



Central
Peninsula
Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

Trending Now: Immigration

Matthew 25:31–46

Dan Reid

July 31, 2016

series: Trending Now

Today we continue our series called Trending Now: Immigration. For you who don't know me, I am a pretty non-confrontational guy. I don't like conflict or controversy. I am a chronic people pleaser. This morning's topic reminds me of a time in my former church when my elders came to me and said, "We think it's time for you to preach on money at our church. Why don't you preach a sermon series on giving?" My response back to my elder board was, "Why don't you?"

As a teaching team we are so grateful for the support we have from our elders. But we also have God's Word that serves as a strobe light. And we need God's Word. We need God's help today. This week I read a survey done by Pew Research a few years back on the issue of immigration. The results were alarming. They concluded that only 7% of all Americans consulted religion or the Bible to form their views on immigration. So we lift up God's Word today, to light the way on this issue that makes the national news every day. An issue that divides, that effects each of us in some way economically, socially, legally and politically. Many of us also connect this issue to our national security and our national sovereignty. Here is a question we hope to answer: What is the appropriate Christian response to the topic of immigration and to immigrants themselves?

Every one of us, unless we are of Native American heritage, if we take just a moment to reflect on the topic of immigration, we can trace our lineage to some family member who immigrated. Many of us here are first-generation immigrants. Maybe some are here today and are not legally documented and you are scared to death that you will be discovered and deported. I want you to know that we are glad you are here.

I also want you to know that the Bible says we are all lawbreakers and every one of us needs the gospel of grace in our lives. May the God who loves you and died for you give you peace. And may he give you wisdom and protection for you and your family, and direct your steps on a path that will honor him. I pray this prayer for myself and my family all the time.

There is a poem engraved on a bronze plaque on the base of the Statue of Liberty that says, "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" As I reflected on this, I thought of my own grandmother, who as a little nine-year-old girl immigrated from Austria in 1912. I imagine her looking

upon this amazing monument from the deck of a ship steaming into New York Harbor from some far away port in Europe. I can imagine her pondering the words of the poem that someone would have had to translate into her native tongue. My grandmother along with 6 million other immigrants and refugees made their way past the Statue of Liberty and onto Ellis Island between 1911 and 1920, carrying with them little more than a dream that America was the place of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

It's over 100 years later, and I'm no politician. Nor do I fully understand all the complexities around this topic. Do we tightly seal the border? Do we grant asylum to undocumented immigrants in our country or do we deport them? Are we able to secure our borders, and at the same time allow generous immigration and still keep us safe? But here is what I do understand. Underneath the politics and policies of immigration, we are talking about a lot of real people and real families, people made in the image of God. So how do we develop a biblical, graceful, loving ethic around immigration? First, let's look at a few passages from the Old Testament that talk about foreigners, like those whom we might consider immigrants today. Then we will look at one interaction Jesus had that will help us form our biblical ethic on immigration.

Old Testament Examples of How to Treat a Foreign Person

He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt (Deut. 10:18-19).

What we see here is a window into the heart of God. His people, the nation of Israel, who during a severe famine were welcomed with open arms into Egypt as foreigners. Through this experience, God's people learned what it felt like to be welcomed as foreigners, but soon they learned another lesson. This good relationship with Egypt turned bad. And their freedom turned into oppression and slavery at the hands of the Egyptians for 400 years. Through this experience the Israelites learned what it felt like to be persecuted and to be unwelcomed outsiders. In this passage, God challenges Israel to love foreigners because God loves them. God is saying, "Remember you were once in their shoes."

“When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God” (Lev. 19:33-34).

God also makes it clear that those seeking refuge in the land of the Israelites were to be granted hospitality. To be fair there are biblical scholars who argue that the idea of “foreigner” here is better translated “sojourner” or “stranger.” These translations supported the historical fact that many foreigners were granted hospitality for a temporary amount of time. And also, we know from the historical record that there were foreigners who entered Israel and obtained a permanent status. Either way it's clear that God is honoring foreigners who “enter Israel and followed legal procedures to obtain their standing.”

When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set up boundaries for the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel (Deut. 32:8).

Another theme stands out in the Bible. God regarded borders as meaningful and important. We read about the details of the Promised Land and discover that boundaries were established for each tribe of Israel and between the Kingdom of Israel and other foreign nations. There was a sense of protection of culture, values, and certainly a protection of their God-given moral laws.

The last Old Testament passage I want to share I picked because it helps us understand the spirit of the Old Testament regarding our relationships. It's a verse that was widely quoted by our country's founding generation as they sought to form a government for our nation. It's Micah 6:8.

