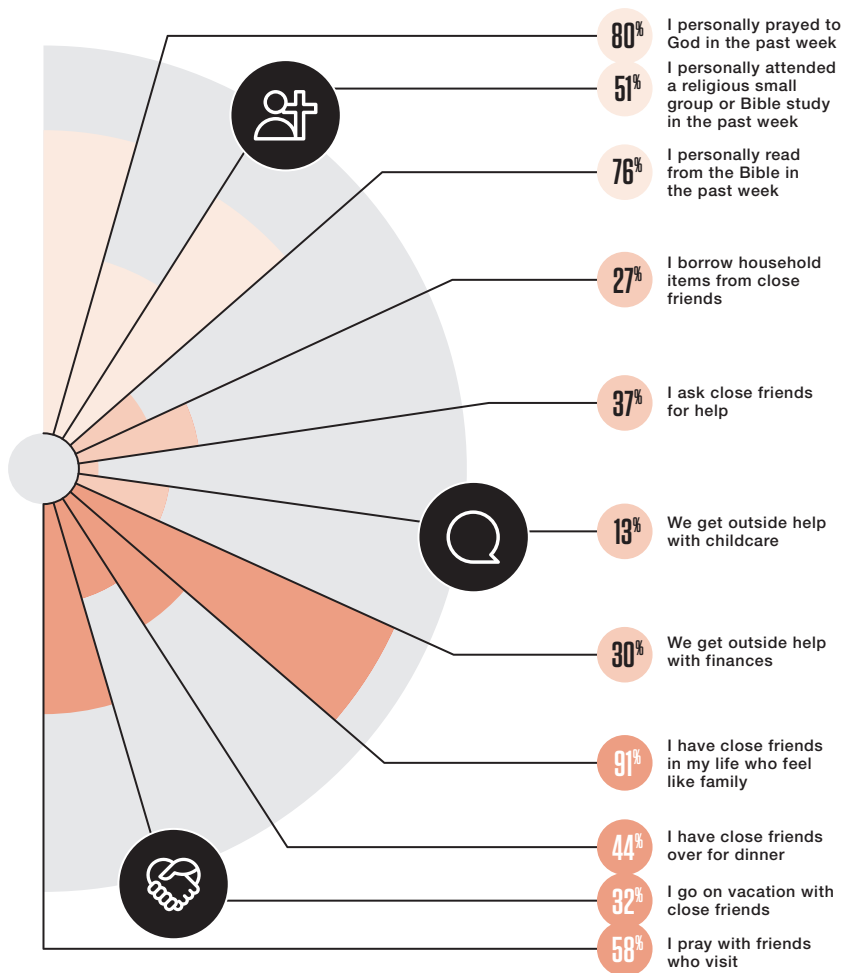
Just as in Skara Brae, our values and priorities will get worked out in these mundane domestic decisions and habits. With those we live everyday life with. Like Wendy and me working on our recycling (and communicating) habits on a slow Saturday morning. The latest research on spiritually vibrant homes shows this clearly. Notice in figure 1.3 the twenty-three separate activities that correspond with more spiritual vibrancy in a home.

# WHAT MAKES FOR A VIBRANT HOUSEHOLD?





-  Spends fun, quality time together
-  A spiritual coach is present
-  Welcomes others
-  Asks for help
-  Members have a personal spirituality



**FIGURE 1.3**

- 1.** How many of the activities listed in figure 1.3 were present in your household growing up?
- 2.** How many of the activities listed in figure 1.3 are present in your current household?
- 3.** The research finds a correlation between these activities and spiritual vibrancy. What connections can you imagine exist between some of the more mundane activities and being more spiritually vibrant?

While there are a number of explicitly spiritual or religious activities that mark spiritually vibrant homes (like teaching about the Bible, praying with friends, or praying together), it is somewhat surprising how many of these twenty-three activities are mundane in nature (like going to the park monthly, going on walks, asking friends for help, playing games). Yet the research is clear: mundane household activities are spiritually significant.

We see the same dynamic play out in the Bible with Joshua and his household. We tend to think of Joshua's household proclamation in Joshua 24 as a leadership moment. After going in to possess the Promised Land, Joshua called all the leaders together for a covenant renewal ceremony to remind the tribes' leaders of the big picture: God gave them the land; when they crossed the Jordan River they were drawing a line. Joshua did have great leadership words that day:

Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD. (Joshua 24:14-15)

Sounds like a leadership moment, right? And it was. But consider again how Joshua concluded this famous call to faithfulness:

But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.  
(Joshua 24:15)

Joshua wasn't just a man of God. He was a man in a household. And as such he needed to decide along with his household how they together were going to live out their faith in the nitty-gritty moments of life. It's worth noting that in the land they were about to possess, homes were filled with small statues of gods placed in niches in the walls. Joshua knew the everyday domestic temptations they would face and so stood up with his household to decide how they were going to live every day by serving God.

A little bit like Wendy and me on that Saturday morning. I wasn't just a disciple of Jesus as I looked down at my trash; I was a part of a household. A household that needed to figure

out how it was going to recycle—and communicate. But is recycling too mundane to really have spiritual significance? Consider the questions Tish Warren poses for us:

God made us to spend our days in rest, work, and play, taking care of our bodies, our families, our neighborhoods, our homes. What if all these boring parts matter to God? What if days passed in ways that feel small and insignificant to us are weighty with meaning and part of the abundant life that God has for us?<sup>13</sup>

*What if all these boring parts matter to God?* This question invites us all to examine the spiritual significance of our mundane domestic moments.

Just like the people who lived thousands of years ago in Skara Brae and the people who lived with Joshua in ancient Israel and the people who lived in the early church in Palestine during the Greco-Roman period, I, too, have a household. And how I create and shape my domestic habits matters immensely.

But how do we really know if all these boring household parts really matter to God? The Bible, it turns out, has a lot to say about households.

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