



The Children of God, Part 1

Opening

What if our theology could get up from our armchairs and move into our world? That would be something worth paying attention to. This is the Armchair Anabaptist podcast.

<intro song> Lay your guns down, down on the floor. There ain't no good in those guns anymore. Take my hand and let me kiss your feet. Let our friendship be sweet. <end>

“Because Mennonites have usually found that the way to faithfulness is to separate from others and eventually, if only I am here, then at least I'll agree with myself.”

“And I don't think that we can say we love someone and then shoot them. It doesn't make sense.”

“I always tell folks that, ‘Look at if you're in a debate and winning the debate becomes more important than reflecting love towards the person you're debating, then do the Kingdom of God a great service and shut up.’”

“How do we encourage people to see nonviolence as something more than a position about war?”

“Because we're not just sitting around doing podcasts and theology, we're actually trying to live our lives as Christians.”

<song> This is a reckoning between you and me. The writing of our wrongs as we eat and as we drink. <end>

Introduction

Kevin Wiebe: You're listening to *The Armchair Anabaptist*. This is episode number three, *The Children of God, part one*. I'm Kevin Wiebe.

Jesse Penner: And I'm Jesse Penner and we are your hosts today.

We are digging into this episode, this idea of the children of God, and we're actually taking a look at a passage of scripture that contains some of Jesus' most clear or straightforward teaching about this idea of peace, or love for our enemies. I think as we get going, because this is sort of the anchor passage for what we talked to the panel of guests that we have today, it would be good to read this passage. So we're going to head into Scripture as we begin and we're going to read from Matthew 5, we're going to read Matthew 5:43-48, and that passage should sort of sit in the backs of your minds as you listen because it really does serve as the launchpad for everything that comes out of the conversations we have. This is what it says. I'm reading from the New Living Translation.

You have heard the law that says, ‘Love your neighbour’ and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.

Why does Jesus connect the idea of loving our enemies to what it means to be children of God?

KW: Well today we have five different guests that are going to be talking with us about this particular passage. We will be speaking to Dr. Greg Boyd, Dr. Carol Penner, Dr. Layton Friesen, Dr. Thomas Yoder Neufeld and Dr. Terry Hiebert.

JP: We're going to start off here with Dr. Layton Friesen and he is the Academic Dean at Steinbach Bible College. He's also the author of a book, *Secular Nonviolence and the Theo-Drama of Peace*. And when we presented this passage to him and asked the question, "why does Jesus connect this idea of loving our enemies so clearly to what it means to be children of God," this was Layton's response.

Dr. Layton Friesen: I think Jesus shared the Old Testament understanding of God as the creator, which is that God is the source of everything there is, nothing exists except what has been created by God and nothing continues to exist except as God gives it breath, as God wills it to exist, as God says, yes, it's good that you exist.

But here's the thing - the further you go down the path, the more you realize that God must really love his enemies, even in the Old Testament, because God is - according to the Old Testament understanding of God the creator, God is actively, moment by moment, saying about his enemies, "it is good that you exist. Live on, for one more moment, live on. Here's some sunshine to warm your body as you work against me. Here's some rain to water your orchards as you hate me. Here let me lend you some logic let me lend you the power of reason, let me lend you the structures of understanding and meaning that you can use to make your arguments against me." And so, in all kinds of ways, we might say in the Old Testament, because God is the creator of everything he becomes kind of an accomplice to his enemies in their struggle against him. The more you understand that God is the active, present, deciding, upholder, and sustainer of all reality, the more you have to conclude that God does a lot of very loving things for his enemies. And I think this is what Jesus is calling us to imitate when he says, "like your heavenly father sends rain on the just as well as the unjust."

And this is kind of almost the other side of the problem of evil, in a way, and in the problem of evil, we wonder why God allows bad things to happen to good people. But in the problem of good we wonder why God allows good things to happen to bad people, and I think Jesus is poking at that here. Jesus realizes that his Father allows good things to happen to bad people and he uses that as a way of saying "be like your Heavenly Father," that that would be my perspective on it.