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.

And what does the Lord require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy

and to walk humbly with your God.

Why is this verse so important to our discussion this morning? Because I think better than any other Old Testament passage it lays out a framework for our Christian ethic on immigration and our ethic toward the immigrant. Acting justly, loving mercy and having a humble walk with God are foundational to who we are as Christians. Justice is our sense of right and wrong. God's sense of justice should form our sense of justice, our sense of right and wrong. One of the ways God's justice plays out in our world is through the moral authority that God established on earth in the institution called government. God's sense of justice should motivate us to have a government of laws and enforcement that reflect God's sense of justice.

I think most of us can wrap our minds around the idea that a government is an instrument of justice designed to make and enforce laws without favoritism. What about mercy? It's harder

and not as clear-cut to try to wrap our minds around the idea that government is an instrument of mercy. We see some examples of mercy in the Old Testament government such as sanctuary cities for those accused of crimes finding sanctuary while they waited to get a fair trial. Today, within our government, we see attempts as they might issue pardons for crimes, or reducing prison sentences based on mercy instead of what the law demands, or the government funding programs to help care for the poor. But it isn't often clean and efficient when it comes to government and mercy.

Let's get back to our issue of immigration today. Wouldn't the most merciful thing be to give asylum to every peaceful person who is in this country illegally? An argument could be made for that. But the other side is how merciful would that be for those who may pay a price to make this happen? That price could include a weakened social system that isn't strong enough to assimilate all the additional needs. Or weakened schools that don't have the resources to handle well all the additional children. Or the loss of jobs and reduced wages because they go to immigrants instead of citizens. Or the stress on those who struggle to pay higher taxes to care for the increasing needs. To those who feel the effects of increasing immigration, it doesn't sound like a very merciful government to them.

The point for us as Christians is to gain an understanding of the needed tension between justice and mercy and all the while walk humbly as a follower of Christ. And God speaks into this tension with power and hope. God gives us both the institution called government to wield justice and he gives us the Holy Spirit in our hearts so that we personally can wield mercy one relationship at a time. The gospel is the perfect picture of justice being rendered to defeat sin and mercy being extended to bring sinners into a loving relationship with a just and righteous God. So to understand God's love for justice, let's remember our responsibility to submit to God's governing authority we call government.

Our Christian Responsibility to Submit to the Laws of Governing Authorities

In this Trending Now series we have referred to Romans 13 several times. It's here that the Apostle Paul tells us to submit to governing authorities and not to rebel against them. He says government is put in place by God and for our good. The primary role of government is justice explained by Paul as protecting the innocent and punishing the guilty. Out of all the things that government is called on to do, do you know what it's best at? Administering the letter of the law with justice and without favoritism. Do you know what the government is not so good at? Trying to navigate how to administer mercy without showing favoritism to one and harming another. The complex issues of immigration and how to treat immigrants is a reason why God

tells us to pray for those in authority over us, that they can find the right tension between justice and mercy.

For some of us it's a pragmatic answer and the primary lens we see through is justice. "They are undocumented? Then they broke the law. So deport them." Or, "We need to figure out how to secure our borders because it's a national security and safety issue. Just do it. Whatever it takes." Or, "We can't afford to take care of millions who want to immigrate and take care of our citizens as well."

These are real issues and real concerns Americans have. This is why Paul tells us in 1st Timothy, *"to pray for all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, ..."* Some of us see this more through the lens of mercy. When we look past these policy decisions, we see something else. We see families. We see immigrant children who need to be provided for. I see my grandmother. We see people who are seeking a better life, and we see people who have experienced unimaginable horror as refugees no longer welcome in their own country who need to be cared for.

Jesus affirmed the place of justice when he sanctioned civil government, as the executor of justice when he said, "Render to Caesar what is Caesars." But Jesus just like Micah said, "Also, love mercy." The government will go on trying to execute policies of mercy the best they can, but God says there is a better way. Every day we are given the opportunity to personally exercise mercy. And you know what? Each of us can do a better job than our government showing mercy because for us it is up close and personal, and it comes from a heart guided by the Holy Spirit. We are better at loving our neighbor than government could ever be.

I don't know about you, but I am no good at waging war and making laws and enforcing laws. But I am designed for mercy. As a former president said, "We are a thousand points of light." Each of us is a point of light to bring the light of mercy into the darkest places, one relationship at a time. So whatever our government decides to do about solving our immigration problem and no matter where each of us land on that issue, here is one place where we all must land. We are called to show mercy to immigrants, we are called to show mercy to refugees, whether they are here legally or illegally, close to home or far away in a refugee camp in Greece.

