

House Cleaning
Leviticus 16:1-22, 29-34

Well, Thanksgiving is just around the corner, and that means family get-togethers, and lots of wonderful food. But before everyone shows up, for most of us it also means some housecleaning is in order.

God's Old Testament people celebrated at the end of their harvest season, just like we do. They spent a whole week observing the Feast of Tabernacles, while we make do with just one day. We'll look more at that festival next week.

But every year about a week before the Feast of Tabernacles, before their great festival of thanksgiving could begin, they would celebrate Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Moses taught the people to observe this solemn ceremony in Leviticus 16, with all of its animal sacrifices. But what does all this blood have to do with cleaning house? And what does all this mean to us?

Look at verse 16. The high priest does all the things described in this chapter in order to make atonement for the Holy Place, the tabernacle or tent of meeting where God dwelt among His people. The tent of meeting had to be cleansed once a year because of the sins of the people. If God was going to continue to live among His people, God's house had to be cleansed.

That much is clear, but what does that have to do with us? However beautiful this room may be, we know we don't have to come in here in order to meet with God. We know that all who trust in Christ have instant and immediate access to God Almighty.

But more than that, we also know that Jesus' Holy Spirit dwells in all who trust in Him. The power and comfort of God live within all His people now – we, the church, are the true temple of God. So why do we need to pay attention to all these old rituals?

Well, if we know we should clean up our houses whenever company's coming, and if we know that God dwells not in a building but in our hearts, shouldn't we check to see if our hearts need a little house cleaning? Instead of worrying about the ritual cleansing of our place of worship, shouldn't our focus be all the more on ridding ourselves of sin?

God's Old Testament people understood that. Verse 30 tells us that the priest was also making atonement for the people, to cleanse them that they might be clean from all their sins before the Lord. We are the people of God. We are the temple of God. So, is it time for a little housecleaning?

Well, can we doubt it? Since July, we've been studying through the book of James, and he's held up quite a high standard for Christian behavior, hasn't he? We've learned that our faith

in God should govern every aspect of our lives, from the words we speak to the plans we make, from our attitudes toward other people to the fervency of our prayers. After studying James' letter, can any of us go on imagining that we are living the way God wants us to?

No, none of us can claim that we don't know any better. And none of us can claim that we aren't sinners. But haven't we been taught that we only need to confess our sins and we will be forgiven? Isn't that the good news of the gospel?

That's why we come to church – to pray the prayer of confession and get a clean bill of spiritual health each week, right? That's why we confess our sins when we pray to God during our daily quiet times, right? As long as we are trying to do right and as long as we confess our sin, we don't really have to worry about punishment, right?

Well, yes, we are saved by grace. We do receive pardon that we don't deserve. But in order for that grace to be meaningful, it is important that we not treat sin lightly. It is important that we do not presume upon God's grace, by assuming that, because of the cross, sin is not a big deal.

It was hard for people at the time of Moses to treat sin lightly, because whenever they broke the law, they could see the consequences with their own eyes. If they wanted to be restored to a right relationship with God, it wasn't enough for them to be sorry. In order for them to be forgiven, something had to die.

The people of God are represented in this ceremony by two goats. One of the goats was slain as a sin offering. Its blood was shed, and this blood was taken into the most holy place. The blood was sprinkled on and in front of the ark of the covenant, so that the people might continue to live in the presence of God.

In Leviticus 16, unless the goat dies in place of the people, unless it is offered as a sin offering, the people are not clean, and cannot live in the presence of God. Unless something dies, the people cannot be holy.

Could there be a more powerful object lesson on the seriousness of sin? For the fact is that the death penalty is required for any sin, no matter how small, no matter how great. And that's because any sin is a declaration of independence from God, an act of treason against our sovereign Lord, our rightful ruler. I mean, we understand that treason against any human government deserves the death penalty, right? So, isn't it true that any time we reject the will of God we are rebelling against Him, shaking our fist in His face, denying His authority? If we sinners are, when you get right down to it, nothing more than worthless rebels, don't we deserve to die?

But if the one goat represents the people's death, then what is the meaning of the scapegoat? If the people's sins have been forgiven because of the goat that died, why are the sins of the people laid on the head of the other goat, to be carried out into the wilderness?

Well, could there be a more powerful object lesson on the need to pursue holiness? This ceremony demonstrates that it is not enough to be forgiven of our sin. We must also put sin away from us.

