

Making Our Way



A McMAHON / CHEYNE PODCAST

#85 • Season 3 • Episode 24

2/25/2026

The Sin of Empathy?

Our Hosts

Janet Cheyne McMahon is a lover of family, dogs, nature, travel, books, and music. Born south of the Mason-Dixon line, she left after 9 months for parts north, landing eventually in Michigan, which will always be “where I’m from.”

Love of learning led Jan to a Bachelor of Arts (History, Political Science) at the University of Michigan-Dearborn (Go Blue), and a Master of Arts (Library and Information Science) at the University of South Florida. Amid all that, studied for a time with Rob at Colorado State University, a pivotal time in their lives.

Worked at the U of M-Dearborn Library, and then The Salvation Army Florida Divisional Headquarters, with the greatest reward being in serving as the Divisional Librarian. A librarian is who Jan is “in my soul.”

Jan and Rob have made our home in Florida since 1983, and live now in retirement with their dog, Skye, who makes it all the best adventure. They travel as much as possible, spending time in nature and in diverse places on this amazing planet. It has all been, and continues to be a fascinating journey, with hope of making a difference, in small ways, by being brave enough to speak and act on behalf of others.

Rob McMahon is a native Michigander, born in Saginaw and raised in the suburbs of Detroit. Rob attended Michigan State University, graduating in 1978 with a Bachelor of Science degree. He did graduate studies at the University of Michigan and the University of South Florida. Rob is retired, having spent 36 years in public education teaching both high school chemistry and biology and middle school science. He worked as a total quality management trainer for the Pinellas County School District and served four years as the president of the Pinellas Classroom Teachers Association. Rob cofounded a non-profit total quality management training center, The Learning Co-op, for Teacher Unions interested in applying the W. Edwards Deming continuous improvement principles to their day-to-day operations. He worked with teacher unions in Colorado, Maryland, New Mexico, North Dakota, Texas and Michigan. He also worked in a similar capacity with Jim Shipley & Associates. In retirement Rob has written a series of science related children’s books, and enjoys traveling with his wife, Jan, and their Black Labrador Retriever, Skye.

Deanna Cheyne, born in St. John’s, Newfoundland, earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Vocal Performance from the University of Toronto (1996), studying with such luminaries as Elmer Eisler, Doreen Rao, Greta Kraus, Lois Marshall, and Rosemarie Landry.

Dee taught music at Mississauga Christian Academy, served as music director for Meadowvale Bible Baptist Church (Mississauga, Ontario), served as Assistant Divisional Music Director for The Salvation Army in Florida, is a former member of Tampa’s Master Chorale, and, for the past 18 years, has been a public school teacher.

Dee has visit 36 of the 50 U.S. states, and 12 countries. Her favorite destinations include France, Prague, New Orleans, National Parks, & Hawaii.

Dee & Jim live in Florida with Brigus (Golden Retriever) and Pip (Teacup Yorkie).

James Cheyne, born in Galesburg, Illinois, earned a Bachelor of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from Michigan State University (1978); and a Master of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from the University of Illinois Urbana/Champaign (1981), studying with David Liptak, Salvatore Martirano, and Ben Johnston.

Jim has served as music director for The Salvation Army in Central Illinois & Eastern Iowa, Orlando Area Command, and the Florida Division, served as a pastor with The Salvation Army, and was a public school teacher for 17 years.

In travel so far, Jim has visited 50 states and 27 countries. His favorite travel destinations include National Parks, New Orleans, Newfoundland, Argentina, Prague, & France.

Jim continues to write music and support Dee’s musical endeavors, and cooks whenever absolutely necessary. Jim & Dee live in Florida with their dogs Brigus & Pip.



L-R: Brigus, Jim, Deanna, Skye, Jan, Rob.
Inset: Pip

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The Sin of Empathy?

#85 - Season 3; Episode 24

2/25/2026

Host: Jim.

| Jim confronts the recent backlash against empathy in the current religious-political-social conversation.
| Captain Kirk and Stephen King drop in for a visit.

[Music]

JIM: Are you a fan of the original Star Trek series, the Captain Kirk one? I am. Nothing against the others. And are you of a certain age when the first time you saw Captain Kirk's Enterprise was not through a streaming service, not on DVD, not even on VHS, but on the original broadcast? I'm that, too. We're talking 1966-69. Do you remember an episode called The Empath, season three?

In the story, Kirk, Spock, and McCoy meet an alien who has the ability to heal empathically. When Kirk is injured, the alien absorbs his wounds into herself, pain and all. After a few moments, the wounds resolve, and both Kirk and the Empath are healed. It reminds me of Stephen King's "The Green Mile," where death row inmate John Coffey also heals empathically, even bringing a crushed mouse back to life. John absorbs others' pain, sickness, even death, feeling their full impact, and then exhales the pain and the disease as a storm of flies from his mouth. This all happens before his wrongful execution.

As someone raised in an evangelical Christian home, I hear these stories and can't help but think of all those Suffering Servant passages in Isaiah. "He was wounded for our transgressions ... with his stripes we are healed," if you remember the King James. For most of my life, until a short time ago, I had thought empathy was a prized virtue. Who could say anything against it?

