

“Hold Fast the Works of Christ” | Revelation 2:18-29

The Rev. Dr. John Frederick | The Falls Church Anglican

Preaching Draft | August 24, 2025

(Discussion questions on page 13)

Introduction

I invite you to turn to page 1029 in your Pew Bibles. Today we continue in our summer series on the *Letters to the Churches*. We'll be exploring Reve. 2:18-29, the letter to the church at Thyatira.

We'll look at today passages in three distinct parts.

First, we will look at contemporary confusions concerning the works of Jezebel, spoken about in this passage

- offering two cautions
- and several faithful responses to these confusions

Second, we'll dig into the biblical significance of the works of Jezebel. And then, I'll offer three biblical approaches that will help us to forsake the works of Jezebel and hold fast to the works of Jesus.

Contemporary confusions of Jezebel. The Biblical meaning of Jezebel. And three biblical approaches to forsaking the works of Jezebel.

I. Contemporary confusions about the works of Jezebel: two cautions

1a. Caution #1- An unhealthy fixation with 'the Jezebel spirit' in the church

The first caution we want to take with the topic of Jezebel is the tendency to hyper-focus on Jezebel as a demonic spirit.

If by 'the spirit of Jezebel' we mean, 'the character traits associated with Jezebel' that we sometimes share, sort of like we use the phrase 'the spirit of the age' – then we're getting closer to what the Bible actually teaches about Jezebel. We will look more at this biblical meaning of Jezebel in just a little bit.

However, it is important to understand that, in the Bible, the character Jezebel is *never presented as a demon or a spirit*. Some traditions think of her this way, and maybe there are evil spirits that share the same characteristics as her, but the Bible never presents her in this manner.

The original Jezebel and the woman associated with her in Thyatira, are presented as *real historical persons*. Neither the phrase *nor even the concept* of a 'Jezebel spirit' or a 'Jezebel demon' ever occurs in the Bible even once. And that, to me, is significant.

We need to be careful not to turn every personality quirk or character flaw into as an instance of demon possession. I came across one self-proclaimed 'expert' on YouTube with half a million views talking about the Jezebel spirit. He seemed like a nice enough fellow, but I noticed he was making all kinds of strange claims.

At one point he said,

"I used to be possessed by the introvert spirit, the introvert demon, but I was delivered. And today I speak boldly about everything."

Honestly, I thought to myself,

"Brother, I think they might have mistakenly exorcised the *introvert angel* from you."

Because, loudly proclaiming subjective spiritual conjecture as if it were absolute biblical truth with no filter is not necessarily a value add.

My wife happens to be an introvert. And I love her for it. I proposed to my wife 18 years ago on a snow-covered mountain in Massachusetts. Imagine if I had said, before getting down on one knee,

"I'll just need to exorcise your introvert demon before proceeding with the nuptial invitation."

She'd have been more likely to exorcise me off the mountain than agree to marry me.

The reality is: it's ok for Christians to hold differing views on evil spirits and demons. However, since a large amount of information on Jezebel out there is highly speculative and can be used in ways that could harm the unity of the church and bring shame upon innocent individual congregants, it's good to ask **what action should we take in regard to this first caution?**

When it comes to Christian faith and practice, healthy Christian discipleship always does best to not major on the minors; to not insist on things that are incidental; to not pontificate about things peripheral. Good Christian preaching, however; always makes judicious use of alliteration.

1b. Caution #2- The misuse of the Jezebel in the wider culture

The phrase 'the Jezebel spirit' is not only foreign to the Bible, but it also has a long history of misuse in the wider culture. Keep in mind: it is not just **what** we say that matters as Christians, but **how we say what we say** and **how what we say might be 'heard' by others**.

Sadly, and shockingly, and *still to this day*, the designations 'a Jezebel' and 'a Jezebel spirit' have been hijacked and misapplied in unbiblical, un-Christian ways to demean and demonize women as a broadly sweeping misogynistic slur.

Most abhorrent of all, is the well-documented but rarely talked about racist use of the term 'Jezebel' by slave-owners who employed it to exploit and abuse black women during the time of slavery in the United States.

In bringing this up, I am not seeking to shame those who may have used this term in the past, perhaps totally unaware of its troubling history. Maybe, considering this for the first time is confronting, or even upsetting to you. Just remember that the grace of godly conviction is why we listen to biblical instruction, and grace of godly conviction is not the same thing as the guilt of condemnation.