That's very different than if you come from a tradition like some of the other traditions around Israel at the time, which had more of a dualistic understanding of the world, in which there's a good god and a bad god, and the good god is involved in all the good stuff that happens and the bad god is in charge of all the bad stuff that happens. And these two gods, they fight it out. They duke it out, sometimes one wins, sometimes the other one wins, it's kind of an equal fight in the end. Then you can just say, "well, the bad stuff is because of the bad god and the good stuff is because of the good god."

You don't have this same kind of thing, but in the Old Testament tradition, in the Jewish tradition, God is the creator of everything. There is no one like God, and so God thus becomes in some sense the one who supports and blesses and - no, maybe not blesses, but certainly gives support to and gives strength to people who are doing evil. That even the very existence of evil people is attributable to the goodness of God. It is God's intention to have created those people and for them to continue to exist is also because God says "yes, exist for one more moment, or for one more day" or whatever it is. And so that's I think where Jesus is coming from here.

KW: Dr. Carol Penner is a professor and the Director of Theological Studies at Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo, Ontario.

This is what Dr. Penner had to say about why Jesus connects this idea of loving our enemies to what it means to being children of God in Matthew 5:43-48.

Dr. Carol Penner: Well, I think all people are children of God. We're all created in God's image and the question is can we live into that identity or not? That's the big challenge. Of course, if we are treating people the way God wants us to treat people, then we are living into the image of God. Sometimes there is an arrogance with Christians that we think we are the children of God because we're Christians and other people aren't children of God, but I think that's totally misguided because all people are made in God's

image and we're all children of God but how do we live into that identity?

I think of my children. They are wonderful people, but if one of them had a lot of problems and ended up in jail, I would think they're not living into the identity of the child I would like them to be, but they're still my child no matter how they act. I love them.

For God to challenge us to be children of God, it's like "remember who you are." You tell your kids things like that.

JP: Dr. Terry Hiebert is president at Steinbach Bible College and he also wrestled with this passage in Matthew 5 and how these things relate - love for our enemies and our relationship to God as his children.

Dr. Terry Hiebert: When Jesus talks about this loving your enemies part in Matthew 5 he takes the best wisdom of the Torah, the Old Testament law, and he's not completely dismissing it. In fact, he says I did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. So, he's basically saying, "yeah, the law was there to restrain evil. The law is there to promote the fullness of life - shalom - the way God intended it. But here's more." And if we seek first God's Kingdom, and in our case, when we seek first to follow Jesus, there's kind of a new level that it becomes law, it becomes life, but it becomes a new kind of transforming way of thinking about these practices that will then give us life to a new level - "I've come to bring life to the full."

When Jesus states "you've heard it said, 'you should love your neighbour and hate your enemy,'" it was not said in the Old Testament at all. So where did this come from? Apparently, it comes from the Qumran community by the Dead Sea, and they were very much sectarian, very separate in one sense, and in one sense have some similarities with some Anabaptist movements as well. It basically said, "love your neighbour, hate your enemy." Basically, avoid anybody outside our group.

And if you love your neighbour but hate your enemy, there is a vicious cycle that happens there too. It starts when we love our neighbour, but it becomes more than that. And we've seen this so much in the last five, six, seven years where we just follow our tribe, our clique, our family, our 'in-group,' our racial background, or our nation, and say "this tribe, this group that I identify with is right, and everybody else is wrong."

We won't listen to each other, we'll hate other people and anybody who disagrees with us, of course, we need to somehow not listen to them and not care. But Jesus says, "well if you love only those who love you or who are part of your tribe, how can we make disciples of all nations - Matthew 28? Or how can we become witnesses to Christ, in Acts 1 and break down those barriers between? How can we in Ephesians talk about the breakdown between Jew and Gentile and so on? Even in Galatians, between Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free?"

It's beyond that kind of tribalism and saying that only the group that's close to me is my friends, and everybody else is my enemy, and you can't trust anybody anymore. And that's become such a big thing in the past. You've got these echo chambers of people talking to each other and excluding other groups, and in Jesus' day it was happening too. The Pharisees were advocating purity and separation and staying inside, making sure that they wash their hands properly and did all the ritual purity actions, not to get together with tax collectors or women or gentiles or impure people, or those who didn't practice this kind ritual period. They excluded outsiders and blamed the corruption on foreigners. And you got some of the similar situations we have today. I mean you have the Roman occupation. And of course, the Pharisees and their holiness and its separation and inclusion and you do that, especially by opposing your occupiers.

