

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Building Faith at Home

Your Glorious (and limited) Home Sovereignty Study #1

(Romans 12:1-2)

Introduction: A fearsome February...

The Bible says, *[1 John 4:18] perfect love casts out fear* - and we believe it. Sadly, since most of us have not been completely perfected in love, from time to time, we still fear.

We may fear things that go “bump” in the night or an empty house or public speaking.

I have feared a few phone calls and visits, several doctors’ reports concerning loved ones, and more than one approaching storm while in the backcountry.

You may be able to think of things that frighten you, too. From dread phobias that only you know about to understandable fears about national and international threats.

Throughout the month of February we’re going to be looking at how to build faith at home. And I’m scared.

Throughout this four message series, Pastor Jeff and I are going to be bringing messages that we hope will help you establish a home where Jesus is Lord.

Jeff is going to have a lot to say about the amazing influence potential of the home. And he’ll develop that thought as he speaks to the themes of marriage and some parenting issues.

I’ll bookend the series with something today about the beauty of a grace-filled home established under the Lordship of Jesus and then something at the end about developing a vision for the powerful impact that a faith-filled home can make in our world.

It makes great sense to bring a series of messages on Sunday mornings that deal with building faith at home. Home is important! And, “Building Faith at Home” is one of the agreed-upon Core Values here at Northwest.¹

I want everyone who is a part of our church - married without kids, married with kids, single with kids, empty nesters, single and living alone, single and living with roommates - to enjoy a faith-in-Jesus-friendly home.

We all long to see homes where Jesus is the recognized Lord.

So why am I frightened?

Well, I’m frightened of bringing a certain kind of message today, or presenting a certain kind of approach to the series. I fear speaking about home life as if it was simple. It’s not simple.

- “Pat-answer-ism”

I fear giving light answers to weighty problems, simplistic solutions to complex challenges, and pat answers to thorny issues.

Regardless of the make-up of your home life, the challenges your home faces are numerous and complex.

With those challenges staring you square in the face, you don’t need me reducing them to something simplistic. That’s wouldn’t be fair.

Of course, I desperately hope that there will be something useful in these messages. But at this point in my life, and after having served as a pastor for three decades, I have come to detest “pat” answers.

¹ Our Core Values are: Loving and Living the Bible, Bringing Our Friends to Jesus, Building Faith at Home, Generous Living and Giving, Masks-Off Relating, and Dependence on God

- “*Formula-ism*”

I fear that what you will hear in what I’m saying is that there is a formula, which, if followed, will “fer-sure” result in a God-honoring home.

It is not hard to find a seminar that will tell us how to run a home according to the Bible. And some of these seminars and the books that accompany them are very helpful.

But I find it intriguing that there is precious little material in the Bible that is written about the family in the form we would have put it in had we written the Bible.

Now I don’t want to overstate the case.

There is some crucial instruction in the Bible about how husbands and wives should be with each other and how parents and children are to be with each other.

But there are no lists.

There is no section in the Bible where we find “Six Principles of Godly Fathering” or “The Eight Steps to Being a Great Brother / Sister / Aunt / Husband / Wife.”

What the Bible gives us is mystery, nuance, a lot of complexity, and fascinating, intriguing, bewildering story after story after story.

As important as we believe family is (and I really do believe it is important!), the Bible’s instruction about family comes in a format that mocks our interest in neat outlines. It pushes us to trust a Person rather than a formula.

- “*Guarantee-ism*”

I also fear that you will walk away with the idea that certain behaviors on your part will guarantee certain behaviors or faith responses on the part of others in your home.

I don’t believe that the Bible offers such a guarantee - and I want you to know that up front.

Of course, there are wise ways to carry on at home. And living wisely will increase the likelihood of a movement toward peace, joy, and love under God in your home.

But each person who lives in or visits your home and mine is a free-will agent who will make his or her own choices about whether to submit to God or not.

If we believe that by our *example* or *love* or even our *prayers* we can guarantee godliness in the people in our home, we’ve climbed way out on a shaky limb without much Biblical support.

These are only a few of my favorite fears.² So, given my fear and the potential pitfalls, why bring a series of messages on building faith at home at all?

Because, again, home is vitally important. What goes on in homes is the passing of the torch of the faith from one generation to another, from one friend to another. AND we are going to bring these messages because the age in which we live is often not kind to a faith-in-Jesus home life.

