

How to Treat Immigrants [Slide 1]

Today I want to speak on how to treat immigrants and refugees as well as talk about immigration policy itself. Cite 2010 poll by the Pew Research Center. There is a reason why religion doesn't have much influence on people's opinions about immigration policy, but we will get to that later.

It is helpful if we break this topic down into smaller categories. The first category I want to address is how we both nationally and individually should treat immigrants and refugees who are already here. We have the greatest amount of Biblical instruction dealing with that question.

[Slide 2] Let's begin with God's instructions to the nation Israel in the Old Testament about how aliens and strangers were to be treated. Sojourners or foreigners were expected to abide by the laws of the land and were afforded equal protection under those laws. Exodus 12:49 says, "Read," and Lev. 24:22 says, "Read." Sojourners also were allowed equal access to the cities of refuge if they unintentionally killed someone. Read Numbers 35:15. You could flee there to escape a family member taking revenge if you unintentionally killed someone. Then the elders of the city would hear your case to determine whether you had unintentionally killed or whether you had premeditatedly killed the victim.

The Law also provided for the foreigner the same kind of financial provision made for the poor. For example, farmers were not to fully harvest their crops so that both the poor and foreigners could glean the crops for themselves. Read Deuteronomy 24:19-21. In addition the tithe on income every third year that was collected for the poor was also collected for the foreigner. Read Deuteronomy 14:28-29. These laws covered foreigners who were poor. Foreigners were also allowed to own private property. Ezekiel 47:22-23 says, "Read."

In summary, the foreigner was obligated to obey the criminal and civil law, but was not required to obey the religious law. They weren't required to keep the Sabbath or Feast Days, make sacrifices, or abide by the dietary laws. The Law protected them from injustice and oppression in the same way it protected the native.

What can we infer from the OT practice to our situation in the United States? Should our laws offer equal protection and equal provision to the native and to the foreigner, even if that also means providing destitute foreigners with food and financial assistance?

Before I answer that question, let's look at what the Law commanded the individual Israelite to do for the foreigner. Look at Leviticus 19:33-34 on your sermon outline. Read. The individual Israelite was to love the foreigner the same way he loved a native. He was not to show favoritism. The reason God gives is because the Jews were once themselves aliens in Egypt.

Look at Deuteronomy 10:17-19. Read. Here we get a second reason why we should treat foreigners the same as natives. The first reason is because, again, the Jews themselves once were aliens in Egypt. This seems to be a corporate application of the Golden Rule. You were in Egypt. You know how you would have wanted to be treated by them. Treat your foreigners the way you would want to be treated if you were a foreigner.

The second reason we should treat the foreigner the same as a native is because according to verse 17 God does not show partiality. That includes not taking bribes and executing justice for the orphan and widow and showing His love to the alien.

We should treat the foreigner the same as the native, because that is what we would want if we were a foreigner and because we are supposed to be like our God and our God is not partial. He loves the foreigner as much as the Jew or the sojourner or the American.

Those reasons are still valid today in the church age and so I do believe that on a corporate and individual level we should love the immigrant and refugee who are here and provide them equal protection under the Law. I believe this is true whether they are legal or illegal since the OT does not make that distinction.

When we get to the New Testament we don't have the same kind of treatment of foreigners and strangers as we did in the Old Testament. That is because the New Testament was not written to a nation of people like Israel. The New Testament books were written primarily to churches and individuals who lived in many different countries, but who often had no impact on national policy.

What we do have in the New Testament is the teaching that whoever has a need I can meet is my neighbor. In the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37 Jesus teaches that to love my neighbor as myself means that whoever needs my help is my neighbor. In the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25:31-46 Jesus teaches that whenever I feed someone or clothe someone or invite a stranger in that I am really doing that to Jesus. Serving and meeting the needs of immigrants and refugees would certainly be an appropriate application of those two parables.

So, from both the Old Testament and the New Testament, loving my neighbor as myself includes loving immigrants and refugees. That's a great example.

As Christians we should also recognize that God is bringing the nations to us, making our task of world evangelization easier. Think about it. Rather than spending a lot of money to send a missionary to another country we can walk down the street or drive across town and witness to those who have come from another country. We Christians, of all people, should recognize the great kingdom opportunity we have with refugees and immigrants coming here.

Listen to this story of a couple who took advantage of this missionary opportunity. Read about refugees.

[Slide 3] What complicates this matter is the issue of illegal immigrants, those who have illegally entered the United States. So I would like to treat that topic as a separate category. Christians are called to submit themselves to government authority according to Romans 13:1-2. Read. Definitely, you should not help people enter the United States illegally, because then you are helping someone break the law.

