

A person is shown from the chest down, holding and reading a newspaper. The image is heavily overlaid with a dark, semi-transparent grey filter. The text is white and stands out against this background. There are faint white circular lines in the top-left and bottom-right corners of the image.

EVIL REPORTS

The question in this season is not whether
God is on our side, but whether we are on
God's side..

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Evil Reports

Now the men whom Moses sent to spy out the land, who returned and made all the congregation complain against him by bringing a bad report of the land, those very men who brought the evil report about the land, died by the plague before the LORD. But Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh remained alive, of the men who went to spy out the land. Numbers 14: 36-38

It was May 1981 and the small church I was leading in South Africa was going through a crisis. To strengthen the team I took them to a conference at a remote Youth with a Mission (YWAM) base in Hammanskraal, South Africa. I heard a man named Don Stephens, now CEO of Mercy Ships, give a talk on Evil Reports and it was so profound I preached it once or twice a year while leading that church. Today the talk on Evil Reports remains part of our leadership training for rēp – Repurposing Business – leaders. (I contacted Don many years ago to see if he had a recording of his talk and asked for his notes, but he did not have them and asked me to send him a copy of my notes of his talk, which I did. I wish I had a recording of Don’s talk, but my notes will have to suffice.)

I have, of course, embellished here and there to add some commentary. For the most part, however, I am going to leave readers to reach their own conclusions. Earlier this year I assembled a group of possibility thinkers (on Zoom) to discuss challenges and opportunities arising from the global pandemic. “What is the truth?” was an issue they identified, and I concur that finding good sources of truth is key. Discerning what you hear is as critical, and a minimum requirement is to be able to dissect a “statement of fact” and ascertain whether it is true or not.

Why am I sharing this in November 2020?

It was easy to see the application of the Evil Reports truths to a small local church, but the message was actually given to a nation. A small group of spies held the future of a nation in their hands. Despite vivid exposure to the miraculous power of God in delivering them from Egypt, the nation allowed themselves to be swayed by fear of giants and stories of fortified cities.

“We went to the land where you sent us. It truly flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. Nevertheless the people who dwell in the land are strong; the cities are fortified and very large; moreover we saw the descendants of Anak there. The Amalekites dwell in the land of the South; the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the mountains; and the Canaanites dwell by the sea and along the banks of the Jordan.”

Nevertheless. We are at a crucial time in the history, not just of the USA, but of the world. Elections took place on November 3rd 2020 and the news media has declared former Vice President Joe Biden as the President-Elect. The mainstream media (and the Democratic Party, of course) are calling for an end to the election process. Overseas leaders and notables are sending congratulations. President Trump has not conceded for various reasons. As of the time of writing, the Trump Campaign has indicated they are filing lawsuits contesting the election in a number of key states.

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Some followers of Jesus (aka, Christians) are rejoicing in the streets, and others are bewildered since there were so many credible prophets stating they believed President Trump would serve two terms. Are we reaping the result of years of disinformation from politicians on both sides, aided and abetted by the media, blunting our senses as to what is truth? When we accept something that comes from “our party” as being legitimate even if it is untrue do we not dull our ability to discern truth from error?

In November 2020 there are questions of critical importance such as:

- Have all votes been tallied correctly?
- Is there evidence of fraud, objectively speaking?
- Who decides the outcome of an election?
- Does the Media get to call an election? (The answer is no, by the way.)
- Is there such a thing as a “President-Elect”?
- Has the election actually been decided?
- If a vote is contested, as in 2000 (by Al Gore), what is the process for going forward?

And, to reiterate, for the follower of Jesus, how do you discern truth in these times? Now, if you are a die-hard Trump/Biden fan and cannot see past your Red/Blue party affiliations I expect this look into scripture will be of little use to you. **If, however, you are willing to sacrifice your political affiliation on the altar of truth then read on because an understanding of Evil Reports might just save a generation from having to spend a future 40 years in the desert.** (The lesson from ancient Israel is what happened when a nation believed the lie of the majority.)