Seeking a place in our homes today are influences that have never had such easy access as they do now. The nearly infinite array of entertainment option is mind-boggling. Everything from the very wholesome to the utterly destructive is all available with the click of a mouse.

For the last several decades it has been true that about as many marriages in America will make it as won’t. And that holds about as true for church and non-church marriages.

Parents face new challenges every month with advancing technologies, including Facebook’s many faces, texting (sexting), Twitter, and the ever-present Internet.

Young adults (my word for teenagers) face the same challenges I faced as a young adult - only about five to seven years earlier than I did.

² Another would be my fear that anyone would think that I think that I’ve got this family thing figured out or that I am the answer man - although people who know me well are unlikely to trend this way.

It's time. It's time to give attention to building faith at home.³

There are fires burning in some of our homes that need to be put out. There is some protection that other homes could use to keep fires from starting.

So, today we launch our series. And I'll offer, now, a bit of pastorly confession.

You may remember that last week I told you we would be taking a break from Romans for our look at building faith at home.

Well, coming into this week I knew that what I wanted to explore today were two ideas.

- (1). I wanted to fuel a vision for homes that are "Grace Places."
- (2). I wanted to say that the first step toward establishing a "Grace Place" home is a personal commitment to the Lordship of Christ by the one person every one of us is responsible for: the person we see in the mirror.

Frankly, there is no text I could think of that combined those two thoughts more perfectly than Romans 12:1-2. So, back to Romans we go!

Paul's first words out of the chute are like a drink of cool water on a hot, February day in San Antonio.⁴

God's Mercies to You and Me (v. 1a)

[1a] Therefore, I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God

What's the "Therefore" there for?

You have heard it before and it's true. Whenever you see a "**Therefore**", stop and ask, "*What is the 'Therefore' there for?*"

Well, THIS "**therefore**" divides the letter of Romans in two. Paul uses it to point to what he has already said as the basis for what he is about to say.

³ The title of a very good book by Mark Holmen.

⁴ You'll remember that Romans 9-11 was a parenthetical section in the letter in which Paul explored the question, "What about the Jews?"

In what he has already said, we have become convinced of the universal sin of humanity and the amazing grace of God. We are lost and He found us. We were without hope, and He saved our eternal souls.

Jesus died for everyone, but not everyone is saved. Only those who confess, "**Jesus is Lord**" and who believe that God raised Jesus from the dead are saved. Faith alone in Christ alone saves. Eternal life does not come from works. It is all of faith, a free gift of God's amazing grace.

It was these and a few other thoughts that prompted Paul to conclude chapter 11 with this great doxology:

[33] Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! [34] FOR WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR? [35] OR WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN? [36] For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

So, as we turn to Romans 12, Paul wants us reflecting on God's mercies, poured out on us in Jesus. And on the basis of those mercies, he "**urges**" us toward something.

The Language of Motivation

To "urge" is NOT to command

To "urge" someone to do something is not to command them and it is not to order them around.

Army drill sergeants don't "urge" new recruits to do more push-ups. They order it!

When Paul "urges" us toward something, he's not being a drill sergeant - but he's giving more than a helpful suggestion. This is more than him advising a course to follow. Think, "plead" or "beg." And Paul's "**urging**" is based on the mercies we have received from God in Jesus.

With that appeal hanging out there we think about grace.

God doesn't deal with us on the basis of rules and regulations and "have-to's" and "ought-to's." It is on the basis of GRACE. God's mercy and grace and kindness to us stand as an invitation to imitation.

I believe that God is calling us to lead lives that are marked by grace and mercy and kindness.

And this morning, our eyes are turned toward home. Can we hear the call to treat those with whom we live with the same grace and mercy and kindness we have been shown by God? Can we hear the call to establish a home that is a "Grace Place"?

Imagining your home a "Grace Place"

There are lots of ways to talk about what home life is all about.

One way to state what Kathy and I do is to say that we run a household. And, yes, it is true that we run a household. We pay bills, cook meals, tend a garden, mow the lawn, and clean the house.

But that doesn't begin to touch what our true aim is. Much closer would be to say that we are seeking to establish a home where Jesus' Lordship comes shining through;⁵ that through our own "one-flesh" relationship others are blessed; that our home would be a "Grace Place."

