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Sermon Summary #6

What is the “Jezebel Spirit”? Revelation 2:18-29

Why in the world would I take a Sunday morning and talk about what I have called in the title to this message, “The Jezebel Spirit”? There are two reasons. First, there are people alive and well in the professing evangelical church today who are guilty of the same perverted behavior as was this woman named Jezebel back in the church in Thyatira in the first century. Second, I love the spiritual gift of prophecy. I hold it in extremely high regard. It plays an important role in our corporate and private spiritual experience here at Bridgeway. And ***I am jealous to protect it from abuse and perversion***. Paul commanded us in 1 Corinthians 14:1 to earnestly desire spiritual gifts, especially that we might prophesy. Why? Because, as he said two verses later in 1 Corinthians 14:3, ***prophecy builds up, encourages, and consoles other Christians***. So, when someone appears on the scene in church history, like Jezebel did in the first century, we need to take time to identify her sin and equip ourselves to oppose its presence in our midst.

After reading in Revelation 2:19 of the splendid spiritual qualities in Thyatira, it is genuinely tragic to discover that ***moral compromise*** was present in the church. “I have this against you,” said Jesus, “that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols” (Revelation 2:20). John Stott put it bluntly: “In that fair field a poisonous weed was being allowed to luxuriate. In that healthy body a malignant cancer had begun to form. An enemy was being harboured in the midst of the fellowship” (71).

The similarity between Thyatira and Pergamum and their joint dissimilarity with Ephesus here comes to the fore. The Ephesians could not bear the presence of falsehood and took no uncertain steps in ridding the cancerous error from their assembly. But it was done at the expense of love. Not so with Thyatira. While abounding in love they had lost their sensitivity to error and had compromised the glorious truths of both doctrinal and moral uprightness.

The exact nature of the heresy in Thyatira was wrapped up in the person and practices of this woman called “*Jezebel*.” Several suggestions have been made as to her identity.

Who was Jezebel?

Some have suggested that Jezebel is none other than ***Lydia*** herself (Acts 16:14), who, if it were true, had badly fallen from the initial spiritual heights that we read about in Acts 16. Of course, there is nothing at all in the biblical text to suggest this identification.

A few Greek manuscripts include the possessive pronoun “***your***” (v. 20), on the basis of which it is argued that Jezebel was the ***wife*** of the senior pastor in Thyatira! But even if the pronoun is original, it probably refers to the corporate church in Thyatira since the preceding four uses of the singular “*your*” in vv. 19-20 clearly do so.

Jezebel may be a veiled reference to the pagan prophetess ***Sibyl Sambathe***, for whom a shrine had been built just outside the walls of the city. This is doubtful, however, and for two reasons: first, she is spoken of in rather definite terms, implying that a distinct historical personality is in mind and not merely a shrine to a pagan goddess; and second, the text suggests that the individual was actually a member of the church (externally, at any rate) of Thyatira and under the jurisdiction and authority of its leaders.

The most likely interpretation is that, in view of the opportunity granted to her for repentance, ***Jezebel was a female member of the church who was promoting destructive heresies and leading many into moral compromise***. She was a real person, but the name “Jezebel” is probably symbolic. It’s hard to imagine anyone deliberately naming their daughter “Jezebel”! Note the parallel in the letter to Pergamum in which the Nicolaitans are subsumed under the name of an Old Testament figure: Balaam. The name “Jezebel” had, in fact, become proverbial for wickedness. Thus, ***this***

disreputable, so-called “prophetess” was as wicked and dangerous an influence in Thyatira as ‘Jezebel’ had been to Israel in the OT.

Note also that she “*calls* herself a prophetess” (v. 20). I can’t imagine Jesus using this language if her prophetic gift was of the Holy Spirit. Some contend she was a born-again believer who had simply gone astray, but I suggest that her behavior and beliefs are an indication that whatever claims she made to being saved and prophetically gifted were spurious. This isn’t to say she didn’t have a supernatural power, but the latter need not always be from God (see Matt. 7:21-23; Acts 16:16-18; 2 Thess. 2:9-10).

According to 1 Kings 16:31, Jezebel was the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians, who married Ahab, king of Israel. Largely because of her influence in seeking to combine the worship of Yahweh with the worship of Baal, it is said of her husband that he “did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him” (1 Kings 16:33). Hardly an endearing legacy!

