

“The Strangers in Our Land”

The Old Testament is extremely clear on how the Israelites were to treat strangers, foreigners, immigrants. Old Testament laws commanded the Israelites to treat foreigners with justice and compassion – always remembering that they themselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt.

For instance, Leviticus 19:33–34 says, “When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the stranger. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.” Foreigners are to be loved just as much as the citizens of the land.

Numbers 15:15–16 tells us, “As for the assembly, there shall be one statute for you and for the stranger who sojourns with you... You and the stranger shall be alike before the Lord.” God’s laws and protections were to apply equally to natives and foreigners.

In Deuteronomy 10:18–19 we read, “[God] executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and...loves the stranger, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” God speaks through the prophet Jeremiah, “If you do not oppress the foreigner, the orphan, and the widow... then I will let you live in this place” (Jeremiah 7:6). The Israelites could stay in their own land, as long as they didn’t oppress foreigners. So...that’s pretty clear, isn’t it!

Did things change at all in the New Testament regarding how God’s people should treat foreigners and immigrants? Let’s take a look.

Believers in the early church were urged to be hospitable, and welcome strangers. Hospitality was a big thing in the early church. Hebrews 13:2 says, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” And the crowning jewel of God’s instructions on how we are to treat strangers and foreigners is what Jesus says in His parable of the sheep and the goats! Remember? “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, *I was a stranger and you welcomed me...*” (Matthew 25:35).

Our country has a rich history of welcoming immigrants. The United States has been shaped, blessed, and prospered as we have welcomed foreigners into our land. For many of us, our grandparents or great-grandparents were immigrants who came here from other countries – England, Germany, Poland, Italy, China. This influx of ethnic and cultural diversity has greatly enriched our land.

Of course, there have always been narrow-minded, bigoted individuals who hate foreigners. And what our country did with Japanese people in the U.S. during World War II is shameful. But by and large, the words on the Statue of Liberty have rung true: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free”.

I don’t know about you, but when I see news stories of people taking their oath of citizenship, becoming U.S. citizens, after going through the requirements to do so, it thrills me! I’m so

happy for these people and my heart says, “Welcome!”

One of my best friends in high school was Harry Keares. I think it was in 10th grade, Harry came into the U.S. from Greece – by himself. It was tough at first. He didn’t know the language. Kids would tell him things to say in English that were inappropriate, or made him look like a fool. But he stuck with it. Somehow, we developed a friendship. We both started college at Millersville University, sometimes rode together to school. Harry became a U.S. citizen. Harry died recently. I hadn’t seen him since probably 1961. I read his obituary. It was a long one, listing his achievements in the business world, as an entrepreneur. He made something of himself in this new land that had welcomed him!

But the immigration scenario is different today. I shouldn’t have to tell you that immigration, and questions around immigration, are big issues, hot issues, right now for our country. Let’s take a look at this, and ponder together how we might view this from the perspective of the Bible, and as followers of Jesus.

Our nation’s experience of immigration has changed dramatically over the last 4 plus years. Since the beginning of the year 2020, our country has seen an influx of migrants in numbers never seen before. It’s hard to get accurate figures on how many people have entered our country. Some manipulate the numbers to side with their political views. In many cases, there were so many migrants crossing the border that it was hard to get an accurate count. Estimates range from 10.9 to 15 million migrants who’ve come in since 2020. Let’s pick a middle point, say 13 million people have crossed our borders.

That’s 13 *million* people. Most of them coming into the U.S. *illegally*. 13 million! To get a perspective, that represents about the total population of the State of PA! 13 million people also represents the *combined population of all of these 12 states*: West Virginia, Hawaii, New Hampshire, Maine, Montana, Rhode Island, Delaware, South Dakota, North Dakota, Alaska, Vermont, and Wyoming!

Obviously, that massive number of men, women and children entering our country has put an enormous strain on our resources to provide for them.

How do you provide food, clothing, housing, education, jobs, for so many people? For instance, New York City spent over \$4 billion between July 2022 and March 2024 to accommodate a surge of new immigrants. Some were housed in downtown hotels; others occupied school grounds and athletic fields. In August, 2023, the town of Eagle Pass, Texas (on the Texas-Mexican border)– a town of about 28,000 people - declared a state of emergency after nearly 6,000 migrants crossed the border in just two days. That would be like having 12,000 people moving into Lancaster in a two-day period.

What about healthcare? This is a hot-button issue in political discussions today. Foreign nationals get sick, and need medical care. But should citizens, who often have to pay high premiums for their own health insurance, have to pay for free healthcare for migrants?

Oregon, one of the most liberal states in the country, gives free healthcare to migrants. In their state budget, Oregon has currently budgeted \$1.2 billion for free healthcare for low income people, including migrants. That's coming close to being *twice as much* as the State Police budget for that same time period.

Another huge issue is that with the influx of so many people, we couldn't vet or track everyone coming in. How many came in before, were deported, and now are back? How many of these people have criminal records? How many have been parts of gangs in other countries? Perhaps you remember news reports of immigrant gang members in Denver, Colorado taking over apartment complexes.