How would you describe what you are all about at home? Wouldn't it boil down to something like, "*I want to see a culture created in my home where we treat each other with the grace, kindness, and mercy that we have received from God.*"?

I'll bet there is no one here today who would be satisfied with a home that was simply a smooth-running machine. Efficiency is wonderful, but who wants someone to walk away from our home thinking, "*Now THAT is an efficient home!*"?

⁵ One particularly noxious way to look at what I do here at Northwest is to say that I run a church. Now, it is true that I and the Elders and staff and other leaders do run a church. But that doesn't begin to state what we are really trying to do. What we are really all about is seeking to follow Jesus by creating a grace-based culture that has us all passionately pursuing life-changing relationships with God, with each other, and with our world!

When people leave our homes we want them thinking, "*I felt so welcomed. What a loving home.*" We want a home that looks like what the Christian life is supposed to look like.

The vision is that our homes will be laboratories where we seek to apply the New Testament's "*one anothers*" and where we treat each other with love. We want waaaay more than a place where everybody follows the rules!

Imagine your home, a place where grace is the prominent theme, where mercy reigns. Where the culture (yes, homes have cultures) is not rules and "got-to's" and "gotchas" and guilt, but a Jesus-centered kindness.

Picture acceptance. Honesty. Compassion. Purity. Passion for each other and for Jesus.

To have a home that is steeped in grace and mercy and love and blessing would be a dream come true.

As we move forward in our consideration of building faith at home, let's not aim low. Let's shoot for the stars. Dream together with those with whom you live. Brainstorm about how creatively and joyfully you can establish a home where the prominent themes are grace, forgiveness, and mercy.

Sounds exciting, doesn't it! You bet it does!! And here's the throat-clearing reality...

A healthy home *can be* faith's incubator. In fact, that is the hope and the vision. But, it *might not be*, even when you or others in your home desperately want it to be.

Not that we can't each do something. It's just that none of us can do everything to ensure a "building faith at home" home.

So here's a thought...

At various points in Romans Paul has talked about God's sovereignty. God is sovereign over history and He is sovereign over our lives.⁶

I'm going to go out on a limb and suggest that the next words in Romans from Paul address another sort of sovereignty: a very limited *human* sovereignty.

You and I, sons and daughters of God, are given a certain control. And with that area of control we have a choice. Paul's got us thinking about God's mercies.

We know a big "ask" is coming. He's going to URGE us to do something - and each one of us here has the sovereign authority to do it.

Ready?

Our Response to God's Mercies (v. 1b)

[1] Therefore, I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies⁷ a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual⁸ service of worship.⁹

This is a call to commitment to God, whole-hearted and eager. It is a call that holds nothing back, as the image of sacrifice makes clear.

⁶ He has sovereign authority to persuade some hardened sinners to see the beauty of the cross of Christ and draw them to faith, and He has sovereign authority to allow others to continue in their rebellion ("**give over**" - Romans 1).

⁷ In the Greek first century world, there was the idea that physical things were corrupt and evil and weak, and that which was spirit was inherently good. Thus, the ideal in Greek philosophy was to be free from the degrading influence of the body. The Greek or the educated Roman would never say, "*Present your bodies to God/god*" for they believed that the mind or the spirit was what was important. The body was the prison-house of the soul. This is not a biblical way of looking at things. Jesus' Incarnation, which we celebrate every Christmas, is evidence that the body is not inherently evil - God Himself slipped into a human body.

⁸ The Greek word we render "spiritual" here is more frequently translated "reasonable" I think that this would actually fit the context better than "spiritual."

⁹ Or, as Eugene Peterson writes in *The Message*, "*Take your everyday, ordinary life - your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking around life - and place it before God as an offering.*"

Your Body - A Living Sacrifice

"Sacrifice" in the Old Testament

There were a lot of sacrifices made in Old Testament times and there were lots of different kinds of sacrifices under the Mosaic system of Law. All Jews understood that sacrifices were an integral part of worship.¹⁰

And here's how the sacrificial system worked.

When a Jew wanted to express his devotion to the Lord, he would select a lamb, goat, ox, or bird, bring it to the tabernacle or the temple, and present it to the Lord.