Jezebel was responsible for the killing of Naboth and confiscation of his vineyard for her husband (1 Kings 21:1-16). She sought the death of all the prophets of Israel (1 Kings 18:4; 2 Kings 9) and even came close to killing Elijah (1 Kings 19:1-3). Her death came as a result of being thrown from a window where she was then trampled by a horse. When an attempt was made to recover her body for burial, it was discovered that the only thing left was her skull, her feet, and the palms of her hands. According to 2 Kings 9:36-37, dogs had eaten her flesh, in fulfillment of a prophetic word from Elijah:

When they came back and told him, he said, “This is the word of the Lord, which he spoke by his servant Elijah the Tishbite, ‘In the territory of Jezreel the dogs shall eat the flesh of Jezebel, and the corpse of Jezebel shall be as dung on the face of the field in the territory of Jezreel, so that no one can say, This is Jezebel’” (2 Kings 9:36-37).

Although the first Jezebel had been dead for over 1,000 years, her “spirit” had, as it were, found new life in this woman of Thyatira. She may even have been the leader or hostess of a house-church in the city.

The complaint of the Lord lies in the unhealthy degree of toleration granted this woman. When it is said, “you tolerate that woman Jezebel,” the implication is that the church in general did not accept her teaching nor adopt her lifestyle. But the subsequent mention of her “lovers” and children in v. 22 indicates that a number in the community did so. These would have formed a distinct group within the church, and the church as a whole was content for them to remain.

Whereas it is probable that one individual lady is in view, others have suggested that the reference to “the woman” and “her children” sounds strangely similar to the phrase “the elect lady and her children” in 2 John 1. In 2 John this refers to the church community as a whole and to the individuals who are each a part of it. Perhaps, then, “Jezebel” is not a single person but a collective reference to a *group* of false prophets and prophetesses in Thyatira. Whether one or many, the presence of such a corrosive and corrupting influence in the church, in *any* church, simply cannot be allowed.

The Longsuffering Christ

I’m constantly stunned by the gracious and longsuffering character of our Lord Jesus Christ. Listen to his words to the church in Thyatira: “***I gave her time to repent***, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, and I will strike her children dead” (Rev. 2:21-23a).

What a stunning display of kindness and mercy, that this woman who so horribly perverted the grace of God and used it as an excuse for idolatry and licentiousness should receive the extended opportunity to turn from her ways and receive the salvation of God! By all counts she should have been immediately cast into eternal darkness. But, then, so should all of us. Praise God for his blessed longsuffering!

But our Lord’s patience has its limits. He will not indulge sin forever. He is no less holy and just than he is good and gracious.

Jezebel obviously presumed on God's grace and interpreted his longsuffering as approval or endorsement of her sinful ways, or at least his indifference toward her chosen paths. There may have been a definite time in the past when through some means, whether a prophetic word or direct encounter or perhaps through John, he issued this woman a warning, no doubt repeatedly. Whatever the case, the culpability of the false prophetess is evident. She "refuses" to repent. She clearly knew what was at issue and chose voluntarily to remain in her sin.

Was Jezebel a Christian?

This raises an important theological and practical question: ***Was Jezebel a Christian?*** My earlier comments would indicate I believe her to be unsaved, and thus some may react in horror that I raise the possibility that she might be born again. On first glance, the nature of her sin and her refusal to repent point to an unregenerate heart. But there are other factors to be considered.

For example, her judgment is said to come in the form of personal sickness, disease, or physical affliction of some sort. Jesus says, "I will throw her onto a sickbed," language that is reminiscent of the discipline imposed on the *Christians* at Corinthians who had persistently abused the Eucharist (see 1 Cor. 11:30-32). And before we too quickly conclude that someone born again could not commit such sins as are described in this passage, we should note that she is specifically charged with "teaching and seducing *my servants* to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols" (v. 20). Note well: those whom Jesus calls "my servants" are guilty of "sexual immorality" and eating "food sacrificed to idols."

Of those who participate with her in these sins, Jesus says, "I will strike her children dead." The text could literally be translated, "I will kill with death," a proverbial statement that means "to slay utterly". Although this sounds more severe than what we might call "divine discipline" of a wayward believer, is it so different from how God dealt with Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5?

The fact that they are called her "children" does not mean they are the actual physical progeny of her many sexual infidelities. They are, rather, men and women in Thyatira who had so identified with her sin that they are best described as younger members of her family. In other words, "those who commit adultery with her" (v. 22) and her "children" (v. 23) are the same people.

This also raises, yet again, the question of whether or not the "sexual immorality" in view is literal/physical or a metaphor of spiritual unfaithfulness and idolatry, perhaps especially manifest in unhealthy and illicit compromise with pagan culture. The evidence is mixed. On the one hand, I can't dismiss the possibility that literal sexual promiscuity is involved. After all, it is rare for one to embrace idolatry without yielding to sexual temptation (see Rom. 1:18ff. So it may be a false dichotomy to insist that she be guilty of *either* sexual immorality *or* religious idolatry. They seem so often (always?) to go hand in hand.