Our Christian Responsibility to Submit to the Laws of Mercy

Listen to the words of Jesus as he tells us to render to God what is God's. That mercy has no borders, and there is no law against mercy.

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before

him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' "He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life" (Matt. 25:31-46).

In this story, Jesus is talking about the future coming judgment of God. He is like a king sitting on his throne, with all nations gathered before him and he'll separate people like a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. In this story the goats are completely surprised by the reason for their judgment. And here is the kicker: the sheep are just as surprised as the goats. Not only do the goats ask why they are goats, the sheep ask why they're sheep.

The difference and the key to understanding the story is the way they treated the king's friends who were in need. The sheep are recognized by their king for their small, unremembered acts of kindness and mercy that they never thought really mattered. Some read this story and wrongly conclude that the whole basis of our judgment is whether we help people in need. If I buy a sandwich for a hungry person, if I put some coins in the Salvation Army bucket at Christmas, I'll get to heaven. But that can't be true because of what Jesus says elsewhere. It's not about

earning our way to heaven, it's about coming to Jesus out of a deep sense of need and letting him meet that need.

When we come to Jesus and receive on faith the gift of forgiveness for our sins, and receive on faith the gift of salvation, we go from being a spiritual foreigner to being in God's spiritual family. And after this happens, we will see others differently. We will become like these sheep. We will become the kind of person who practices small and unremembered acts of mercy.

Jesus is saying, don't be surprised here. These small acts of mercy are the things I see. These acts of compassion toward the least of these are what matters to me. When you find yourself showing hospitality to an immigrant, feeding a hungry person, visiting a sick person or person in jail, you are showing that you belong to Jesus. These are things that don't require a seminary education, or exceptional amounts of time or intelligence or creativity. These things don't need amazing spiritual gifts. One day we will stand before God and at that time Jesus will ask for evidence of his grace and mercy in our lives. And his way of measuring is how we treat the most vulnerable among us.

Some of the most vulnerable among us today are illegal immigrants and refugees. There are at least 12 million undocumented immigrants in the country right now. If Jesus refers to the least of these—the strangers, the immigrants—as his brothers and sisters, then shouldn't we refer to them as our brothers and sisters as well. Do we do that? We need to stand against bigotry, harassment and exploitation as well. Do we do that?

I want to say a word about refugees. I read this week that in Syria alone, 300,000 people have died. Half the country is homeless. Millions are fleeing. The plight of these refugees came to national attention in September with the picture of the three-year-old boy whose body washed up on a shore in Turkey. Many evangelical Christians sprang into action, making plans for welcoming and serving refugees. CPC has sent a team to Greece to minister to refugees, and this fall we will send another.

Christianity Today magazine had an editorial this past fall that said, "Christians need to embrace the unparalleled opportunity to love neighbors here and abroad and showcase the beauty of the gospel that proclaims the good news to the poor, liberty for

those stuck in refugee camps, and a new life for those fleeing oppression." There are also insightful Christians who call for "prudent compassion," the idea that we need not choose between accepting all refugees and no refugees, but through a rigorous screening we can and should still receive refugees in a time of war against terror.

Kevin DeYoung, pastor of University Reformed Church in Lansing, Michigan, a church with an international ministry to immigrants spoke out against both the "harsh anti-immigrant rhetoric" and "those who make broad appeals to compassion without thinking through security issues. Christian charity means loving the safety of the neighbor next door at least as much as loving the safe passage of the neighbor far away."

When I think of my grandmother, I am reminded that the United States of America is a nation of immigrants. But when I think of Jesus I am reminded that the Kingdom of God is a Kingdom of Immigrants.

We Are a Kingdom of Immigrants and Refugees

Ephesians chapter 2 says, "*we were separate from Christ, exclude from citizenship, foreigners, without hope, and far away from God. But now we are brought near by the blood of Christ. And consequently we are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens.*" As Russell Moore writes, "Immigration isn't just an issue. It's an opportunity to see that, as important as the United States of America is, there will be a day when the United States of America will no longer exist. And on that day, the sons and daughters of God will stand before the throne alongside former undocumented workers. Some of them pick our food now and clean our hotel rooms, but one day they will be kings and queens, our brothers and sisters forever."

We may disagree over immigration policy, but we should never disagree that Jesus identifies with the least of these. When we serve the least of these we serve Jesus. And when we show mercy to the least of these we serve Jesus.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2016 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1422-8FC