Enter Elon Musk. I heard Elon Musk say this, "The fundamental weakness of Western civilization is empathy." Really? The fundamental weakness? I could make a list several pages long of weaknesses in Western civilization before even thinking to include empathy. But then enter Kirk. Not the captain this time, but Charlie, a self-avowed Christian. Charlie Kirk said this: "I can't stand the word empathy. I think empathy is a made-up New Age term, and it does a lot of damage." Well, I'll agree with him on one point. Empathy is a made-up word, because all words are. But how does a Christian come to put such a low value on empathy? Then, a little over a week ago, a friend on Facebook posted about a Christian pastor named Joe Rigney, who has written a book called "The Sin of Empathy." A pastor calling empathy a sin? What's going on here? There's some conversation that I've completely missed. So I went looking for it.

I did not buy Joe Rigney's book, but I did find a podcast featuring Joe Rigney where he lays out his case, and I want to talk about that. The podcast is called "Man Rampant," so hold

on to something. It's hosted by Doug Wilson, so get a firm grip. This could get bumpy. Let's tune in.

Wilson gets the conversation going with this quip to Rigney: "So you're saying Christians shouldn't be loving?" Rigney begins his argument in this way, quoting:

"You've got someone drowning, or they're in quicksand," says Rigney, "and they're sinking, and what empathy wants to do is jump into the quicksand with them, both feet. It feels like that's going to be more loving because they're going to feel like, 'I'm glad you're here with me in the quicksand.' The problem is, you're both now sinking." Rigney continues, "'I'm going to keep one foot on the shore and grab onto this big branch, and then I'll step one foot in there with you and try to pull you out.' That's sympathy," says Rigney, "and that's actually helpful. But to the person who's in there it can feel like, 'You're judging me.'" Rigney then summarizes it this way. "No one wants to feel like they're the hurting. We want to equalize everything, and so empathy demands, 'Get in here with me, otherwise you don't love me.'"

Okay, let's unpack this.

During that podcast, Rigney claims that sympathy and compassion are the same thing, but that empathy is something quite different. In common usage, sympathy, empathy, and compassion are nearly synonymous, but a dictionary sorts them out this way. Sympathy is something one has *for* another. "I feel sympathy *for* you." It's connected with pity and sorrow. Empathy is something one has *with* another. "I feel empathy *with* you." It's connected to sharing another's feelings. Compassion is like the others, but brings a measure of concern that often leads to action. I grew up in The Salvation Army where I understood compassion to be the signature trait of all of our activities. "Except I am moved with compassion, how dwelleth thy spirit in me," is the familiar lyric.

So, in the dictionary, and in common usage, sympathy, empathy, and compassion are quite positive emotional responses to another's plight. In this podcast, however, Rigney and Wilson consistently praise sympathy and compassion as prized emotions, but throw empathy in only a negative light.

Here are some examples.

Think of how a parent reacts to a pouting child, or to a child throwing a tantrum. The parent who gives in just to keep peace in the house is a parent practicing empathy, they say. But the parent who holds the line to teach a child that tantrums don't work here is practicing love. I would think giving in isn't really empathy, it might just be bad parenting.

Another example. Wilson and Rigney are both Christian pastors, so they give an example from pastoral counseling. It happens sometimes that someone who is being counseled will engage in emotional manipulation with the pastor. "Agree with my side, agree with my feelings, or you're taking the other side, and you're not showing love." The counselor who succumbs to this emotional manipulation does so, according to Rigney and Wilson, because of empathy. To me, though, it's just bad counseling practices, something even my rudimentary training in pastoral care would easily identify and avoid.

Then they bring C. S. Lewis in, with an example from "The Great Divorce," of someone who

sulks when they don't get their way. The person who gives into the sulking just to keep the peace in the house does so because of - you guessed it - empathy, but the person who does not give in does so out of love.

With these examples and more, Rigney and Wilson - and I use their names together because they're on the same page throughout the podcast - they both have sequestered empathy to the bad corner of the room. In my view, what we feel about a situation and what we do about it are two different things. The emotions we feel are not necessarily confined to only one response, as Rigney and Wilson suggest.

If a man does something crazy, maybe even something that causes harm, and says he did it for love, should we expect Joe Rigney then to write a book called "The Sin of Love"? If someone commits an atrocity because, in their mind, God told them to do it, are we due for a book called "The Sin of Obeying God"? Yet this podcast presents us with bad parenting, bad counseling, and bad strategies for escaping quicksand, all supposedly because of the sin of empathy.

Listening to this podcast was frustrating for me. So I tried a little thought experiment. Suppose, before I listened to it, someone handed me a transcript of the podcast, but with the word "empathy" blotted out. Suppose I had been given a Pam Bondi redacted transcript, with every instance of the word "empathy" blacked out by a large Sharpie. And then I was asked what word or phrase I thought might be hidden under those black bars. What would I come up with? Given Rigney and Wilson's arguments and the examples they use, I think I would have guessed the podcast was called "The Sin of Enabling," or "The Sin of Complicity," or "The Sin of Acquiescence," or even "The Sin of Giving In to Emotional Manipulation."