On the other hand, since there were surely at least some female followers of Jezebel, the "adultery" they are said to have committed "with her" would likely, at least in their case, be metaphorical for spiritual infidelity.

Jesus says they must repent of "her" works, i.e., since they have joined "with her" in this sin, to repent of what she did is to repent of what they, too, did. If they do not, Jesus will "throw" them "into great tribulation." The precise nature of this "tribulation" is not specified, but it would surely involve, at minimum, physical illness that in the absence of repentance would culminate in physical death.

So, was Jezebel a true Christian or not? I think the answer is No, she was not.

First, the fact that she is designated by a name that is linked historically to a woman of almost unimaginable wickedness and perversity suggests that she, too, is utterly unregenerate and devoid of spiritual life.

Second, having said that, I must also say, reluctantly, that Christians *can* fall into grievous and horrific sin. As noted, Jesus here says that his "servants" have joined with Jezebel in her works. The divine response of our heavenly Father to his backslidden children isn't eternal judgment but firm and loving discipline (see especially Hebrews 12). If that discipline is not met with heartfelt repentance, it may well lead to physical (not spiritual) death. This was certainly the

case with Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5) as well as the believers in Corinth. It would appear also to be the case with some of those in the church at Thyatira.

These are difficult matters that cannot be ignored, treated casually, or dismissed with cavalier dogmatism. Having said that, I am confident of two things. First, our Lord *will* deal with unrepentant sin. He himself declares in v. 23, “I will give to each of you according to your works.” It may not happen immediately (longsuffering as he is), but in the absence of heartfelt conviction and repentance, it will most assuredly happen. Second, although we may not have the discernment to know infallibly who is and is not saved, “the Lord knows those who are his” (2 Timothy 2:19).

The Jezebel Spirit

How is it that this woman called “Jezebel” came to exert such incredible power over the lives of Christians in Thyatira? What accounts for the authority she possessed to convince the followers of Jesus to abandon their commitment to ethical purity and engage in sexual immorality and other forms of compromise with the surrounding culture?

There’s no indication that she held an ecclesiastical office. She wasn’t an Elder or Pastor or Apostle. But she did claim to possess the gift of prophecy. Jesus said she “*calls* herself a prophetess” (v. 20).

Some may be tempted to dismiss Jezebel’s claim based on their belief that women are not allowed to exercise this spiritual gift. A quick look at several texts from the NT will demonstrate that women did indeed prophesy under the influence of the Holy Spirit. That doesn’t mean Jezebel did, but her gender was itself no barrier to the proper exercise of this gift.

In Peter's speech on the day of Pentecost he explicitly said that characteristic of the present church age is the Spirit's impartation to ***both men and women*** of the prophetic gift. Look closely at his citation of Joel's promise: “And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and ***your daughters will prophesy***, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and ***female*** servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and ***they shall prophesy***” (Acts 2:17-18; emphasis mine).

In Acts 21:9 Luke refers to the four daughters of Philip as having the gift of prophecy. And in 1 Corinthians 11:5 Paul gave instructions regarding how women were to pray and prophesy in the church meeting.

Is Jesus suggesting she only ***claimed*** to have this gift but in fact did not? Or did she have a genuine spiritual gift but ***abused*** it in ways inconsistent with NT guidelines on how it was to be exercised? If Jezebel was *not* a Christian, as I have argued, it is most likely that she exercised a supernatural “prophetic-like” ability that was energized by ***demonic*** power rather than the Spirit of God. That this was (and is) distinctly possible is evident from Matthew 7:21-23 and Acts 16:16-18 (and perhaps 2 Thess. 2:9-10).

It’s not out of the question that the presence of such false prophets and the havoc they wreaked in the early church was the principal reason why some in Thessalonica had grown weary of this phenomenon and had begun to “despise” all prophetic utterances (1 Thess. 5:20), even those that clearly were prompted by the Spirit. ***Paul’s exhortation is that they not allow the damage perpetrated by the spurious to undermine the benefits that accrue from the genuine.***

I want to suggest that it was possibly (probably?) through this alleged “prophetic” ability that Jezebel gained power and authority in the church at Thyatira and adversely influenced a number of Christians there. It’s not difficult to see how this could (and does) occur. [By the way, a ***man*** can display the characteristics of “Jezebel” no less than a woman. This is one sin that is by no means gender specific.]

A brief word is in order about my use of the phrase, “***spirit***” of Jezebel or “Jezebel spirit,” language that, although not strictly biblical, has been bandied about in charismatic circles for generations, but perhaps is not as familiar to those in mainstream evangelicalism. I’ve read numerous articles, books, and listened to an equal number of sermons on the so-called “Jezebel spirit”. To be honest, I haven’t found them very helpful. In most cases they are speculative meanderings that show little concern for the biblical text.

