

The Fact Of Evil

The idea of evil is not intellectually fashionable anymore. Even to speak of “evil” in secular company makes you feel like a rube, a yokel from some backwoods area where nobody ever heard of clinical depression or bipolarity or low self-esteem or any of the other terms we use to explain the cruelties that human beings inflict upon each other—and upon themselves. To explain such acts as being motivated by evil seems almost embarrassing in an age where scientific explanations have replaced religious doctrines as our way of understanding reality. Unfortunately, evil is a fact and facts, as President John Adams said, are stubborn things. Facts like Adolf Hitler’s systematic extermination of six million Jews. Facts like Joseph Stalin’s starvation of 20 million Ukrainians while he imposed state control of farming in the Ukraine. Facts like Mao Tse Tung’s sacrifice of fifty million Chinese in service of his “great leap forward.” Facts like the genocide of 700,000 Tutsis in Rwanda in 1994. These are factual examples of evil in action and to try to explain them in terms of psychological or sociological categories is futile. To bring the subject closer to home, consider the horror that burst upon Littleton, Colorado, twenty-two years ago when two boys, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, walked into Columbine High School and murdered 13 people, wounded 23 more and then committed suicide. Besides unleashing hell, they also unleashed a firestorm of speculation from media-appointed experts who competed with each other to answer the most important question in the world: why? They told us violent video games did it. They told us the availability of guns did it. They said being bullied did it. They said being ostracized did it. They said bad parenting did it. But nobody said that evil did it. Small wonder. What do you say after you say that evil did something? The word itself stops the discussion in its tracks and eliminates the hopeful notion that there is something we can do about it, some measure we can take to keep obscenities like this from happening. If you say bullying did it, you can try to find ways to curtail bullying. If you say violent video games did it, you can pass laws to control video games, and when they’re stricken down because of the first amendment rights of children to ingest sex and violence, you can urge parents to keep a close eye on what their children buy and play with. If you say that bad parenting did it you can offer courses in good parenting. But what can you do to control or eliminate evil? What law can do that? The answer, of course, is no law. So here we are, twenty-two years later, and it’s interesting to see some of the literature that has been published about the Littleton massacre, much of which is summarized in a book by Dave Cullen entitled *Columbine*. According to Cullen, the consensus of scholars is that everything we thought we knew about why those boys did what they did—is wrong. It turns out they were not bullied. They weren’t outcasts. They weren’t addicted to violent videogames or dark movies. They weren’t NRA members. Their parents were good parents. They did what they did because they had been taken over by evil. Which brings us back to the fact of evil. One of the reasons we find the notion of evil repellent is that it flies in the face of our cherished belief that human society can be perfected. That if we just apply our minds to it and let reason and science do their work, we can one day build utopia where we will all ride our bikes to and from our eco-friendly jobs. To regard evil as an inescapable fact of human existence means that there is something in the world that is beyond correction, beyond elimination, beyond redemption—and therefore beyond our power to fix.