Not only is it very hard to find the truth nowadays, but many self-proclaimed followers of Jesus are not necessarily biblically literate. While 59% of self-declared Christians say the message of the bible has transformed their lives, 35% do not read it (according to a 2019 Barna study). They prefer their opinions to the Word of God. Exacerbating this situation is how we filter and receive “media.” What is streamed to our news feeds generally reinforces our preferences, so we do not see outside our bubble. We consume news or information that underscores our preferences while claiming to be objective. We call our viewpoint “scientific, informed, rational” and their viewpoint “biased, fake, illiterate and ill-conceived”... and that is on a kind day! Jesus Christ said, “I am the Truth.” If we claim to be aligned with him we need to be razor-sharp in ferreting out what scripture calls “evil reports.” An Evil Report is like the coronavirus: it is out there, I can become infected, I can become a carrier, and I can infect others.

Ignorance about what constitutes an Evil Report (ER) can make us both receivers and carriers of ER. I will continue the rest of this blog without much reference to the

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current situation in the US. Suffice is to say that media and political parties are trafficking in evil reports. In addition, big tech have set themselves up to play God, filtering, flagging and censoring what they think you and I should see. The people who believed the “fake news” from the 10 spies ended up losing God’s purposes for their generation. This is our warning. It is therefore important that we understand at the personal and community level what the phrase “*those very men who brought the **evil report***” might mean today.

1.1.1 What is an Evil Report

An ER is a distortion of facts, unauthorized facts, or facts given with a wrong motive. Think about this for a moment: what percentage of daily news is in fact an “evil report”? An ER is generally not an outright lie, but rather a truth presented in a context other than one of faith. The twelve spies all saw the same thing: those who turned the facts into a “bad report” were not inaccurate about the data, but they were not faith-filled about the interpretation. We can attach labels like “spin” and “hype” and “conjecture” and “majority opinion” to things: if we do this we must be aware that we can quickly run foul of God’s view on truth.

1.1.2 How we receive an Evil Report

Understanding how the human body receives an illness gives us some idea for reflecting on how we give and receive Evil Reports. Our familiarity with the present global coronavirus pandemic should inform our understanding on this topic.

Consider this five-part process;

1. Ignorance – you don’t know something that is out there.
2. Exposure – you are exposed to the germ, for example.
3. Contamination – it connects with you.
4. Affected – you become a carrier.
5. Destruction – the disease destroys life forms in the body.

1.1.3 Ignorance

“My people go into exile for lack of knowledge/understanding.” Isaiah 5:13

For the most part, people are not aware of the creative and destructive power of the tongue.

- We are ignorant of how words destroy reputations
 - Spreading of lies about opponents dates back to the Garden of Evil and continues to this day
 - Many people have a completely false view of others based solely on ER
 - I have close friends who proclaim “as fact” that Melania Trump is stupid, Donald Trump cannot read and Joe Biden has lost his mental faculties.

- Is your distorted view of others based on an ER?
- We are clueless about how an ER damages community
 - There are taboo topics at dinner tables because those gathered have believed ERs
 - We must learn to cover confessed sin. Proverbs 17:9
 - We must be loyal to cover each other's weaknesses. Proverbs 16:28
- We are ignorant about how the unclean defiles the clean
 - Haggai 2:11-14
- Ignorance of what constitutes an ER
 - Unauthorized information shared freely
 - Distorted information shared readily
 - Half-truths presented as complete facts
 - Unverified "facts" (which makes them... not facts)
- Ignorance of how ER are given
 - It is both verbal and non-verbal
 - Subtle, sweet, angry, non-verbal, rolling of eyes
 - It is both what is said, and not said. (You can omit context or leave people guessing and reaching a wrong conclusion and later claim, "I did not say that." This too is an ER.)
- Ignorance of who gives an ER
- Ignorance of the motives of people, or your own motives
- Ignorance of how susceptible we are to ER
- We are ignorant about how satan uses ER
 - To discredit leadership
 - To close our spirits to each other
 - Allowing someone else's failure to be an occasion for an ER.