Then, he would lay his hands on the animal's head, signifying substitution and identification. Then, he would slaughter it. After this, the priest would burn the carcass on the altar.

That was the Old Testament. We also find the vocabulary of "sacrifice" in the New Testament. But, no longer are we to offer animals to the Lord.

By His death, the Lord Jesus has made those sacrifices unnecessary forever. His sacrificial death paid the penalty for our sins for all time.

But here Paul throws us for a loop with words about us being "**living sacrifices.**"

"Sacrifice" here

That, my friends, is an oxymoron. As you probably know, an oxymoron is a combination of two apparently contradictory terms in one phrase.

We all have favorite oxymora. A list of mine would include:

- bureaucratic efficiency
- Airline food
- Jumbo shrimp

¹⁰ In addition, Paul's Greek and Roman readers would have been thoroughly familiar with the idea of sacrifices.

- Pretty ugly
- Definite maybe
- Deeply superficial (thanks, Andy Warhol)
- Deafening silence
- South Texas winters/seasons

You probably have your own favorites. But the term, “*living sacrifice*” is an oxymoron, because every sacrifice the people of God had ever known was a DEAD sacrifice.

Still, while the phrase is striking for its incongruity, Paul has crafted an extremely helpful word picture.

Here’s the thought:
Living in light of the mercies we have received means offering ourselves up to God and giving ourselves to Him as completely as the Old Testament sacrifices were given to God.

I remember when I first heard the idea that God wanted my whole life - lock, stock, and barrel. I was nervous about climbing up on an altar (even a figurative one!). But, as a high school student, I did so. That decision to thoroughly commit to Jesus led to the most amazing period of joy and freedom and fullness I had ever known.

Sadly, and as you have perhaps heard, the problem with living sacrifices is that they keep crawling off the altar. And I crawled off the altar.

Truth be told, my life has been a series of decisions to climb back up on the altar and to re-offer my life to God - lock, stock, and barrel.

Paul is urging us to make a decision, but it is NOT a “once-and-for-all” decision. If you are at all like me, you may crawl on and off and on the altar over and over and over again.

But I have found that L-I-F-E is found there on the altar for God and nowhere else. And I have never regretted yielding to the will of God.

If you have never before today presented your body (your life!) to God as a living sacrifice, I URGE you to do so. I truly believe that you will never ever regret it, either!

Yes, Scripture is giving us a very strong call today. But it is a call into life! And it is only reasonable. It is the most reasonable way to live, given the mercies that we have received from God.

That is Paul’s thought when he writes that presenting your body to God as a living sacrifice is your “*spiritual* (or “reasonable”) *service of worship*.”¹¹

Your Living Sacrifice - Acceptable to God!

Paul would want us to know that we are not worshipping unless our lives are marked by conscious, consecrated, self-sacrifice to God.

And whenever we do present our bodies as living sacrifices to God, in whatever context, we have presented God with a true service of worship.

Now, that kind of worship can certainly happen at 9:30 or 11:00 on a Sunday morning. And I hope that it does - and is! - happening regularly as we meet here at Northwest.

But, much more to the point, what Paul has in mind are little “*services of worship*” occurring all throughout the day.

Those living-sacrifice service-of-worship moments happen at work, at school, and at play. They can happen morning, noon, and night.

And they can happen at home.

- When you have pressing matters to take care of and still take time to listen to your child tell you about her day.
- When, out of nowhere and for no good reason, you take your husband or your wife in your arms and express how much they mean to you and how much you thank God for them.

¹¹ The word that Paul uses here to express the kind of worship that is going on when we offer our bodies as living sacrifices to God is a peculiar word. It is not the normal word used in the New Testament to describe worship. It is the Greek word “*latreia*.” Unlike the normal word for worship (which means “to bend the knee”) “*latreia*” is what I call a “stained glass word.” There is about “*latreia*” the idea of liturgy, and it actually means “to serve God by ritual sacrifice.”

- When you take a break from hectic schedules to enjoy a meal with your roommates to share life and God.
- When you give up a favorite TV show to invite friends over for real, live, face-to-face interaction about the stuff that counts.
- When you pause before meals or at bedtime or at random times to pray, out loud, with and for people in your home, making prayer the common language of your Jesus-centered home.

At every point of need and with every new challenge we can present our bodies to God as living sacrifices.