Maybe you weren't aware about any of this. Many aren't. But here's the key: *now you are*. And here's the question: *now that you are aware, what are you going to do about it?* Let me suggest two actions.

1. We can begin to play a positive role in helping people to distinguish between the faithful interpretation of the Bible and its grievous misuse and misapplication.
2. We should ask:
 - when 'Jezebel' is used as a pejorative insult (often directed at people we don't personally know)
 - when calling someone a 'Jezebel,' or asserting publicly that someone is possessed 'by the Jezebel spirit,' or the 'Jezebel demon,' or whatever; we should ask:
 - Do we **really** believe that?

- Do we really *mean* that?
- Or are we using it as a bit of rhetoric to win an argument?
 - To portray the other person in a negative light?
 - The spiritual equivalent of 'poisoning the well.'

Because if it is the case that you really do believe a person is possessed by a literal demon (whether Jezebel or anyone else)

- Then the proper Christian response would not be to publicly defeat, defame, and demean them
- But rather to pray for their *deliverance*.

Friends: these days online and in the culture, I see **a lot of demonizing**, but **not a lot of desire for deliverance**. To me that's a cause for Christian alarm and an opportunity for faithful course-correction.

I'll offer one question and two brief examples to help us in this task of course-correction for misuses of the Jezebel concept.

First, a question.

Someone might say: 'But didn't Jesus call people names in the gospels?' This is the ultimate mal-intended use of 'what would Jesus do?' meme, taken up to justify misbehavior.

I *highly doubt* that if Jesus rocked up to one of these hipster bagel shops in Arlington, and the barista got his bagel order wrong, that Jesus: would shout across the counter, 'I said cream cheese *on the side*; you brood of vipers!'

Jesus did often use confronting words, with the Pharisees and others. But whenever he did this, it was to warn them of the coming judgment. Jesus never name-called to destroy a person; his speech was always intended to deliver them. He never spoke for a soundbite, but always sought their salvation.

- The same Jesus that said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan' later warmly addresses him, 'Do you love me, Peter? *Feed my sheep.*'
- In John 8, Jesus does not call the woman accused of adultery a 'Jezebel' instead he tenderly says, 'Has no one condemned you? Neither do I condemn you.'

We should ask: is this the case with *our speech*, **as Christians**, in the public square? Do we desire salvation or do we prefer demonization? Are we faithfully following the Bible's teachings, or are we using the Bible as our personal sanctified thesaurus in which we search for spiritually charged insults that come with a perceived seal of divine approval?

The world can learn how to name-call from its secular professors, its podcasters, and its politicians; it should be learning how to speak graciously and truthfully from those who claim to follow Jesus.

Two examples of how the misuse of Jezebel creates troubling results

IIb.1 - Lydia

In Acts 16 we learn about a famous figure in the early church, a woman named Lydia. The Bible reveals that Lydia was exceedingly helpful to Paul in his ministry. She blessed the early churches with her financial resources, and Scripture reports that her whole household was baptized. Fast forward to the present day and all the major denominations consider Lydia to be a noteworthy saint. The Anglican Church celebrates her feast day every year on January 27th.

And yet, because Lydia was:

- a woman
- viewed as a powerful leader,
- who just happened to live in Thyatira . . .

. . . there are some who declare—**with no evidence**—that Lydia must be 'the Jezebel' in Thyatira. How unfair! How unfounded! How *un-Christian*!

IIb2. Daughters

A second, more personal example before we move on to explore the biblical understanding of the works of Jezebel happened this week.

As I was writing this section of the sermon, randomly, my 9-year-old daughter came over out of nowhere and gave me a big, long hug. She said nothing. She just hugged me and walked away. I'm convinced it was a gift of grace.

I smiled with sense of surprise and gratitude.

To her the hug probably meant:

'I love you dad, and I hope you give me Nutella for dessert.'

To me it shouted in its silence,

'Speak dad, speak.'

I smiled but inwardly I winced at the thought that someday someone could look at this **strong-willed, full-of-life, natural leader little girl** who gathers the entire neighborhood in my yard for impromptu marshmallow roasting parties (without proper notice to her parents), and who dreams big with her lemonade stands and front yard craft bracelet business.

