

## Welcome

Good morning! I'm Sue Sweeney and I am part of the Teaching Team here at Catalyst. Some of you know my husband Jeff, and we have two little girls. Clara is 3 and Stella, will be 7 years old this week.

My girls are pretty much the most precious things that have ever existed. I know y'all agree with me. In addition to being their mother, I also work full time for the Richardson school district and I spent 8 years as a classroom teacher.

Last month, the worst thing that could ever happen to a person like me who is a parent and also a teacher...happened.

I was at work, in a meeting, minding my own business and I received this message on my phone from Stella's 1st grade teacher...



Um, excuse me? The teacher must have gotten my child confused with someone else. Literally my first thought was, "this is a case of mistaken identity. She sent this message to the wrong parent."

Surely this cannot be, right? MY sweet little princess, Stella. Whose mom was a teacher, whose Grandmommy was a teacher, whose aunt is a teacher?

Stella has been persistently reminded since her birth by three important family members to always listen to her teachers and follow their directions.

What. Is. Happening?

I sent a few clarifying questions to the teacher and discovered, that my worst nightmare had indeed come true. Stella was not listening to her teacher and following directions.

And a hot rush of shame and embarrassment washed over me.

This happens to me a lot, actually. I let the things my children do embarrass me sometimes because I view these things as personal failures on my part. I'm quick to view their behavior as a direct reflection of me. Sometimes, I want people to think I'm perfect. I want people to respect what I say and I want my family to have financial success and our way of life to feel secure.

I come by this honestly because this is what our culture expects of me. This is what the world expects of me.

I want people to believe that my religious life and my everyday life are in balance. I want to live my life according to what it means to be a Christian, but I don't want to be so into my faith that people think I'm some kind of weirdo.

I want to be the person God wants me to be, but I also want to be the person the world wants me to be. I want to live out my God-given calling, but I also want power in the form of respect, security, and success.

You probably feel like this too.

There is nothing inherently wrong with wanting to be more powerful. The problem is when we put a desire for worldly power first and make God second place.

We want this life God has promised us, but not when it's in opposition with what the world tells us we should want.

We want what the world says is the "good life" and what God says is the "good life." So we try to balance the two.

This morning we're going to talk about the problem with this balancing act. We have two feet, one foot in living out what the world wants and one foot in living out what God wants, but we find we cannot straddle between the two. We cannot find our balance.

The Good News is, we don't need to be balanced at all. It's actually better if we just throw this whole balancing act out the window. Because if we do, we inherit hope and life.

Let's sing together.

## **Sermon**

We're in a series called *Empathy for the Devil*. We're meeting six of the worst villains in the Bible and asking, "Why did they do what they did?" We're not looking to apologize or make excuses for them. We

simply want to practice some empathy - put ourselves in their shoes. Because ultimately, we'll discover we're more like them than we thought, and reflecting on their sin will illuminate the seeds of those same sins in our own lives.

Today, we're going to meet an evil queen named Jezebel. Turn with me to 1 Kings Chapter 16 verses 29-31. If you borrowed one of our Bibles from the back table, you can find these verses on page ###. If you don't have a Bible of your own, you're welcome to take that one home with you.

The name Jezebel is probably familiar to you. It's the name of a high-end magazine which covers the details of living in modern luxury. It's also the name of a popular lingerie brand that qualifies for Amazon Prime shipping. If you grew up in church, you've heard the name before because calling someone a "Godless Jezebel" was a pretty serious insult.

Jezebel is heralded as one of the original Bad Girls of the Bible. The Biblical authors call her a harlot even though it appears she was faithful to her husband, Ahab, the King of Israel, the nation of God's people. This association with promiscuity is likely because she was a foreigner who brought the worship of the pagan god, Baal to Israel. All throughout the Old Testament, we hear God forbid the people of Israel to worship any other gods or engage in child sacrifice like many of the other nearby civilizations and kingdoms.

Let's see what the Old Testament authors had to say about Jezebel and her husband, King Ahab:

#### 1 Kings 16: 29-31

In the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, Ahab son of Omri became king of Israel, and he reigned in Samaria over Israel twenty-two years. Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him. He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him. He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to arouse the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than did all the kings of Israel before him.