But for Jesus, he has a different value in relating to enemies and the people on the outside. What the Pharisees said - holiness equals exclusion - for Jesus, holiness means compassion and mercy, even with the people that were tax collectors or women or prostitutes. And it's kind of this intentional reversal of the practices of the Pharisees. It says that pollution doesn't come from the outside, it comes from the inside. It's in our inward nature, our hateful relationships or our hateful thinking toward others. That's what's really happening.

It reminds me of a Pogo comic strip where the main character, Pogo, and his friend are walking around

in the swamp and they're circling around the swamp and they keep going around the swamp and they discover after a while that the swamp has got a whole bunch of junk in it. And there's a whole bunch of garbage there and they're going, "I wonder what's going on here?" They reflect on the situation and they realize that in their walking they created the junk and there's this famous conclusion he makes: we have met the enemy, and he is us.

And I think if we realize that if we meet the enemy and he or she or they are us, that they're human like we are, and we have also created a mess that others are cleaning up and this compassion, this mercy - maybe it's a bit easier to remind ourselves that it's not just them that's the problem, that we all are part of it. So, Jesus diagnoses this vicious cycle of blaming and exclusion and shows that you know even evil people, they will love their friends and hate their enemies. So a follower of Jesus is no better off if that's all we do, we've got to be better than that. Our righteousness is supposed to exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees. If we're supposed to seek first God's Kingdom and be holy, complete, perfect as the Heavenly Father is, what does that look like? Then realizing, that if we just love those who love us, it's just a spiral and it will never go anywhere, it will never seek first God's Kingdom. But this transforming initiative is more challenging to the status quo.

If you love your enemies and if you pray for those that persecute you, it says there, "so that that you may be sons and daughters of your Father, who is in heaven." Jesus points out that even God loves his enemies by making the sun rise on the evil and the good, sending rain on the just and the unjust. If we actually want to be children of our Heavenly Father, then we need to be the imitators of our Father. And it's not a feeling of warmth or you know necessarily saying, "oh, I love what this person is doing or is doing to me." It's not.

It's being godly, not in a fake kind of way, but in a genuine kind of way, saying, "how does God show compassion and mercy on these people, whom I call my enemies?"

KW: Well, thus far we have had some very valuable thoughts on why loving our enemies is in fact a hallmark of what it means to be a child of God. And I had this thought as we were talking to these guests and it's this phrase, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. You know it's this phrase we use when we talk about parents and children. If a child is like their father, if their dad has a certain quirk, a way of walking, a way of talking, certain phrases they use, the way he wears his hat or whatever, and then their child just does what their father does, then we say the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

It made me think of John chapter one, where in John 1:12 it says, "but to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God," and so for all of us who are children of God, just as Paul says, we are to be imitators of God as dearly loved children [Ephesians 5:1]. If God loves his enemies, then that's supposed to be something actually that we are supposed to do as well.

JP: Right and there is more to it even than just following the actions or imitating God, I think there's something that came through in these interviews and these discussions that we had about the idea that because God is creator and not only creator - because God is sustainer, because he is actively sustaining the world we live in, that gives value to creation, that gives value to all that we see around us and first and foremost, it gives value to the people who are around us, whether they're a part of our tribe or our group or not.

Everybody - friend, neighbour, enemy - is created and sustained by God and people of course are made in God's image, and so it's this transformative thing. And for me, it's been deeply valuable to understand that not only do I want to try and do the right things, I'm also trying to have the vision of my Father and to be able to see people through the lens that God has created; see people through the lens that God has for them and that changes the way that we interact.

JP: Dr. Greg Boyd is a theologian, preacher, teacher, and author. He pastors Woodland Hills Church in St. Paul, Minnesota and he's also written many books including *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God*. We sat down with Dr. Boyd to ask him the same question, "how does Jesus' statement in Matthew 5 help us

understand the connection between being children of God and loving our enemies?”