That someone could look at my Zoe when she grows up to be a strong, godly woman and say: 'Stand down, Jezebel.' Simply because she is a woman, a leader, and strong. That's a dreadful thought.

And so, I say:

- in the name of the dignity of our daughters,
- in the name of every Lydia whose legacy has ever been slandered by the unjust smear campaigns of careless name-callers,
- in the name of Jesus Christ and Almighty God

We reject every **undignified, discriminatory** spirit that comes against every image bearing daughter of the living God. The Gospel speaks a better word than slander, insult, and shame. It speaks the name of Jesus over you, and by his wounds the Jezebel slur can be healed, not heralded; atoned for; not approved of.

II. The biblical meaning of the works of Jezebel and three faithful responses

IIa. The biblical meaning of the works of Jezebel

The historical Jezebel was a pagan queen, married to Ahab, Israel's king. You can read about her in 1 Kings 16, 18, 19, and 21. The characteristics associated with the original Jezebel were:

- her unfaithfulness to the Lord by leading her husband to worship the pagan gods Baal and Asherah,
- her murder of the Lord's prophets,
- her violent death threats to the prophet Elijah,
- and her deceptive plot to kill a man named Naboth to steal his field for her husband Ahab.

The Thyatira Jezebel character shares with the original character Jezebel in 1 Kings, this the theme of unfaithfulness. The two sins associated with Jezebel in the Book of Revelation are **sexual immorality** and **idolatry**.

These two sins are not presented here as comprehensive list. Rather, "sexual immorality and meat sacrificed to idols" was a well-known catch-all phrase that stood for **the uncritical acceptance of the cultural norms that are contrary to the teachings of Christ**.

To fully understand what's being said here, we need a bit of background. You see, Thyatira was a trade town, home to leather workers, potters, bakers, and artisans of every sort. Practically everyone who lived there belonged to a trade guild. It really was a requirement if you wanted to make a living.

In addition to guaranteeing work, these guilds practiced pagan sacrifices. The meat from these sacrifices would then be consumed in official guild gatherings. Afterward, heavy drinking and sexually promiscuous behavior would commence, in line with the typical pagan practices of the day.

In all likelihood, Jezebel from Thyatira would have belonged to one of these guilds. And she would have been promoting a form of mixed allegiance between Christianity and paganism that said,

'Hey, it's no big deal! We can have *both*. We can have the benefits of Jesus and the perks of the culture.'

This message was leading immature Christians astray, seducing them to sin to uncritically engage in practices contrary to their Christian faith.

So, what are we to make of this? What should we do?

IIb. Three approaches that help us to forsake the works of Jezebel and hold fast to the works of Jesus

1. We should cease tolerating the works of Jezebel (v. 20)
 2. We should resist lying down in the sickbed of Jezebel (vv. 21-23)
 3. We should stand firm and fight by holding fast to the works of Jesus (vv. 19, 24-29)
- Cease tolerating her works. Resist lying down in her bed. Hold fast to the works of Jesus.

IIb.1 - Cease tolerating Jezebel

In Revelation 2:20 Jesus says,

“But I have *this* against you, that you **tolerate** that woman Jezebel.”

Our base level response to the works of Jezebel should be that **we cease tolerating this kind of behavior** in own lives, in the lives of our leaders, in the lives of those who desire to be leaders, and in the lives of those who purport to be leaders in our Christian communities.

We can use the character of Jezebel **as a means of careful self-examination**.

We should ask:

- Are we basing what we say and do on scripture alone, or are we uncritically trying to sync Scripture up with the fleeting fads of a fading social order?
- Are we leading people astray, or are we being led astray, by seducing others or being seduced to adopt and approve of sinful practices?

Brothers and sisters: let us examine ourselves, so that we might cease tolerating Jezebel's works. This brings us to our second response.

IIb.2 - Resist lying down in the sickbed of Jezebel

Verses 22 and 23 say,

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,²³ and I will strike her children dead.

In Revelation 2, lying down on the sickbed represents a deadly shift of allegiance toward Jezebel and away from Christ. By unrepentantly, uncritically embracing sin, we commit a form of spiritual infidelity. This results in tribulation, judgment, and death. It gradually dooms with what amounts to **a terminal sickness of the soul**.