1.1.4 Exposure

"A prudent person sees trouble coming and ducks; a simpleton walks in blindly and is clobbered." Proverbs 27:12 The Message

We have to stay away from carriers of ER. [This includes media outlets. We are not excused if we claim as our defense, “But the New York Times / Post said...”] Our bodies warn us of physical contamination through our senses: sight, sounds, smell, taste, touch. In the same way, we can become sensitized to ER. These are the warning systems that will let you know whether someone is trying to drop an ER on you:

- The carrier normally tests your spirit before giving you an ER. They “put out feelers” before dumping things on you.
- The will check your acceptance of ER.
 - Ask your opinion
 - Drop a negative comment to see how you respond so that they can drop an ER on you.
 - Get you to ask for the ER by creating curiosity
- Asking for your counsel—what they want is to share dirt
- Or they pretend to be concerned: “I am concerned about...”
- The carrier tries to advise you—to make you feel important.
 - “I am sure you will understand...”
 - “What I would advise...”

Nowadays this applies to news sources, not just people. Beware of being so devoted to your brand of news that you are no longer discerning about what they publish.

1.1.5 How to detect an Evil Report

“So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong.” 1 Kings 3:9

People will come to you with negative views of candidates, bosses, pastors and others. Here are five questions to ask someone who is trying to dump an ER on you.

1. What is your reason for telling me this?

- a. If there is no reason, don’t listen.
- b. People sometimes pretend to know more than they do in order to draw things out of you.
- c. There is a time to be open, and a time to be silent.
- d. Make sure you do not widen the circle of gossip.

2. Where did you get your information?

- a. A witness that is not willing to be identified and quoted is not a witness.
- b. Don’t respect so-called “confidences”

3. Have you gone to the person involved directly?

a. Gal 6:1-5. "Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves. Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else, for each one should carry their own load."

b. Matthew 18:16-16 "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'"

c. Have you followed a biblical process to determine the truth of allegations?

4. Have you checked out all the facts?

5. Can I quote you after I have checked this out?

NOTE: In an age of social media, when someone states something publicly you do not have the biblical right to comment (reply, call them out, disagree) publicly. Scriptural protocol requires that you go to them directly, ask a clarifying question or three, get your facts in a row, and try to resolve things in private. If you cannot do this, keep your commentary to yourself. We live in a clickbait "how much engagement did I get on social media" culture, and it is often the opposite of the Kingdom of God. Decide which kingdom you are from.

1.1.6 Contamination

"The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man's inmost parts." Proverbs 26:22

"See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many." Hebrews 12:15

Absalom is a case study. 2 Samuel 15 – The Message.

1-2 As time went on, Absalom took to riding in a horse-drawn chariot, with fifty men running in front of him. Early each morning he would take up his post beside the road at the city gate. When anyone showed up with a case to bring to the king for a decision, Absalom would call him over and say, "Where do you hail from?"

And the answer would come, "Your servant is from one of the tribes of Israel."

3-6 Then Absalom would say, "Look, you've got a strong case; but the king isn't going to listen to you." Then he'd say, "Why doesn't someone make me a judge for this country? Anybody with a case could bring it to me and I'd settle things fair and square." Whenever someone would treat him with special honor, he'd shrug it off and treat him like an equal, making him feel important. Absalom did this to everyone who came to do business with the king and stole the hearts of everyone in Israel.

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7-8 After four years of this, Absalom spoke to the king, "Let me go to Hebron to pay a vow that I made to God. Your servant made a vow when I was living in Geshur in Aram saying, 'If God will bring me back to Jerusalem, I'll serve him with my life.'"

9 The king said, "Go with my blessing." And he got up and set off for Hebron.

10-12 Then Absalom sent undercover agents to all the tribes of Israel with the message, "When you hear the blast of the ram's horn trumpet, that's your signal: Shout, 'Absalom is king in Hebron!'" Two hundred men went with Absalom from Jerusalem. But they had been called together knowing nothing of the plot

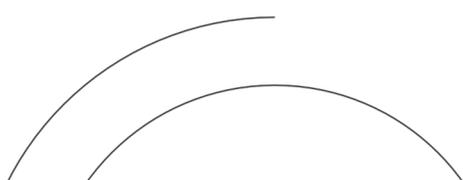
and made the trip innocently. While Absalom was offering sacrifices, he managed also to involve Ahithophel the Gilonite, David's advisor, calling him away from his hometown of Giloh. The conspiracy grew powerful and Absalom's supporters multiplied.