Dr. Greg Boyd: That is, I think, one of the most important questions you could possibly ask me. Jesus says “love your enemies and bless those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven,” that you may be. I remember after I read that verse about 100 times, maybe 200 times, until the very late 90s, all of a sudden I read that verse. Like I had never noticed how strong a verse that was. This is his central criteria. Our capacity to love our enemies rather than hating our enemies the way the world always does, we’re supposed to love them, bless them, do good to them, he says in Luke 6.

The reason for that I think is this: it’s only when we love our enemies that we’re really loving the way God loves and that’s why Jesus says, “that you may be children of your Father in heaven because he causes the sun to shine on the righteous and the wicked and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust.” So God loves indiscriminately, he doesn’t pick and choose. He loves like the rain falls and he loves like the sun shines. And then we reflect that we’re his children when we look like him in this respect, there’s a family resemblance and when we love the way God loves, well, that’s what it means to be godly and that’s what it means to reflect the character of Abba Father.

Another way of saying this is that when we can love our enemy, genuinely love and bless our enemies, we’re most conformed to the cross and the cross is like the definitive revelation of God’s character, and God is other-oriented, self-sacrificial love. And so it’s when we resemble the cross, the crucified Christ, by having this other-oriented self-sacrificial stance toward all people at all times like the rain falls, like the sun shines, that’s when it’s clear that we are the children of a Father in heaven.

It’s also that the teaching of Jesus that requires us to most thoroughly crucify our flesh, to most thoroughly crucify our self-preservationist instinct, and that’s why it’s the clearest demonstration that we’re children of the Father in heaven. You have to die to that self-preservationist instinct that we all have, to love an enemy, especially to love a life-threatening enemy. You have to be willing to die and Jesus says lose your life and you’ll find it. And so that’s another reason why I think this is the distinctive criteria, it’s “you’ve crucified your flesh so that now you can resemble your loving Father in heaven.”

KW: Dr. Thomas Yoder Neufeld is Professor Emeritus of Religious and Theological Studies at Conrad Grebel University College. He’s also the author of the book *Killing Enmity*, and he’s the chair of the Faith and Life Commission of the Mennonite World Conference.

I first met Dr. Yoder Neufeld at Conrad Grebel University College in a class I took there, and I was very excited to be able to interview him for this series. We also asked him, “why does Jesus connect this idea of loving our enemies to what it means to being children of God in Matthew 5:43-48?”

Dr. Thomas Yoder Neufeld: Well, actually if I can correct the translation that you’re having because it relates to this, the term is children of God as you quoted, but that’s a kind of inclusive version. The actual term there is sons of God and the reason I’m drawing attention to that is not to be exclusive or sexist, but rather because... Son of God is the way we talk about Jesus when we really want to speak of his status and his power and his authority, so to be sons of God is to participate in a sense in some measure in that status. And that’s important.

In fact, in the beatitudes, which come earlier in the chapter in Matthew 5, “blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God.” Now most of our modern translations, “they shall be called the children of God,” which sort of obscures that status term. Caesar wanted to be acclaimed as a son of God. The sons of God in the Bible already relates to the angelic beings in the presence of God. So this is grand language, which “children of God” speak somehow, at least in our contemporary imagination, captures more dependency, affection, care, not sharing in a kind of status as divinely chosen agents, so that’s, in my view, very important to link the love of enemies to the fact that we have been called and chosen to be sons and daughters of God with that sort of degree of status and empowerment that goes with it.

So to be peacemakers and to be lovers of enemy, really puts us right into that – how should I say? We

might even say as co-creators with God. Remember the image here in the passage you just read is of God who shines the sun and makes the rain fall on the just and the unjust. This is not a kind of image of well, the sun shines on everybody and the rain falls on everybody, sort of indiscriminately nice. It's rather a very directive action of love. I think it's really important to see how strongly peacemaking and love of enemies are linked to the highest possible thing we could ever say about those whom God has chosen. So that's I think about as solid a link as we could possibly make. This isn't the action of the powerless or the people who have no alternative. This is not marginal behaviour. This is intended to be reflective of exactly who God is.

