The Insanity of Evil

By Dennis Pollock

Sick has become the new evil. When we see evil in its purest and most abhorrent forms, our culture has lost the ability to label it for what it is. The best example of this is the media’s treatment of serial killers. When the latest school shooting hits the press, reporters and commentators outdo one another in describing the killer as mentally ill, sick, unhinged, or crazy. Almost never do we hear the murderer referred to as evil.

Chuck Colson ran into this in a Norwegian prison years ago. He was being given a tour by the proud warden, who told him of their wonderful new progressive and humane programs for the therapeutic rehabilitation of the prisoners. He met several doctors in white coats, and it was clear that the theme of this prison was therapy rather than confinement or punishment. The prisoners sent here were the worst of the worst, the most violent criminals in Norway.

Out of curiosity Colson asked how many of the prisoners were mentally ill. The warden immediately assured him that they all were, going on to explain that “Anyone who commits a crime this serious is obviously mentally unbalanced.” Of course that presents a dilemma. If insanity is a reason to be found not guilty (which American law has always held), and if all the most wicked criminals are insane, then society would be put in the position of being forced to allow the perpetrators of the most heinous crimes to go free, after a season of therapy and analysis. Rob a convenience store and get five to ten; kill 30 people on a college campus and undergo therapy for a few years and be set free.

We haven’t, of course, gone that far yet, but we are headed in that direction.

Before the Iraq War in 2003, former editor of Newsweek, Meg Greenfield, picked up on our reluctance to speak of evil, and commented on this in relationship to Saddam Hussein:

Have you noticed how many of us have been saying … Saddam Hussein … is crazy or a nut. He’s not crazy. He’s no nut. It’s far more scary and dangerous than that. He is sane. He is evil. He knows exactly what he is doing… The question itself reveals that there is an apparently invincible innocence … at the bottom of our reasoning… It is evidently impossible for us to accept the fact that people of no particular gigantic dimension or clinical insanity … do wicked things — knowingly… We think of him as someone who needs calming down, a string of reassuring “there, there” rather than the required confrontation. He must be mad, we have concluded .. otherwise why would he be behaving like this?

The American Heritage Dictionary defines legal insanity thus: “In most criminal jurisdictions, a degree of mental malfunctioning sufficient to relieve the accused of legal responsibility for the act committed.” In layman’s terms, a truly insane person is one so out of touch with reality that he hardly knows what he is doing, or the consequences of his actions. He is delusional to the point of innocence. Such a person could no more justly be held accountable for his actions than a child who picked up a gun, and while playing with it accidentally discharged the weapon, instantly killing his father. His deeds may be horrifically unfortunate but could in no way be labeled criminal.

Over these things the Christians and the secularists are sharply divided. For an agnostic to admit that evil exists would be to acknowledge an ultimate source of righteousness. There can be no evil without good, no lawlessness without righteousness, no immorality without holiness. These are concepts the secularists are not at all prepared to embrace.
On the other hand, to suggest that the worst forms of human behavior spring from mentally imbalanced states which renders the perpetrators guiltless, is to undermine the very heart of the Scriptural revelation. A God who was not allowed to judge the Hitlers, Stalins, and Jack the Rippers of this world would be an impotent deity indeed.

Moral Insanity

It’s easy to understand how people can call those who plumb the deepest depths of depravity insane. Many of the actions of those sold out to evil are not only wicked; they don’t even make sense on a practical level. The killer of the Virginia Tech students, Seung-Hui Cho, was unhappy with his life and became enraged with the world. Feeling the victim of some conspiracy to make him miserable, the alienated young man decided he would make them pay. Arming himself to the teeth he then went out and shot down 32 students and then himself.

His goals had clearly not been met. First there was no conspiracy. He was simply a young man whose social awkwardness and internalized anger made it impossible for him to make friends. Secondly the students he killed were randomly selected targets who had nothing to do with his problems. Almost none of them knew him at all. They were paying for his outrage, not for any sins of their own.

Young Cho accomplished nothing more than to end his life, grab headlines which he would not be around to see, and create enormous pain in a lot of families. A bank robber is evil, but at least comes away, if successful, with profit (albeit temporary) from his transgression. A liar may benefit from his lies, and a drug smuggler may improve his situation by his profession. But Cho gained nothing. Was he not therefore insane?