13 Someone came to David with the report, "The whole country has taken up with Absalom!"

These were the tactics of Absalom:

1. He gathered a group around him that was more loyal to him than to the person to whom he was responsible. We need to have loyalty to those who are "above" us.
2. "Rose up early." He was energetic and disciplined. "After four years of this..."
3. "Stood at the gate." He intercepted people coming to the king for a decision, basically saying, "The leader(s) doesn't have time for you, so let me solve your problem."
4. Seeks out broken, aggrieved people.
5. Took a personal interest in aggrieved people. "Look, you've got a strong case; but the king isn't going to listen to you." Note that he pre-judged his father, David, a man "after God's own heart" mind you, questioned his character and performance.
6. Takes up the offense of those who have been hurt.
7. He alienated people from their authority by giving an ER about David.
8. He offered to be the intermediary, distancing people from David, and effectively demoting the people from their direct representation.
9. If you are a leader and you come between people and their "direct line" to a more senior leader, make sure your motives for doing so are right.
10. He had a false humility. "Whenever someone would treat him with special honor, he'd shrug it off and treat him like an equal, making him feel important."
11. He used religious language to dupe those above him. 'If God will bring me back to Jerusalem, I'll serve him with my life.'

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12. He lured people into his scheme without them knowing it. This showed a characteristic of an Absalom—manipulation. “But they had been called together knowing nothing of the plot and made the trip innocently.” “he managed also to involve...”

Bottom line: he stole the hearts of the people. This is diabolical. Remember what happened in the garden? Not much has changed in the enemy’s tactics.

1.1.7 Infection

*“A simple man believes anything, but a prudent man gives thought to his steps.”
Proverbs 14:15*

Proverbs 26

- 20 Without wood a fire goes out;
without gossip a quarrel dies down.*
- 21 As charcoal to embers and as wood to fire,
so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife.*
- 22 The words of a gossip are like choice morsels;
they go down to a man's inmost parts.*
- 23 Like a coating of glaze [a] over earthenware
are fervent lips with an evil heart.*
- 24 A malicious man disguises himself with his lips,
but in his heart he harbors deceit.*
- 25 Though his speech is charming, do not believe him,
for seven abominations fill his heart.*
- 26 His malice may be concealed by deception,
but his wickedness will be exposed in the assembly.*

When we respond to an ER with affection, then we are infected. What are some of the symptoms that we are infected?

1. We believe that the ER is true.
2. We form a negative opinion based on the ER.
3. We focus on the negative aspects of the person involved.
4. God delegated the building of his kingdom to you and me; he does not focus on negatives.
5. We tend to interpret whatever the person does as support for the ER we have received.
6. So, when we are pre-judging people based on the ER, then we have become infected.

To get real for a moment, if someone makes a negative comment about a politician you disagreed with, does it delight you? Do you smirk internally a little, or a lot?

1.1.8 Disease

An ER in full bloom gives way to the loss of the normal functioning of the body (of Christ) and sometimes to death.

The main indicator of being a giver or receiver of an ER is bitterness and rebellion, often manifested through a critical spirit. When we set ourselves up as judges of others—be they individuals or movements—we might just be carriers of ER.

There is something, in my view, that goes beyond bitterness and rebellion, however. When we willfully carry evil reports, our thinking becomes shaped by our distortion of the truth. Over time we are unable to separate good from evil. We have slipped down the slope of Psalm 19 into deception.

12 Who can discern his errors?

Forgive my hidden faults.

*13 Keep your servant also from willful sins;
may they not rule over me.*

*Then will I be blameless,
innocent of great transgression.*

Note the four-part pattern in this psalm:

1. Errors. We all make mistakes, and the Holy Spirit convicts us of them, and we change, otherwise the error becomes....
2. A hidden fault. When the mistake becomes an uncorrected pattern, then it becomes part of our nature, and we are no longer conscious of it. It is a hidden fault. Errors and hidden faults, when not brought under the cleansing blood of Christ, lead to...
3. Willful sins. By now our conscience is seared and we sin without feeling much remorse. Then we get to...
4. Deception: sin ruling over us.