Look at that last line. *"Ahab did more to arouse the anger of the Lord than did all the kings of Israel before him."* That's pretty bad because there were a lot of kings in Israel's history who did a lot of messed up stuff. So, what did King Ahab do?

Well, he married Jezebel and allowed her to bring her religion to Israel with her. Not to replace Israel's religion, but more like, in addition to it.

That doesn't really sound so bad.

Jezebel was the princess of Sidonia, which means she was Phoenician. Phoenicia was a great ancient civilization. You may remember from your high school World History class that the Phoenicians were the

ones who invented the alphabet that is basically what we use today. By the world's standards, Phoenicia was an advanced society with plenty of wealth and relative equality for women. At this time, Israel by comparison, was nothing but a poor little backwater kingdom with weird religious and cultural beliefs. It is likely Jezebel saw it her purpose to improve Israel by making it at least as powerful as its neighbors. She saw it her business to help her husband, Ahab, by acquiring land and wealth for the royal family. Unfortunately, this required her to plot the murder of a Hebrew vineyard owner, but hey..to make an omelette...sometimes you have to break a few eggs.

But Jezebel was not the first Biblical person to have someone murdered. Even God's favorite, King David, killed a man for selfish reasons. Jezebel was just trying to help her family out. She was just trying to bring Israel up to the world's standard of success.

So how did Queen Jezebel turn her husband, King Ahab into the worst king in Israel's history?

It's important to understand here how God feels about idolatry. "The Hebrew word for God is 'Yahweh', and the Israelites believed the worship of anything other than Yahweh was, and is, considered idolatry. Idolatry being the worst of the sins. When God, or Yahweh, gave Moses the 10 commandments in Exodus, chapter 20, the first commandment was this:

**"You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.**

So, this is serious. *"The Lord, your God, am a jealous God."*

So a jealous God? That can make us uncomfortable. Does that mean that God is jealous like a jealous husband?

That's not what this means. We're called by God to live in God's image because of God's love for us. God knows that giving our worship to anyone or anything else will only lead us down a path of fear and death. The Israelites knew and we know today, that Yahweh or God's way is the way of hope and life.

And how did Jezebel get God's people to engage in idolatry exactly? When she married Ahab and moved over to Israel from her Phoenician home, she set up temples to worship Baal in Israel. This caught the immediate attention of God's prophet, Elijah, who warned the Hebrew people again that their purpose was to follow Yahweh and Yahweh alone.

To further the point, Elijah put on a great show of challenging Jezebel's priests of Baal in front of all the people of Israel. The competition was to see which god could rain down fire on a sacrificial offering first: Yahweh or Baal. Hundreds of priests of Baal called and called for their god to bring fire to the offering

and nothing happened. Even though Elijah threw water all over his offering, Yahweh still miraculously set the sacrifice on fire.

Even in the face of this amazing evidence of Yahweh's power. The Hebrew people still let Baal worship seep into their lives. To them, Yahweh was the God of the desert- of victory and power and big defining moments for the Hebrew people, but Baal was the god of rain and crops, which was more fitting with everyday life.

I know what you're thinking, "this is all some weird Old Testament stuff. I know I'm all good because I definitely do not worship Baal or any ancient pagan god that I know of."

I do need to ask myself, "Who is the god of my big defining moments, my biggest challenges and victories and who is the god of my every day regular life?" When big, great things happen, I give God the glory. When I am in crisis, I call on God for help. God feels nearest to me in these moments.

What is harder for me to determine is where God fits into my regular life of family, friends, going to work and paying my bills. This is where I'm most likely to give over my worship to something else without really realizing it.

If I'm honest, in my everyday life I find myself splitting my devotion and worship into two spheres or circles. In one circle, I want to live into the image of God. I want to live my life in such a way that it helps usher in the Kingdom of God here on earth. I want my life to be about loving my neighbor and bringing about peace and justice. In order to do this, I have to die to myself. I have to admit that I cannot do this on my own- that given over to my basic human desires I will only try to make myself greater by making other less. I need the hope and help of the Holy Spirit.

But in this other circle, I want to be successful by the world's standards. I want people to think I am handling it all on my own and I look good doing it. I want people to respect me. I want to be able to do the things I want, and have the things I want, whenever I want. In our world, this type of power is the standard of success- to have more than others and to be more than others because we feel like we deserve it.

