

All My Failures

Sunday was part two of a brief sermon series on the Jewish high holy days. In part two, we focused on Yom Kippur [YOM-key-purr].

1. Warm-up Question: Many of us have pets. What's something ornery your pet has done recently?
2. Like our pets, we also mess up on a regular basis. So how should a healthy spiritual person address sin and guilt? The Jewish traditions around Yom Kippur offer great insight. Yom Kippur means Day of Atonement, the holiest day on the Jewish calendar. Although Yom Kippur happens on a specific day – the tenth day of Tishri [TISH-ree] – it's not just about a single day. Yom Kippur is the culmination of an intentional spiritual process involving weeks of preparation that unfolds in three parts. Part One begins 40 days before Yom Kippur and occupies the entire month of Elul [EL-lool], during which faithful Jews **conduct a searching self-examination**.
 - a. Self-examination is one of the hardest, most-painful things we'll ever do. The pain of admitting our mistakes to ourselves is visceral. Jeff told a story of a time he did something terrible – inadvertently insulting a group of blind high school students. He described how painful it was to admit to himself what he had done. Tell us about a time you found it easier to live in denial than to admit to something wrong you did?
 - b. Although self-examination is painful, it's the only way we can thrive and grow fully into who God calls us to be. So let's practice a bit. What's something you've done during the past week that you regret?
 - c. What's one of the worst things you've done in your life that you're able to acknowledge here in this group setting?
 - d. Psalm 139:23 says, "Search me, O God, and know my heart. Test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." During the month of Elul, faithful Jews ask themselves questions of self-examination like those listed on p. 3. Take a minute to thoughtfully read the list. Which of these questions most calls to you as an area of weakness. Tell us a little about that weakness and what you think you need to work on.
3. Part Two of the process leading up to Yom Kippur begins on the first day of Tishri and lasts ten days until Yom Kippur. During this time, faithful Jews engage in a **period of intentional repentance**. In the Bible, repentance is not just about admitting what we've done and expressing sorrow, it's about making a deliberate turnabout. It's about taking concrete steps to mend our ways. Jeff gave the illustration of how in 1492 Sir Gerald, Earl of Kildare, hacked through the door of St. Patrick's Cathedral and "chanced his arm" in order to make peace with Sir James, Earl of Ormond.

- a. Tell us about a time you did something concrete – or maybe even dramatic – to mend fences with others.
 - b. Why is fence mending such an important part of the process of repentance? Why isn't it enough to just be genuinely sorry and regretful?
 - c. Think back to your answer to Question 2.d. What's something concrete you might be able to do to address your shortcomings in that area?
4. Part Three of the Yom Kippur process happens on Yom Kippur itself. Jewish theologian Arthur Green explains it this way: "Yom Kippur is [not] a day of repentance in its primary focus. Rather, it is a day of atonement, a day when those who have failed at repentance – and which of us has not? – may cast themselves upon God's mercies and ask that God act for them. Until this final day of the season of repentance, all is up to us. It is we who are given the burden of changing our ways. Now, seeing that we have not been able to do so fully, we turn to God and ask that God be the one to act, that God offer . . . a cleansing of the slate and an opportunity for us to begin again, even to us sinners who have not been able to work our own way out of the quagmire of our tangled lives." This is Part Three of the process: **welcoming and receiving God's grace into your life.**

- a. How would you define grace? And why is it so critical that we believe in and receive grace?
- b. Here is the prayer chanted at the outset of the Yom Kippur service: "All vows, prohibitions, oaths, consecrations that we may . . . swear upon ourselves – from this Yom Kippur until the next Yom Kippur . . . – we regret them all. . . . They will all be . . . abandoned, cancelled, null and void, without power and without standing. Our vows shall not be valid vows, our prohibitions shall not be valid prohibitions, and our oaths shall not be valid oaths."

Why is this prayer so important? Why is this prayer prayed at the end of the Jewish season of repentance?

- c. Let's also read a portion of the scripture customarily read at the Yom Kippur service. Read Jonah 3:1 – 4:3. What are we supposed to learn from this passage about God's grace and how it should affect our attitude toward others who sin?
- d. Ephesians 2:8 says, "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God, not the result of works, so that no one may boast." What is it about grace that saves us?
- e. Tell us about a time when you were being ornery, yet nevertheless experienced the grace of God.

Despite all your past failures, and many yet to come, God's love for you will never fail.

Example Self-Examination Questions

1. Am I being a good spouse?
2. Am I being a good parent?
3. Am I being a good coworker?
4. Am I taking good care of my body?
5. Am I living a generous life?
6. Am I seeking justice?
7. Am I cultivating a vibrant relationship with God?
8. Am I living into the fullness of who God is calling me to be?
9. What are my weaknesses?
10. Where am I falling short?

Jewish High Holy Days

Illustrating how a healthy spiritual person deals with sin and guilt.