When thousands of people a day were crossing the border, overwhelming Border Patrol personnel, there's no way they could screen everyone coming into the country.

The underlying question for me in all of this is: How do you balance having a compassionate heart for the thousands of people crossing our border, many just seeking a better life here in the U.S. – but also maintain a sense of justice for those U.S. citizens and their communities who may have to suffer in some ways as a result? What is just and fair for all?

To be honest, I keep coming back to the fact that almost all of the immigrants who have crossed our border over the last 4 plus years have come here *illegally*. Is that fair for people like my friend Harry Keares, who came into this country legally, and did what they had to do to become a U.S. citizen?

While the Bible speaks clearly about welcoming the stranger, Scripture also tells us to obey the laws of the land.

1 Peter 2:13–14 says, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right." The message from Titus 3:1 is similar: "Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good." And then, of course, there are the words of Jesus: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God" (Matthew 22:21).

With all of this in mind, let me suggest some ways we can respond.

First of all, we can't let everyone in. Now, apparently not everyone agrees with this! Judging from the loud and boisterous protests and demonstrations we've seen in the news, some people seem to want an open border – let everyone in – and don't deport anyone who's already here.

President Bill Clinton, in his 1995 State of the Union address, said this: "All Americans, not only in the states most heavily affected but in every place in this country, are rightly disturbed by the large numbers of illegal aliens entering our country...the public service they use impose burdens on our taxpayers. That's why our administration has moved aggressively to secure our borders

more by hiring a record number of new border guards, by deporting twice as many criminal aliens as ever before, by cracking down on illegal hiring, by barring welfare benefits to illegal aliens...we will try to do more to speed the deportation of illegal aliens who are arrested for crimes, to better identify illegal aliens in the workplace...we are a nation of immigrants. But we are also a nation of laws. It is wrong and ultimately self-defeating for a nation of immigrants to permit the kind of abuse of our immigration laws we have seen in recent years, and we must do more to stop it.” (At that point, there was loud applause from both sides of the aisle).

We can't offer a home for everyone in the world who wants to get into our country!

President Clinton also mentioned that we are a nation of laws. ICE agents (Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials) are federal agents, whose job is to enforce immigration laws.

We're probably aware of the those who are taking to the streets to try to physically oppose these agents from doing their work. We may have seen news clips of angry mobs, protesting ICE agents, throwing things at them, cursing them, spitting at them, attacking them. Liberal states and cities want to keep them from coming in. Some governors and mayors are not cooperating with the Federal agents. Federal law takes precedence over state law. So, standing in the way of ICE agents doing their job, putting these agents at risk, is a crime.

Following an incident on October 4, 2025, a Chicago police dispatcher was heard on a radio recording relaying an order from the Chief of Patrol for officers not to assist federal agents in trouble. The incident occurred after a suspect rammed an ICE vehicle, which prompted a call for assistance. The dispatcher stated: "Per the chief of patrol... said all units clear out from there, we're not sending anybody over to that location". The dispatcher repeated the order: "Per the chief of patrol, everybody out, we're not responding over there".

President Obama, during his 8 years in office, deported over 3.1 million illegal immigrants. The most of any President. I don't remember massive demonstrations against ICE agents, resisting their doing their job. Do you? So, while having heartfelt compassion for the men, women and children who've come into our country, we also do best when we recognize that we are a nation of laws.

A couple of further comments on laws: I do think that the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE) needs to be more open and transparent in what they are doing. Who are they apprehending? And why? How do they decide who to go after? Do they seize people by mistake, who've not been arrested for any crime? What happens to these people? By the way, many protesting what ICE agents are doing say no one should be deported without access to a hearing. This will never happen! There simply aren't enough judges and courts to provide this for the massive numbers of migrants now here.

Speaking of laws: The immigration laws themselves are in need of updating. Do you know when the last major overhaul of our immigration policies took place? It was 1952. Yes, there have been amendments added to the laws since then. But much has been said about the need to

draft a new, comprehensive immigration policy. But neither Republican nor Democratic administrations since 1952 have done that. I think working cooperatively to draft updated immigration laws is a necessary ingredient for bringing some sense of order in our immigration practices as a nation.

In closing, let me say that this has been a difficult sermon to preach. My fear is that some of you will just see this as me delving into politics. *But, how we treat human beings who want to leave their land and live in our country is more than just politics – it's a moral and spiritual issue!*

I hope and pray that we as individuals, as the Church, as a nation, will always have that biblical mindset of welcoming the stranger and foreigner. Most of the hundreds of thousands and millions of people who have entered our land are decent human beings – husbands, wives, children – with hopes and dreams just like us. People who want a better life.

But there's a limit to how much we as a nation can do for the world's poor and oppressed. And there are laws that govern the citizens of our land – as well as those seeking to enter it. Scripture also beckons us to respect and follow the laws of the land. One of the jobs of any President is to protect the citizens of the land.

Let's hope, and let's pray, that somehow our nation's leaders can come together, and carve out a new immigration policy that will be just and fair for everyone.

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