In our world, this is a god we also worship. A false god of power, material success, fame, and ego.

I want to find what our culture calls "balance." So like a Venn Diagram, I put these two opposing circles together and try to find some overlap.

We think the good life is found in this sweet spot where the gods overlap-where our religious life and our everyday life overlap only where it is considered by others to be "socially, economically, or politically appropriate."

But, this isn't the good life. No matter how hard we try to balance at all, we can never quite do what God wants and what the world wants at the same time. God's way leads to life. The world's way leads to death.

We can't have it both ways. There is no place where they overlap. There is no balance. We cannot worship two gods. To try is to engage in idolatry.

So, how do I know where I'm engaged in idolatry against God?

The questions to ask are, "where am I giving my worship? To whom am I giving my worship?"

Worship is where my heart is.

How do I know where my heart is? I can look to where I'm giving my time, attention, and effort.

If I'm honest, I find myself, more often than not, worshipping at the altar of a version of myself that is fully made into the image of the world. It is a version of life in pursuit of security in my social, economic, and political life. I so easily subscribe to the idea that my value in society only increases when someone else's value decreases.

It's easy for me to believe that my success must come at the expense of others. But hey..to make an omelette...sometimes you have to break a few eggs.

This is not the life God has called us to. What I should really give my time, attention, and effort to is a version of myself that is surrendered to the Holy Spirit and made into the image of God.

Jezebel wanted to find this overlap as well between her and Israel's religious life and their every day social, economic and political life. She wanted the people of Israel to find their power in being made in the image of God, but also worship pagan gods like the rest of the world so they could increase their status on the world stage. Jezebel wanted Israel to be powerful in the way the world expected them to be powerful- to exert more social, political, and economic power at the expense of others.

In a world that operates like everything is a zero-sum game and where there can only be winners if there are losers, God wanted a different path for the people of Israel. Because God loves us all so much, God wants this different path for us too.

But like Jezebel, we want to veer off this path and find our own way, because we think we know better and we don't want people to think we're weirdos.

We can't have it both ways. We don't want it both ways. Jesus tells us why.

Turn with me to Matthew 6:19-24. If you have one of our Bibles, that's on page ###. Here, Jesus explains why the more we lean into this circle of what the world wants us to be, the smaller we make this circle of what it means to follow God with our whole heart. As we continuously pursue more social, economic, and political power and collect treasures as evidence of our worldly successes, sin is invited to creep deeper into our hearts and lives.

Here, Jesus explains that we cannot have one foot in the desires of the world and one foot in the desires of God. We have to put God first. Jesus says,

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

“The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

“No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

So, Catalyst, how do you know where your heart is? What are your treasures and where are you storing them?

I want to be clear here that God has no problem with trying to take care of your family and friends. There's nothing wrong with wanting to work hard and do your best in this life. It's just about putting true value in the proper place. It's about putting the God first, and the desires of the world second. Let me offer you an analogy.

Pastor and author Shane Higgs asks us to think of God as a 1 and all the “stuff” that makes up our lives - our family, our jobs, our friends and social groups, our church - to think of all these as 0's.

If we put any of the 'stuff' ahead of God, they don't add any value to our lives. In fact, the more we put in front of that 1, the more cluttered everything looks. 1 has the same value as 00000001

But if we put God first, then everything else *adds* value. Every 'zero' we put in its proper place - after God - makes the overall value of our lives greater and greater. 1 isn't the same as 10 or 100 or 1,000 or 1,000,000. When we put God first, our whole lives are ordered better and everything flourishes and finds its place.

This is why Jesus insists we seek God's kingdom first.

So, what does it look like to seek God's Kingdom first? What does it mean to live into the image of God? Is it about making sure my butt is in a seat in church every Sunday? Is it about just not being a jerk to people? What does it look like?

It looks like listening to the Holy Spirit. It's about rejecting this idea that we can balance what God wants and what the world wants.

The world wants us to win the the social, economic, and political power game so we can store up more treasures here on earth.

More personally for me, the world wants my children to always be dressed better, behaving better, and be always winning while you're losing because it makes ME look better.