You may wonder how this pathway to self-deception was fueled, and how could it have been prevented? The next verse spells it out.

*14 May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be pleasing in your sight,
O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.*

Think about this for a moment. There was a saying during the war, “Loose lips sink ships.” The same is true in life. Many people have shipwrecked themselves and torpedoed others through bad speech.

NOTE: We are in a sad place in the world where we are calling good evil and evil good. This is a symptom of having succumbed to Evil Reports.

1.1.9 How to be Cleansed from an Evil Report

The first thing we need to do is to recognize that an ER is sin. Don't sugar coat it: it is simply sin. Responding to an ER with joy means we are not ready to repent.

Should we recognize that we have been infected by an ER (whether through personal choice, ignorance or misinformation) then here are some steps that will help get free of an ER:

1. Ask God to cleanse your mind from the ER and from the residue of the ER. 1 John 1:9 and Romans 12:1-2
2. Pray for God's love for the people involved.
3. Bless the people involved...even if you have to start doing so through clenched teeth.
4. Do not accept everything that you hear. Develop godly filters. Proverbs 21:23
5. Pray that God would keep your heart from being fertile ground for ERs.

1.1.10 How you know you are free from an Evil Report

Some indicators of being free of an ER:

1. You have lost your desire to repeat an ER... to tell someone else about something questionable.
2. You grieve over ER.
3. You have a genuine love for the people concerned or involved.
4. You have genuine repentance for the fact of propagating, participating in or receiving an ER.

Psalm 31:20 says, "in your dwelling place you keep them safe from the strife of tongues."

Closing thoughts

Numbers 13 records the account of the faith-filled and the doomed spies:

26 Now they departed and came back to Moses and Aaron and all the congregation of the children of Israel in the Wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh; they brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. 27 Then they told him, and said: "We went to the land where you sent us. It truly flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. 28 Nevertheless the people who dwell in the land are strong; the cities are fortified and very large; moreover we saw the descendants of Anak there. 29 The Amalekites dwell in the land of the South; the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the mountains; and the Canaanites dwell by the sea and along the banks of the Jordan."

30 Then Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, "Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it."

31 *But the men who had gone up with him said, “We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we.”* 32 **And they gave the children of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, “The land through which we have gone as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great stature.** 33 *There we saw the giants (the descendants of Anak came from the giants); and we were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight.”*

From where we sit on the evening of November 9, 2020 it appears the matter of the election is going to court. I do not know where it will end but, by definition, there will be an outcome that will make millions of Americans, and many around the world, very unhappy. How Christ-followers handle truth—not their political preferences but before-God-truth—and what we do with our words in the next few months will be both weighty and weighed. We do not get a free pass for turning a blind eye to untruth.

Joshua, Vice-President to Moses for many years and the newly anointed and appointed leader of Israel, had a quick wake-up call when he encountered an angel as he headed out on a conquest. “Are you for us, or against us?” asked Joshua. It was the wrong question. Joshua 5 records the encounter:

13 *Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, “Are you for us or for our enemies?”* 14 *“Neither,” he replied, “but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come.” Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, “What message does my Lord have for his servant?”*

The question in this season is not whether God is on our side, but whether we are on God’s side. You will never really understand the kingdom of God if you don’t see it as bigger than your political affiliation, your race, your gender, your age, your education or “your” whatever. If we are holding our identity, however we define that, as more important than his kingdom then we are not seeking first his kingdom; we are wanting him to validate (and support) our kingdom. This will negatively affect our ability to discern truth. I will not leave you with a tweetable conclusion but the challenge to hone your skills at spotting and calling out “evil reports” in yourself first so that you can better see it in society and align with the Jesus you know. We were assured, “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” May God grant us the humility of mind and spirit to recognize we do not see it all or know it all. May we ask for wisdom to see right from wrong, discern truth from lies. May a righteous core who are willing to kindly call out falsities arise. And may we spare ourselves and the next generation the consequences of willfully believing lies and suffering the consequent personal, party or national blindness.

How do we know we are on the right track? When we bow as Joshua did and ask “*What message does my Lord have for his servant?*” then we are closer to where we need to be.