What about those who are already here illegally, how should we respond to them? Should we hire them to mow our lawn or babysit our children? The law is much clearer about job sites where you hire employees. Employees have to fill out an I-9 form and an employer can't knowingly hire an illegal immigrant. If you do, you're breaking the law. The Law does not require you to verify the legal status of an independent contractor, although if you know for sure they are illegal and you hire them, then you are breaking the law. So, I understand that you can pay someone to mow your lawn or babysit or whatever, as long as you don't have certain knowledge they are illegal. In this case, ignorance is bliss.

Are you required by law to report an illegal immigrant? Individual citizens are not required to report an illegal immigrant. So, as individuals we have the freedom to support, to serve, to witness to, and to befriend illegal immigrants. We just can't knowingly help them break the Law.

[Slide 4] How should we think about public policy on immigration from a Biblical perspective? This is where it gets hard because the Bible does not directly address the issue and immigration is much more of an issue in the modern age than it was in Biblical times. The OT does not address the issue of whether to let someone immigrate into Israel or not. Most people lived and died a few miles from where they were born. Only in times of crisis such as famine when Jacob's family moved to Egypt or war when the Israelites were deported to Assyria or Babylon, do you see the issue of refugees and immigration. Crisis still is one of the main reasons people move here today.

It is at this point where Christians sometimes make a logic fallacy called a category mistake and they apply Biblical principles from one category into a completely different category. For example they take the Biblical principle that you should love your neighbor as yourself which applies to personal relationships and they apply it to government policy. They say that loving your neighbor as yourself means that the US Government should let Syrian refugees into our country because after all, Jesus did say that when you do it to the least of these you do it to him.

You can't take Biblical principles intended for the individual and automatically apply them to the government. For example the personal principle is "Thou shalt not murder." However, God never intended that personal moral value to be applied to government because God, himself authorized government to carry out capital punishment. He authorized the Israeli government to go to war against the Canaanites. Government is a different entity than the individual and the government has different responsibilities and concerns than the individual does.

The most clearly stated government responsibility in the New Testament is the responsibility for government to protect its citizens from evil doers. Paul states that in Romans 13:3-4. Let's read that. Read. So, I would argue that the first responsibility of the US Government in dealing with refugees and immigrants is to make sure that whatever they do does not endanger the citizens of the United States. It is not the responsibility of the US government to help all the individuals in the world. Now, you can certainly argue whether the present policies are necessary to protect us or whether they need to be relaxed or made more stringent. Those determinations have to be made on the basis of past history, threat assessments, and whatever solid evidence you can find, but it clearly is the responsibility of the US Government to protect its citizens from importing terrorists as well as rooting out those who are already here.

I read up on the seven countries that Trump wanted to enforce a temporary ban on immigrants. It sounded like those seven countries were the ones where the infrastructure had so deteriorated that those nation's governments could not ensure the identity and safety of the people applying for asylum from those countries. Prudence is justified when another nation cannot adequately vet those applying for refugee status.

Our present immigration system is a mess. It's outdated and inadequate for the times. Over ten million illegal immigrants live here now, many of them working in the food service business in restaurants or as migrant laborers on farms, or in construction or other forms of manual labor. Our annual quotas for legal immigration are way too low. Many people who would want to become legal citizens can't because after we make allowance for those who are closely related to American citizens, there simply are not enough slots left to fill the demand.

We also have to secure our borders. We can't keep letting people sneak in. Most immigrants are not a threat to us, but I am concerned about those who may sneak in order to commit terrorist attacks. Too many in elitist Washington believe in a borderless world, but only clearly defined nations with secure borders can guarantee the rights we cherish. A world with no borders also has no nations, but only nations secure the rights of their citizens.

I don't believe you can characterize any position on immigration as the Biblical position because the Bible never addresses the issue of immigration. There are broad Biblical principles that we should seek to apply to the discussion. Besides the proper role of government to punish evildoers and our responsibility to submit to government authority that I have already referenced, we should treat people justly and with respect, but what that looks like in terms of specific policy proposals for immigration is debatable.

For most of us our greater concern needs to be how we treat those who are already living here. Both the OT and NT are clear that loving our neighbor as ourself includes immigrants and refugees. Because the categories of government policy and individual responsibility are so very different, you may find that your positions in those different categories almost seem contradictory. You may be very pro about helping people who are already here and very conservative about political positions on immigration. You may have to live with some tension between the two.

For us Christians it is helpful to remind ourselves, as Paul teaches, that our true citizenship is in Heaven. Even though legally we may be Americans, the United States is not our true home. It is our place of temporary residence. We have not arrived at our true home yet. In that sense we are foreigners living in a strange land. We should keep that perspective in mind when we think about immigration, immigrants, and refugees. Let's pray.