This explains why I take Stella's teacher's concerns so personally. According the the world's standards, everyone, including people I hardly know, need to see me as successful. It's why I felt this hot rush of shame and embarrassment when I got that message from her teacher. This was not my daughter's failure. This was a parenting failure. This was MY failure! Her teacher made it look like I was screwing up and that I don't have my life together. (As if I really did.)

My first impulse is to try and solve it on my own, and my own desires are inherently bent away from God because really, my only desire is to make myself look better and the best way to do this is to try to shame someone else and make them feel worse than I do. I can either make my daughter feel utterly miserable for embarrassing me or I can make the teacher feel like an idiot for even questioning that my family is anything other than better than everyone else's.

This is really an opportunity to let God into my everyday life. This is a chance for me to stop listen for the Holy Spirit. Maybe this choice of punishing my daughter or punishing the teacher is really a false dichotomy. The Holy Spirit can show me a third way that involves making this a positive learning opportunity for Stella and a way to build a productive relationship with her teacher.

This world wants me to make myself more, even if it means making others less.

The Holy Spirit calls me to forgo more social, economic, and political security if the cost is the oppression of others. The Holy Spirit calls me, in situations where I am privileged, to recognize and empower others who are not. The spirit reminds of me of what my treasures really should be and where I should store them.

What was truly evil about Jezebel was the way she tried to normalize living a life with one foot in what God wants and another foot in what the world wants. The scriptures again and again point to what God cares about and what the world cares about to be in opposition to one another.

## **Communion**

[Communion Slide] We approach the communion table today to put God's way before everything else in our lives. This table invites us to share the meal Jesus shared with his followers the night before he was killed. At that meal, he broke bread and gave it to his followers, saying, "This is my body, broken for you. Eat it." Later in the meal, he offered a cup of wine, saying, "This is my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sin. Drink it."

Jesus shows us what it means to put God's way first: he followed God all the way to the Cross, even giving up his very breath rather than divide his allegiances. We follow his lead, walk in his footsteps and ask God to make us into his image.

You don't have to be a member of Catalyst to receive communion with us today. If you're willing to put God above all else, to reject the idol of balance, then you're welcome to come forward.

Before we approach the table, I'm going to lead you in a prayer of Examen. I'll ask you four questions to give you space to reflect on what God is calling you to today. After we've worked through those questions, I'll pray for all of us, and then you're welcome to come forward as you're ready.

Here's the first question:

### **Prayer of Examen**

1. Where in the last week did I seek God's way above all else?
2. Where in the last week did I put other priorities above God?
3. Where in the next week will I be tempted to put other priorities above God?
4. How can I seek God's kingdom first this week?

God, you created our lives and you know how they fit together. Forgive us for listening to the voices in our world that whisper that family, wealth, respectability or balance belong in the same breath as our praise of you. We have seen in the story of Jezebel that this can end only in pain - for us and for our families.

We approach your table today as a people who wants to seek your way first. Teach us yet again that your path leads to life. May these wafers and juice become a spiritual food that opens our eyes to see the way of Jesus and our ears to hear the voice of your Holy Spirit. Make us your people, wholly committed to you. Order our lives. Show us what should stay, what needs to go, and what's in the wrong place. Order our priorities and our steps. Breathe new life into us.

We offer these prayers and approach your table in the name of your son, Jesus.

### **Blessing**

Thank you to all who are supporting Catalyst both financially and in serving. Your faithfulness in this area helps us continue to do what God is calling us to do. If you want to begin contributing in those ways, more information is in the mini and on the next step cards.

Again, thank you to the guests with us. We know it can be hard to connect with a new Church, so we wanted to make it as easy as possible to do that. We created a next step called Newcomers Lunch we do once a month (the next one is October 15). It's right after we worship together, and in about 45 minutes, we feed you, tell you who Catalyst is, what God is doing here, and we give you a next step to get connected. If you'd like to sign up, you can check the box at the top of the tear off we did earlier, and drop it in the box by the door on your way out. Either way, thank you again for worshiping with us.

Next week, we meet Judas, the man who betrayed Jesus to death. But for now, Catalyst, as you go:

May you dispense with the lie that God wants you to live a balanced life. Seek God's kingdom first, and his righteousness. And as you put God first, may you find all those other areas of your life begin to make more sense. May you see what should stay and what needs to go. May you find wholeness and flourishing as you follow God's way. Go in the grace and peace of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.