And this - personally choosing to climb up on the altar - is the most pro-active thing any of us here today can do to build faith at home.

Decisions to have a home where Jesus is Lord are made one person at a time. Homes where Jesus reigns are occupied by people who have personally enthroned Jesus.

If you want a home that pulsates with Jesus' love and joy, start with you. YOU be the one to leaven your home with grace. YOU spread salt and create thirst for Christ. YOU shine the light of His mercy by your mercy.

None of us can enthrone Jesus in anyone else's heart. As much as you might wish you could, you can't. The only sovereignty God has granted you is the sovereignty to choose to submit to Him, yourself.

And such a response - submitting to God; living according to His agenda - is only reasonable in light of the mercies He's given.

And what's next? What follows the act of (mentally) climbing up on the altar and giving yourself to God?

In a word, change.

As we enthrone Jesus to His rightful place in our lives and commit to joyful submission, we embark on a never-ending journey of life transformation.

The Ever-Changing "Jesus-Enthroned" Life (v. 2)

[2] And do not be conformed to this world,¹² but be transformed¹³ by the renewing of your mind so that you may prove what the will of God is,¹⁴ that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

Breaking Out of the Mold of Conformity

God loved you so much that He sent His Son to die for you, just as you were.¹⁵ And He continues to love you so much that He will work in your life to change you into a stunning reflection of His Son to the world.

Change comes as we reject the world and its ways.¹⁶ As Paul uses the word here, the world is the system that is committed to values that don't last. The world ignores the unseen, the eternal, and the spiritual.

We face constant pressure to allow the world to squeeze us into its mold through media, music, movies, and more. Paul says, "*Don't go there!*" There's no future in following the world's lead.

Instead, cooperate with the leading of the Holy Spirit and allow God to transform you into the person He wants you to be.¹⁷

¹² Note the negative slant of the first part of the verse. This is a strict prohibition. The form of the verb is significant. It is a present imperative, better translated, "*stop being conformed.*" Paul either assumed or knew that the Roman Christians were, to some extent, being conformed to the world. He wanted them to stop it!

¹³ Some have made a great deal out of the difference between "conform" and "transform." But, there is actually little difference in the words themselves. "Conform" is used in a good sense in 8:29. Note, too, that Jesus was "transformed" (same word as here) at the Transfiguration (Matthew 16).

¹⁴ This verse is frequently understood very differently from the way I understand it. Some feel that Paul is teaching the means by which a Christian can come to know, in a specific way, what it is that God wants them to do in a given situation. My own sense is that the kind of commitment being discussed here does not at all assure a Christian that he will know "*God's will*" for which job to take, which person to marry, which courses to sign up for in college, or which car to buy. Paul is saying that that which is "good, acceptable, and perfect" IS the will of God.

¹⁵ See Romans 5:8 -

¹⁶ In 1 John 2:17, John's contribution to our understanding of the *world* is that it is consumed by selfish lusts.

¹⁷ It is also an interesting command because, grammatically, the action that we are to carry out is given in the passive voice - which makes little or no sense to us. Paul

Allowing God to Transform You!

Yielding yourself to God's transforming power is the road to follow if you want to become more loving, more honest, less selfish, more joyful, wiser, and more compassionate.

Do you want to lead a more God-honoring life at work or at school? Climb up on the altar, present yourself to God as a living sacrifice, reject the world's backwards values, and submit to God.

Do you want to be the salt and light of Jesus to those in your home? Is it your dream to entice those you live with you or those who come over to your home toward Jesus? Follow the same path.

Present your LIFE to God. Don't allow the world to conform you to its mold. Then, by the influence of the Word of God and the people of God, allow the Spirit of God to transform you from the inside out into a witness in your home to the life-changing power of Jesus.

Conclusion:

The abundant life Jesus promised is available in fullest measure - but only to those who enthrone Him and present themselves as "living sacrifices."

When YOUR life is one in which Jesus reigns supreme and others in your home have also enthroned Jesus, you will, together, build faith at home.

And there are few things more beautiful or more powerful than a Jesus-is-Lord home!

has literally directed us to carry out a command that is up to the initiative of Another to perform. The best I can do in paraphrasing what Paul means here is to suggest something like, "*allow yourselves to be transformed.*" We are to actively yield ourselves to the process of transformation.