It's very interesting, by the way - this is not unique to Jesus in the New Testament. I spent a lot of time working on the letter to the Ephesians, and it's interesting that at the end of chapter four, we are to grace each other or forgive each other as God in Christ has forgiven you. And then a shocking phrase right in the very next verse in chapter five, verse one: "Be imitators of God and walk in love as Christ has loved and given himself for you." So this is a key connection. It's not a Mennonite theme to be harped on, this goes to the heart of what it means to call ourselves sons and daughters of God.

JP: I think what really struck me in those conversations was that the call to enemy love is sometimes perceived, along with many things in scriptures many of the calls that we have from Jesus can be perceived as a weakening or a disengaging or a stepping away from responsibility and submitting out of fear or out of weakness, and rather what we see is that these decisions aren't something that are made out of weakness. These decisions are a reflection of the greatest strength in the universe and in fact a strength greater than the universe.

This comes out of a relationship to, and identifying in, a creator God who has all the power in the world and it's actually out of that power that we have the ability to step aside from the weakness of retaliation and instead lean into the strength of loving those who might hurt us.

KW: Yeah, I used to think that being a pacifist was about being a doormat and I used to think that that classic kind of trope of pacifism is the same as passive-ism. But like you said, it's actually not about that, that there's something tremendously empowering about learning to get past our pride, about getting past our ego, and in fact like you said earlier, about being able to see in the other, even though they're hurting us, even though they may be doing something that we disagree with, but about learning to see in them the image of God.

And that's why I think our feature song today is something that's so very powerful. It's a song by Peters and Pilgrim. There's actually a uniquely Evangelical Mennonite Conference connection, an EMC connection here. Pastor Ed Peters, his son and daughter-in-law wrote this song. It's called *Eye to Eye*, and the very beginning of the song has these lyrics. "We may not always see eye to eye. We may not always seem on the same side, but you're as precious as gold, as precious as gold to me." And this song is that kind of picture of even when we disagree, to be able to see the gold in one another. I think that's the goal, right?

That is, I think, what Jesus is calling us to in this kind of passage about what it means to be children of God. Can we see the gold inside of one another? Can we see the image of God inside each other even when we're not on the same side? And that's what I think is so profound about this whole concept, and I think is something that we should all seek to grow in as human beings, but also, especially as Christians and followers of Jesus. This is *Eye to Eye* by Peters and Pilgrim.

Eye to Eye, Peters and Pilgrim

We may not always see eye to eye.

We may not always seem on the same side.

But you're as precious as gold,

as precious as gold to me.

The ring on my finger,
that's what it means to me.
There ain't gonna be another,
another for me.
Cause you're as precious as gold,
as precious as gold to me.

You're as precious as gold,
as precious as gold to me.
You're more precious than gold,
more precious than gold to me.

Closing

The Armchair Anabaptist is a Theodidaktos podcast and Theodidaktos is a publication of the Evangelical Mennonite Conference. You can check us out online at www.thearmchairanabaptist.ca and find us on iTunes, Spotify and wherever podcasts are found.

A special thanks to our guests who have joined us today, Dr. Layton Friesen, Dr. Carol Penner, Dr. Terry Hiebert, Dr. Greg Boyd, and Dr. Thomas Yoder Neufeld.

Our intro song is *First Communion* by Dane Jones Hill and our feature song today was the song *Eye to Eye* by Peters and Pilgrim.

Our executive producer is Erica Fehr, our producer and audio engineer is Kevin Wiebe, and our administrative assistant and wizard of all things web related is Ruth Block. I'm Kevin Wiebe.

And I'm Jesse Penner, and we have been your hosts for The Armchair Anabaptist. We certainly hope that what you have heard today will do more than stay as merely food for thought, but that it can help inspire each of us to get up out of the comfort of our armchairs and translate into living more like Jesus.

Join us next time as we continue our journey looking at the life of peace and the second half of this particular discussion about what Jesus said all of this has to do with being children of God.

*Edited for clarity.