And so, we must resist. But how? This leads us to our third and final response. We resist lying down on the sickbed of Jezebel by holding fast the works of Christ.

11b3. Stand firm and fight by holding fast to the works of Jesus (Conclusion)

The tools we need to stand firm and hold fast are the works of Jesus. Do you see it there, in verse 26, Jesus says

“The one who conquers and who keeps **my works** until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations.”

These are not additional works that are required by Christians to earn or maintain salvation. We know this because in verses 24-26, Jesus says,

I do not lay on you any other burden. Only hold fast **to what you have** until I come.

‘Hold fast, Jesus says.’

- In other words, keep doing what you are doing.
- Keep going. Keep fighting.

To hold fast the works of Jesus has two sense:

- first, to hold fast to the love, faith, service, endurance for which Christ commended the church in verse 19, and,
- second, to ‘hold fast to Christ’ himself

The one who lies down on the sickbed of Jezebel represents a person who has not held fast. They’ve given up the fight. Or worse, they’ve lied down in adulterous infidelity with the enemy.

At some point, without fanfare, maybe without even realizing it, like a man who finds himself soaked to the bone after a casual walk in a barely detectable mist, the kind of thing we don't even reckon to be real precipitation. At some point,

- he finds himself saturated
- he finds that he's walked off the spiritual battlefield of everyday life
- he finds that he's given up, given in, allowed himself to be given over to tribulation and the terminal illness of spiritual infidelity on the sickbed of Jezebel.

That's a very different person than the person who finds themselves still on the battlefield. Still holding fast. Still *fighting*.

Where are you? Are you there, on the spiritual battlefield of everyday life?

- wounded and weak, yes, so am I
- often barely able to even crawl along, clawing, bloody-handed across the hard soil in hope toward holiness

Is that you I see out there, on the field. Yes, it is you. Fighting alongside me, alongside us. Feeling alone, but not alone. Holding fast in faith, love, service, and endurance.

Holding fast,

- fighting to overcome addiction
- fighting to experience victory in the present pursuit of purity and fidelity,
- fighting to mortify the desires of the flesh

Is that *you* on the field? Is that you, *fighting*?

If you find yourself, in whatever condition, on the spiritual battlefield of everyday life, that means you are still in the fight. And, in virtue of the fact that you're still there, you can be assured that you've held fast to the works of Jesus, to his victory, and to the reward of everlasting life in him.

Brothers and sisters: hold fast the works of Christ. For he is our rescuer, he is our healer, he is our great redeemer.

Discussion Questions

- (1) The sermon states, “the original Jezebel and the woman associated with her in Thyatira, are presented as *real historical persons*. Neither the phrase *nor even the concept* of a ‘Jezebel spirit’ or a ‘Jezebel demon’ ever occurs in the Bible even once. And that, to me, is significant.” Some push back against this and say, ‘my experience tells me different.’ How should Scripture shape and correct our experiences? Is experience as an equal source for theological truth? For example, would it be valid for someone to say, ‘my experience tells me the Bible’s teaching on human sexuality is not applicable for today’?
- (2) Envision that the works of verse 19 (“love, faith, service, and endurance”) are not primarily individual personal virtues for our sanctification solo projects but are instead the spiritual tools for the medics to bring onto the spiritual battlefield of everyday life. In what ways can we see our own spiritual growth in these ‘works’ not by focusing on ourselves but by seeing them as means by which Christ’s work is made present to those who are wounded on the field? In what ways can our works be less about us, and more about what Christ is doing through us?
- (3) The sermon states, “Jesus never name-called to *destroy* a person; his speech was always intended to *deliver* them. He never spoke for a soundbite; but always sought peoples’ salvation. Is this the case with *our speech as Christians*, in the public square? Do we desire salvation, or do we use the Bible as a means of demonization? How can we graciously counter-act negative Christian name-calling without taking on its negativity, participating in it, or compromising our witness in the process?
- (4) How can the finished work of Christ provide motivation to ‘hold fast the works of Christ’ in times when our present victories feel so few and far between?
- (5) In what ways can we clarify the real meaning of Jezebel and counter-act the misuses, without engaging in a culture war that further divides the society and the church, and without merely repeating the approved talking points in the echo chambers of our preferred political, theological, and cultural tribes?