Not in the classical sense of the term. If doing things that are unreasonable and irrational constitute insanity, most of our world fits the bill. The man who leaves his wife for a younger model and devastates the lives of his wife and children, the woman who lives comfortably but cannot resist a compulsion to shoplift, the teens who expose themselves to sexually transmitted diseases and a possible death sentence for a few brief moments of passion are all acting in ways that make no sense from a purely rational and objective point of view. Indeed, if our world could be viewed by aliens from a planet that always acted dispassionately out of pure reason, they might well conclude that the entire population of the earth is gripped with insanity.

This is not all that far from the truth, except that the insanity of our world is not a mental insanity, but a moral one. Most serial killers, mafia hit-men, dictators, and child molesters, along with the more ordinary sinners are not out of touch with reality. They know what they are doing, do not have hallucinations, and can function well in their jobs. They shop at grocery stores, carry on intelligent conversations with people they meet, balance their bank statements, and check the oil level in their cars and air pressure in their tires. They do not talk to dead people nor believe that they are Napoleon or Jesus Christ. They are, by most accounts, quite sane.

The madness they possess is a madness of the heart, not of the mind. It is quite possible to be mentally sane and spiritually insane. Perhaps this is what Solomon had in mind when he wrote, “The heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live…” (Ecclesiastes 9:3).

This brings us back to the concept of evil. The writers of the Scriptures have never been reticent to acknowledge the reality of evil, and to declare God’s response to it. The entirety of the Bible affirms again and again that God will hold men accountable for their actions. God’s response to Adam and Eve’s eating of the forbidden fruit, His thunderings of the law from Mount Sinai, His fiery prophets who railed
against the sins of Israel, and His insistence that the abominable, the unbelieving, and all liars will have their part in the lake of fire, all speak of a God who will ultimately call men to account for the lives they have lived – no insanity defense allowed!

Not only do the Scriptures declare there is such a thing as evil, but they even give the impression that God is personally offended by it! The men of Sodom were called “exceedingly wicked and sinful against the Lord.” Though God lived in heaven, and their sins and sexual immorality were committed on earth, yet their sins were considered “against the Lord.”

We find just how seriously God takes evil by the means He goes to eradicate it. In the Old Testament, God told Israel to put those guilty of serious crimes to death, declaring:

And you shall stone him with stones … So all Israel shall hear and fear, and not again do such wickedness as this among you (Deuteronomy 13:10,11).

In the New Testament Jesus tells us to be so concerned with avoiding sin and judgment that “If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.” Most preachers, myself included, believe Jesus was warning us to avoid those situations that could possibly entice us into sin, rather than advocating literal eye-removal, but there is no escaping the fact that Jesus was warning us to take sin seriously.

By far the greatest and most radical step God has taken towards the eradication of sin and evil was the cross. It was here that our old man (our sin nature) was put to death with Jesus (see Romans 6) that sin and evil should no longer have dominion over us. It was on the cross that Jesus paid the price to set us free from the icy cold hands of death and judgment and bring us into the warmth of God’s love and abundant life.

Perhaps the most shocking news the Bible reveals is that the same seething, murderous, grasping, sinful nature that drove Hitler, Stalin, Jim Jones, Charlie Manson, and Seung-Hui Cho to commit their horrendous acts, lives in every one of us. It may not be as finely honed and perfectly developed but it is there. Evil is an equal opportunity employer, making no distinction in race, creed, or status. Only in Christ are the cruel chains broken and the prisoners set free. God’s solution to the problem of evil was the most radical one possible – through the indwelling Holy Spirit our sin nature is said to be crucified with Christ. As we abide in the Savior, the fragrant beauty of the new man begins to emerge, where God is the focus and love is the rule.

The Bible occasionally speaks of madness, but there is a more common term which is used to refer to that morally absurd lifestyle that stubbornly ignores God’s boundaries and brings about self-destruction. The term is fool. In Biblical terms a fool is not someone lacking in intellect or suffering from hallucinations. He is simply one whose priorities are entirely out of whack. Jesus described such a man who found himself greatly prospering, though his soul was shriveled and without God’s grace. The rich farmer debated within himself what he should do with his abundant harvest. He decided to pull down his old barns and build much larger ones to store all his grain. After that he could take it easy and enjoy many years of plenty. As he reveled in his abundant riches, God said to him, “You fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?” What madness to prepare so well for your temporal needs and yet be so clueless about your eternal needs!

In Christ alone we find our sanity.