

## The Christian and Immigration

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This past weekend, I heard a news story: a religious body placed effigies of Joseph, Mary, and baby Jesus into chain-linked cages to protest the detaining of illegal immigrants to the United States. It is true that Joseph, Mary, and baby Jesus took refuge from King Herod in Egypt, but they were travelling lawfully within the Roman Empire and were not illegal immigrants. In fact, Joseph had led his family to Bethlehem because Caesar Augustus had ordered all to participate in a census (Luke 2:1-2). Joseph was obeying the law. The suggestion that they were doing otherwise is offensive.

There's no more controversial topic in the nation today than illegal immigration. Does the Bible have anything to say about it? Many will cite the Old Testament's immigration laws to justify their contemporary politics. One oft cited verse is Exodus 22:21, "You shall neither mistreat a stranger nor oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." The word for "stranger" is the Hebrew word *ger*. Gesenius' Hebrew-Chaldea Lexicon defines this word as "a sojourner, stranger, foreigner, a person living outside of his own country." Moses' Law implicitly permitted foreigners to immigrate to the nation of Israel. Moreover, they were to be treated with respect, and not mistreated or oppressed.

The Law of Moses also expected the foreigner to obey the law. For example the foreigner was obligated to: 1) observe the Sabbath day (Ex. 23:12), 2) offer sacrifices (Lev. 17:8), 3) not eat blood (Lev. 17:12), 4) not commit abominations (Lev. 18:26), 5) not practice idolatry (Lev. 20:12), 6) not blaspheme (Lev. 24:16). There were penalties associated for violating the law up to and including death. Those who were accused of violating the law could be detained until such a time as a trial could take place (Num. 35, and specifically verse 15).

The Mosaic Law had a unique purpose, and that was to bring Christ into the world (Gal. 3:24). Once this purpose was accomplished, the law was no longer needed (Gal. 3:25), and it was abolished (Eph. 2:15). No other law today exists to bring Christ into the world. This means that the Law of Moses cannot be used to divinely justify contemporary politics. Are there other scriptures that might comment on contemporary legislation and immigration? Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-17 address the purpose of government in general, and part of that purpose is to punish those who do evil. These verses also command obedience to the governing authorities. They state that the government may impose penalties (including death) on those who don't comply. The only exception the word of God gives us to obeying the law is if the government's law directly contradicts God's law in which case we are to obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29).

Is it a direct contradiction to the word of God to prohibit unregulated immigration? It is not. This means that governments may regulate immigration and decide who may and may not enter a country. Nothing about the mere regulation or prohibition of immigration per se is inherently unjust. There may be times when a government wants to open the gates to immigration. There may be times when a government wants to halt immigration. None of these actions taken by the government should create a crisis of conscience in the mind of the Christian since God's word does not explicitly prohibit such laws and since God explicitly commands obedience to governmental authorities. This means that Christians are obliged to honor laws of immigration. Christians who want to immigrate are also required to honor these laws. Even those who are not Christians have a divine obligation to obey the

law; everyone is amenable to the law of Christ and all will be judged by His word (John 12:48). There are no scriptural grounds on which one may object to a country's immigration policy, per se.

Having said that, individuals employed by the government have a moral obligation to treat every person they encounter with dignity and respect. The Bible says, "Honor all men" (1 Pet. 2:17). This means that while an individual is detained, he must be given access to the necessities of life: food, water, clothing, shelter, necessary medical aid, and anything else that honors basic human dignity. Children who have been forced to participate in illegal activities must especially be respected since their parents acted custodially on their behalf, and children are not legally responsible for their behavior. Upholding the law and honoring the dignity of each individual is a great challenge. With love, compassion, and respect, such a challenge may be met. May God help us to love Him, our neighbors, ourselves, and our enemies (Matt. 5:44; 22:37-40).