I don't think empathy is the problem here. Empathy is an emotional reaction to a situation. It is not an action plan. Empathy is what actors use to relate with the characters they portray. It's a tool for understanding a situation. But no one believes Daniel Day-Lewis really is Lincoln, or that Charlize Theron really is a serial killer. And if I get in a taxi one day driven by Robert De Niro, I'm not going to assume he's going to or coming from a killing spree. I'll assume he's preparing for a role, or that residuals aren't what they used to be.

So why the sin of empathy? What are Rigney and Wilson and Elon Musk and Charlie Kirk really getting on about? Could it be that empathy is that virtue most invoked to promote progressive social ideas? Could it be that they identify empathy as the root motivation for a progressive agenda? Isn't it empathy that makes progressives argue for a more fair treatment of immigrants? Isn't empathy behind progressive social justice initiatives? Isn't empathy at the root of understanding those with gender and sexuality issues? And if empathy is the foundation on which these progressive programs are based, then what better way to defeat those programs than to undermine that foundation, that word? To me, this is just classic poisoning the well strategy.

Think of the labels we use to stigmatize people, labels that automatically disqualify them from normal social discourse. Communist, Fascist, Pagan, Progressive, Muslim, Woke, Right wing nut job, Left wing nutjob. There is a whole storehouse of epithets ready to cast scorn on people to minimize them, to marginalize them, to eject them to the fringe where they won't be a bother any more. And now the move is to add empathy to that list of attributes. "You say you have empathy for those people? I heard of a book once that says, empathy is

a sin." Case closed.

It would be tempting at this point to reference Bible passages that, to me, clearly endorse empathy. So I will.

We read in Romans, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with those who mourn." And in Galatians, "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ." And Philippians, "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others." In John, we see Jesus moved to tears because of the mourners at Lazarus' tomb. But why react that way when he knows what he is about to do, except through empathy? In Luke, Jesus is moved to tears over Jerusalem. In Hebrews, Jesus is said to have prayed with loud cries and tears. To me, these are clear examples of empathy. It's a hallmark of the Incarnation. Jesus participates in humanity completely, not from some judgmental distance. He involves himself completely in our humanity. "In every respect he has been tested as we are," says Hebrews, and gives himself over to a real emotional identification with suffering humanity. In so doing, he shows that empathy is a proper response to that suffering, not a hopeless one.

Now, I can hear Rigney and Wilson say these passages are about sympathy and compassion, not empathy. But the meaning is there, even if the word did not yet exist for the Bible to use. Really though, isn't that just moving the goalposts? If you define terms away from any counterexamples, of course your definitions will win. And that's what this podcast does. "Are you motivated to help someone? Excellent," they say. "If the consequences are positive, it's because you were motivated by sympathy or compassion or love, which are good. But if the consequences are negative, it's because you were motivated by empathy, which is a sin."

The publisher's blurb about the book Rigney wrote describes his argument this way, quoting, "The so-called virtue of empathy is the greatest rhetorical tool of manipulation in the 21st century. Because love is a real virtue, empathy's power is imposing as selfless care for victims." End quote.

So the basic argument made on the podcast is this, empathy is a sin because we have defined it as such, and therefore any action you take based on empathy is also a sin. QED. And anyone familiar with formal logic knows this as a "begging the question" fallacy. When you use the conclusion you're trying to reach as a premise for the argument, that's circular reasoning, and it fails as an argument in the same way that plugging a power strip into itself fails to produce any power.

In closing, I don't intend to poison this well, but I will share this information for context. Doug Wilson and Joe Rigney are Christian Nationalists, though perhaps not in the sense one might assume. As we've learned, let's be careful with definitions. They both identify as complementarians, which means they believe that men and women, though equal in God's sight, have different but complementary roles to play in the family and in society. Doug Wilson, for instance, advocates household voting, where women do not vote, and each household is given a single vote which will be cast by the male head.

I believe I've represented their arguments in good faith, but if you'd like a copy of Joe Rickney's book, it's available on Amazon. But I would encourage you to order it through your local bookstore. Doug Wilson is also an author. Some of his titles are:

Federal Husband; Covenantal Headship and the Christian Man; or,
Reforming Marriage; Gospel Living For Couples; or,
Mere Christendom; or,
Southern Slavery As It Was, and many others.

My goal always is to measure an argument by the merits of the argument, not by the merits of the one making it. That's a fundamental principle for me, and a useful tool for discovering my blind spots.

But let's return to Star Trek. The empath in that episode was mute and could not say her name, so McCoy named her Gem. At the end of the episode, Scotty remarks that Gem, the empath, must have been "a pearl of great price."

And finally, since Joe Rigney and Doug Wilson are pastors, I will offer a few words once offered to me by Phil Needham, our spiritual guide as we were studying to be pastors. They're from a book called "The Wounded Healer" by Henri Nouwen.

"The great illusion of leadership," says Nouwen, "is to think that man can be led out of the desert by someone who has never been there."

[Music begins]

It was a pleasure to have your company as we are Making Our Way today.

Until next time.

[Music ends]