Let me be brief and simply say that the word “spirit” is used here in one of two ways: either (a) of the ***human*** spirit, perhaps an attitude, disposition, habit, or set of characteristics displayed by a particular individual, or (b) of those

whose supernatural “prophetic” ability is energized by a *demonic* spirit. In either case, regardless of the animating force, a person with a “Jezebel spirit” is one who displays the insidious, manipulative, and evil tendencies manifest in this woman of Thyatira.

So what kind of person do I have in mind, and what is it that they do? All too often we hear of individuals using their authority or position in the local church as well as their supernatural gifting (whether it be of God or the enemy), to manipulate others into behavior they would not normally embrace. I’m burdened by the number of instances in which even Christians who are prophetically gifted use their endowment to expand their sphere of influence for personal profit or are afforded unwarranted privileges in the local church.

Virtually everyone is aware of some situation in which a Christian has used a spiritual gift, whether teaching, administration, pastoring or another of the *charismata* to gain illicit control and influence within the wider body of Christ. So it should come as no surprise that someone who legitimately possesses the gift of prophecy might abuse it to enhance their status or broaden their liberties or even seek monetary gain.

The most heinous abuse of a “prophetic” gift is when appeal is made to special “revelatory” insights in order to justify immorality (or, at minimum, to ignore it). Similarly, because of the “wonderful contribution” that a person has made to the kingdom, he/she is virtually untouchable and rarely held accountable to the normal rules of ethical behavior that govern all other Christians. Anyone who “hears” God with such regularity and alleged accuracy, so they contend, is unique, extraordinarily anointed, and therefore so highly favored of God that they needn’t worry about the temptations that average Christians face or the tendencies of the flesh against which we typically wage war on a daily basis.

On occasion, a person with a Jezebel spirit will claim to have “revelation” that trumps Scripture (although they would rarely, if ever, put it in such stark terms; a person with this “spirit” is subtle, if nothing). Because such “words” from God are direct and immediate, and can’t be explained by appeal to what one knows by natural means, they are falsely perceived as carrying greater authority than the inspired text itself. Or it is “revelation” that allegedly provides a superior and formerly unknown interpretation of Scripture that makes it possible to circumvent (or at least treat with casual disdain) the Bible’s doctrinal precepts and ethical commands.

A person with a “Jezebel spirit” is one who appeals to his/her “spirituality” or spiritual gifting to rationalize (or again, at minimum, to overlook) sensuality. Often they don’t even believe it to be sinful or illicit, but are so blinded by pride, the praise of men, and sensational supernatural experiences that what may well be inappropriate for mainstream believers is, in their case, permissible. It’s just one of the perks.

Religious prestige is thus employed to foster sexual liberty. Under the pretense of anointed “ministry” a person exploits his/her platform and power to gain sexual favors or to lead others into similar behavior. This person is generally unaccountable to the leadership of the church, believing that the Pastor and Elders are “un-anointed” or insufficiently gifted to appreciate the level of supernatural spirituality at which he/she operates on a daily basis.

Eventually a double standard emerges: one set of strict, biblical guidelines to govern ordinary Christians and the exercise of their gifts within the body, and a lax, minimal, or more flexible list of expectations by which the “Man/Woman of God” is to live. Needless to say, it’s a prescription for moral disaster.

Make no mistake, the Jezebel who lived in Thyatira undoubtedly appealed to her prophetic gift (and “anointing”) to excuse her sexual immorality. She was using her power to manipulate others into sensuality and idolatry.

You may wonder why anyone would yield to such obvious unbiblical counsel, no matter how “gifted” the individual might be. It’s not that difficult to understand. Some of you may be unaware of how mesmerizing and enticing the prospect of supernatural activity can be. ***When one witnesses what one believes is a genuine supernatural or miraculous event, otherwise normal theological defense mechanisms often fail to operate.*** Discernment is cast aside, lest it be viewed as a critical spirit or the response of a cynic. No one wants to be perceived as stiff-necked and resistant to the voice of God or the manifestation of his power. So, it is hard for some to resist and challenge the “ministry” of a recognized (or “alleged”) prophet in the church.

Conclusion

The “spirit” of “Jezebel” was not unique to the church in Thyatira. It is alive and well in the body of Christ today. One need only read the latest headlines. It is an insidious, yet subtle, spirit. It is destructive, yet enticing. It typically gains momentum among those who are so fearful of quenching the Spirit (1 Thess. 5:19) that they fail to rein in the flesh.

The solution is not to repudiate the prophetic altogether, or any other spiritual gift for that matter. Rather, we must become good Bereans, “examining the Scriptures daily” (Acts 17:11) to see if these things are of God or not. In sum, we would do well to heed Paul’s counsel: “Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thess. 5:21-22).