

Is it evil to call out others as being evil?



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Columnist

We hear it all the time, and probably think it too: “That’s evil” or “They’re evil.” Add a “D” and, no surprise, we have “devil.”

As the dictionary puts it, “evil” describes something “profoundly immoral and malevolent; (of a force or spirit) embodying or associated with the forces of the devil; harmful or tending to harm.”

Evil is “wickedness, and depravity, especially when regarded as a supernatural force.” Someone gives you “the evil eye” or you have “evil thoughts.”

In the Bible we read of “The Evil One” and we know exactly who that is: Satan, the adversary of God — created by God — and up to no good. In the First Book of Peter this nasty creature is lurking around, “prowling like a lion,” “looking for someone to devour.”

This plays on our fears of wild animals and the wilderness itself. Stay inside the locked doors (of the faith) because there be dragons beyond.

The solution? “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (Book of James). Stand your ground face to face with a hungry lion and he’ll run away. That would be something to see.

A homeless veteran I knew had a rather unique perspective. He liked to say, “EVIL spelled backward is LIVE.” When we live our lives with goodness we keep the evil away. Simple, yet profound.

This is all over our contemporary culture, especially in our films — “the Dark Side” versus “the Force” played out in hundreds of ways. In the shadows lurks the bad stuff, the bad guy, the terrors and horrors that haunt our dreams and heighten our fears.

Some people exploit these fearful images and feelings. They tell us there are “evil empires,” “evil nations,” “evil leaders” of “evil countries” out to “do evil



The concept of “evil” is often described using wild animals, preying on human fears.

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things” to us. The worst is when individuals are called “evil” and become less than human — “monsters.”

Strangely, this makes us feel better, because we’re not evil monsters, are we? Surely not.

Another instruction from the Book of James is, “Do not speak evil against one another.” We may wonder if calling others “evil,” even when they do “evil things,” is “evil” in itself.

This is where it gets weird (“suggesting something supernatural; uncanny; something controlling destiny or fate” — some would consider the weird as evil). Our tendency to call things or people “evil” when something happens that’s just too terrible for words reveals our own fears, our own inner lions. At least it seems so. Something or someone is just “too weird” and we reach for the most convenient word: evil.

Partly for this reason, I would suggest it’s time we eliminate the word evil. Apart from our mythologies and popular legends, the term is unhelpful at best, and harmful — “evil” — at worst.

That’s the circle: evil is evil. Using the word can be “harmful or tending to harm.” When we separate something or someone from us and slap on the label “evil” we suspend our reason, our ethics or conscious ability to cope with something bad. It’s too easy to turn evil into “Evil” and personify our fears to make us feel better. Could it be “D-Evil” is our big, scary shadow cast on the wall of our mind?

During my 10 years as a jail chaplain I was often locked in — quite literally — with people the community labeled as “monsters” or “evil” sub-humans. One woman was accused of stabbing another woman to death; another of killing her child; another of assaulting a young girl. One shot a local clergyman. Pretty bad crimes, deserving of severe punishment.

Yet as I learned — pushing through my own personal fears and revulsion over their brutal actions — they were each human beings I knew by name, talked with, prayed with and even hugged, who were charged with some truly horrible things (horrible: “to cause trembling or shudder” — and I did), yet they were human beings who were alive as I am alive, sharing the same breath of life — even though they may have taken that life from another person. Puts “being human” into perspective, and that’s not comfortable.

To face our humanity honestly — to truly LIVE — is the opposite of EVIL. We can naturally devour our imagined “evils” like a hungry lion. It makes no sense to go out and kill all the predators (though we try) just to calm our irrational, vengeful fears.

We can either choose to view the world as Good and Evil, God and Devil, or we can choose to see our world as ours, with all kinds of people, some who do some very bad things that deserve clear-headed lion-hearted responses.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.