For we must remember that repentance includes not only confession of and sorrow for sin. It also includes sending sin away, turning away from sin, renouncing sin. Repentance is a break with sin, a divorce from sin, a change in the direction of life away from sin and towards God.

And at this point we see where the two goats actually point to the same reality. In order for us to be accepted before God, we must die, not physically, but spiritually. We must not only give up our desires, our agendas, and our self-perceived needs. We must also send our sinful selves with their sinful passions so far into the wilderness that they will never return. We must die to them. We must die to sin. We must die to a life focused on ourselves and our desires. Instead, we must live to God. We must love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

That was the true meaning of the Yom Kippur ceremony. When the high priest entered the presence of God, he was saying, "God, here is the blood of your people who have died to sin, who have put away from themselves all that is unclean. Be pleased to dwell with them."

Most of the time, when we offer Christ to people, we tell them that they should accept Him because the only alternative is death. Trust Jesus to die in your place and you will live. Trust yourself and you will die. There is much truth in that claim.

But it would perhaps be truer to say something like this: You are going to die one way or the other. If you don't trust Jesus, you will have to die, eternally separated from God. But if you do trust Jesus, you will have to die to your sin, you will have to die to yourself, so that He might live in you and through you instead. Either way, death is the only answer for sin.

Well, what can we do? Once we know we have a sin problem, and once we recognize how serious it is, can we clean ourselves up so that God would dwell with us? All too often we try to do just that. We are often tempted to point to our good deeds to justify ourselves before the living God. We tell God how hard we try to be good. We count up the dollars we put in the plate or the hours we spend serving others. But none of these things can satisfy God's demands, for none of these things involve our death to self, our death to sin. When it comes right down to it, we can't set things right with God, because we don't have the power to die and live at the same time.

And the same thing was true of God's Old Testament people. Notice that there's nothing the people could do in this ceremony, either. A quick glance at each verse in the chapter makes this quite clear: Aaron shall come into the holy place. He shall put on the garments. He shall take the sin offering. Aaron shall offer the bullock. Aaron shall cast lots. Aaron shall offer the goat as a sin offering. He does it all. The people do nothing. It is Aaron who makes atonement for the people.

In fact, verse 17 says that only the High Priest was to be in the tabernacle when the atonement for the people was made. The whole point of the whole chapter is that only the High Priest could cleanse the people.

But he does all of this in a rather surprising way. Most of the year, the High Priest was dressed in splendid, colorful robes. But on this one day, all that glory has been laid aside, and he put on a simple shirt, pants, sash, and turban all made of linen. For this ceremony alone he was dressed, in other words, as a servant.

But there's something else that is strange. Before he could go into the presence of God on behalf of his people, before he could offer the goat for his people he had to offer for himself a bull, an offering of much greater value, and bring its blood before God. What does all this mean?

When we look at Jesus, the One Who fulfills all the Old Testament rituals, it all makes sense. For Jesus is the true meaning of the Day of Atonement. The High Priest dressed in linen because Jesus laid aside all his glory which He shared with His Father from the time when the world was new. In the same way that the High Priest dressed as a servant, Jesus took on the form of a servant, bending to wash the feet of his disciples, humbling Himself to His Father's will.

The High Priest offered a more costly sacrifice for himself than for the people. And Jesus did the same thing. For to prove His love for you, it was not the blood of a bull, but His own blood that He shed, a holy and divine sacrifice, one that was worth much more than all the lives of all the people of all the nations through all the years.

The High Priest alone accomplished the ritual of the atonement, doing everything that needed to be done so that God might once again dwell with His people. And didn't Jesus do the same thing? Right before He died on the cross, He said, "It is finished." The debt that we could never pay on our own behalf – for how could we pay the death penalty and still live with God? – that impossible debt is paid in full for us. Christ has died that we might have new life.

But the scapegoat sent away in the wilderness reminds us why Christ did everything that He did. Christ died, not so that we might continue to walk in our own way, but so that we might

put away our sin, so that we might put away our old selfish lives. Christ died so that we might turn to Him instead, so that He could live His life in us.

Yes, today – and really every day – is a day for house cleaning. But the question is not whether you will clean up your house today so that God will come live with you. You can't. The question is whether you will allow Christ to cleanse you today, no, to put your sinful, rebellious self to death today, so that He might live His life within you today. Christ offered Himself as a sacrifice for sinners like me, for sinners like you. Today, will you give Him what He deserves: your soul, your life, your all?