We have become accustomed to thinking in terms of "illness" and "dysfunction" rather than evil, because both of those terms imply the possibility of a cure. Criminals aren't evil, they are just people whom society has failed. They're not bad, they're just sick and need our help. It reminds me of a joke that's based on the biblical story of the Good Samaritan. Two social workers were walking down a country road and they came upon a man lying in a ditch by the side of the road. He had been stripped, robbed, beaten within an inch of his life and left to die. Instead of taking him to a hospital as the Good Samaritan had done, one social worker turned to the other and said, "*Whoever did this needs our help.*" Part of the problem is that we have been conditioned to think of evil as something that comes wearing a snidely whiplash moustache and speaks like Darth Vader. We fancy that we can recognize evil for what it is when we see it. Don't kid yourself. As the bible tells us, satan appears to us as an angel of light. Evil is an inconspicuous thing, a trite thing that hides in plain sight in the moral compromises we make, in our spiritual lethargy and in the vanity that infects our thinking. Inconspicuous, that is, until it bursts upon us like a thunderstorm and then we wonder where it came from. Evil is a fact—a fact that is an offense to believers and unbelievers alike, but for different reasons. For many unbelievers, the idea of evil is itself the problem. In their thinking, evil is an outworn myth, a religious boogeyman that unenlightened people believe in because they haven't been educated enough to understand that there is no such thing as God or the devil or heaven or hell and that human beings are merely biochemical accidents that evolved out of the muck and mire. In a famous criminal case in Chicago back in the 1920's, two young men named Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb kidnapped and killed a child. They were caught and convicted and at their trial they were represented by the famous attorney Clarence Darrow. In Darrow's summation of his defense, which lasted twelve hours, he maintained that the boys were not responsible for what they did because they were only the end result of an evolutionary process that was governed by laws of physics and chemistry which pre-determined their actions. In effect, he was arguing that there is no such thing as moral responsibility. Many people believe that if we could just get over our superstitious notions and let the biochemists and neurologists figure out what makes the brain tick, they will come up with ways to eliminate sickness and dysfunctional behavior. Then there will no longer be any need to talk about God or the devil or evil or sin or heaven or hell or any of the other bugbears of religion. But if the fact of evil is an offense to the unbeliever, it is can also be a stumbling block for the believer. As Christians we believe in a just and merciful God who is altogether good and who loves his creatures. But if God is good and just and loving, why does he allow evil to exist? Where did it come from? The Bible doesn't answer these questions, so we shouldn't try to answer them either. But even if the Bible doesn't tell us where evil came from or why it exists, it does tell us how we should—and should not—respond to it. First of all, we should not ignore it or minimize it pretend that it doesn't exist. Nor should we ignore or minimize the misery that it causes—like the rich man who ignored the beggar Lazarus as he lay suffering at the gate of his mansion. Nor should we toy with evil by calling it art or entertainment and persuading ourselves that it's safe for us to dabble in—like having mock séances or playing at an ouija board. The amount of evil that infests the so-called entertainment industry—in video games and board games and movies and popular music, is staggering. And evil is evil, whatever form it takes; it doesn't stop being what it is just because we trivialize it in our thinking or call it "art." We must never underestimate its power. So how should we respond to evil? First of all, by realizing that the problem starts with us and not with the other person or with God.

Until we realize that each of us is a potential incubator for evil, we have a log in our eye and we will continue to set ourselves up for failure. So the first thing we need to understand is that we are part of the problem. The next thing we need to understand is that we cannot overcome evil by our own strength because we are no match for the one who spawns it: our enemy, the devil. As we sing in one of our favorite hymns: *"and still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe; his craft and power are great and armed with cruel hate—no one on earth his equal."* We are no match for the evil one or for the evil he perpetrates. On the other hand, we should not exaggerate the power of evil, for there is one who has already delivered us out of its power—one who is far more powerful than the one who spawns it. As we also sing, *"one little word can fell him."* The answer to the problem of evil is given to us in the *Book of Job*. Just as we do, Job pleaded with God to show him the cause of his suffering, to show him how it could possibly be just that he, a righteous man who worshipped God, should be allowed to suffer at the hands of the evil one. And the answer God gave to Job is the same one He gives to us. He said, in effect. *"Trust me and I will deliver you out of the hands of the evil one. Trust me and I will deliver you out of your pain and suffering, and I will do it at precisely the right time. Trust me, and in the end I will make all things right. Trust me."* And Job responded: *"surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know....therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."* And once Job had repented, God restored him and blessed him twice as much as he had blessed him before.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I pray that we may all face up to the fact of evil, yet not give it more or less power than it has. I pray that our response to evil, to the suffering it causes, and to the doubts and fears we all experience in its wake will be the same as Job's response: the response of faith. I pray that each one of us may say with Job: *"I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end He will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I, myself, will see him—and not as a stranger."* Beloved of God, our Redeemer has stood upon this earth and He has conquered evil. And He will stand upon it again, thanks be to God. Amen.