

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
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Longing for a Better Country

Deuteronomy 10:12-22

This past week, Congress continued its struggle to pass a compromise immigration bill, hoping to get legislation completed before its July 4 recess. There's something appropriate about debating such a potent and divisive topic this close to our country's commemoration of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. After all, America's Founding Fathers recognized that an openness to immigration was essential to the future of the fledgling nation. Their complaints against the king of Great Britain included the following: That "He has endeavoured to prevent the Population of these States; for that Purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; (and) refusing to pass others to encourage their Migration hither." So from the beginning, keeping the country open to others who want to come and enjoy the blessings of liberty was built into our nation's identity and purpose.

Articulating these lofty ideals and aspirations is one thing. Hammering them out into specific policies and concrete legislation is another, especially in an atmosphere where Americans are so at odds about what to do about immigration. The intensity of the debate flared up recently over the issue of separating children from their parents at the border. After several days of controversy over the policy of separating families seeking asylum, President Trump signed an executive order that stopped the practice and keeps families together.

One of the remarkable things about the situation was that so many Christians of different stripes were united in their objection to the practice. Believers on the right, believers on the left, and believers at various points in the middle, found themselves in a rare moment of agreement about national policy. In most cases, people who enter the public square to pursue justice in the name of Jesus Christ end up looking a lot like the nation as a whole, divided and unable to reach a consensus. But in this case, religious organizations and their leaders came down pretty much on the same side of the debate.

This is even more striking in view of the fact that for many Americans, religion isn't a major factor in how they think about issues of immigration. A 2010 poll by the Pew Research Center found that only seven percent of all Americans (and 12 percent of white evangelicals) "consider religion the most important influence on their opinions about immigration policy." The most important influences included a personal experience, the media, and education. At that time, white evangelicals were among those expressing the least favorable views of immigrants. Twenty-seven percent of white evangelicals said immigrants strengthen America, compared to the national average of 42 percent. What's more, only 24 percent of regular churchgoers said that their clergy have addressed the issue of immigration.¹

If pulpits have been too silent on the issue of immigration, it's not because the Bible has little to say about the subject. There's plenty in the Scriptures that can shape our attitudes and actions toward immigrants. In fact, during the recent debate about separating children from their families at the border, Attorney General Jeff Sessions defended the Trump administration's policy by quoting from Romans 13 where Paul urges believers to obey the laws of government for purposes of peace and order. White House Press Secretary Sarah Sanders also summed up the same idea saying, "It is very biblical to enforce the law."

Others countered by underscoring the Bible's stress on love and its mandates about caring for children and those who are marginalized. They cited texts like Matthew 25:35, where Jesus says, "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, . . ."

This morning, we open these Scriptures to Deuteronomy 10, where God's people Israel are once again wrestling with what it means to be the recipients of the Lord's choice and call. With God's call come privileges and opportunities, but also great responsibilities. One of those responsibilities is for Israel to embody and reflect the character of God in its dealings with others. "For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing" (vv. 17-18). Notice that before God's people are told more about who they are and what they're supposed to do, they're reminded about who God is and what God does. The God who, out of all the nations, has chosen and called them, is a God who is zealous for justice, which includes hospitality toward and care for non-Israelites.

In our text, the Hebrew term is *gare*, which gets translated in a variety of ways, such as "foreigner" or "sojourner." In some versions of the Bible, including the NIV, it's rendered as "alien." Some interpreters even read its meaning in a way that's equivalent to the term "immigrant," but that's sort of stretching it. I'll focus more on the translation "alien," since that's what we have in today's reading.

In the historical setting of our Deuteronomy text, "aliens" were essentially non-Israelites who had to a significant degree attached themselves to the people of God and joined themselves to the God of Israel. They followed various portions of the Mosaic code. They enjoyed certain rights under the Jewish law. They benefited from social welfare programs. In these respects, they had pledged allegiance to the Lord and to his covenant with Israel, and enjoyed a form of citizenship. So part of what we see reflected in today's Scripture, along with numerous other texts in the Old Testament, is the process of working out exactly how people from beyond the border, geographically and religiously, will be incorporated into the life of the nation. And for this process to be productive and effective, basic convictions have to be translated into legislation. There have to be laws that define the rights and obligations of those who enter from the outside, as well as regulations that govern the actions of those on the inside who are already part of the majority culture.

And underlying all these specific guidelines and ordinances are certain fundamental beliefs and attitudes. In today's Scripture, there's a lot of focus on these essential convictions. As I said, one of them is that God's people will reflect and imitate God's own zeal for justice and his care for those on the margins. Thus the reference to aliens, who are listed alongside orphans and widows as members of society to whom God gives special attention and care. If these individuals are the objects of God's compassion and provision, then they also have to be the object of God's people's compassion and provision. Not only because that's the way God is, but also because God's people were once aliens themselves. "And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt" (v. 19).

Each year, at the feast of Pentecost, as Jews presented their firstfruits offerings, they were to recite these words: "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous" (Deut. 26:5). In this way, God's people could remember how Abraham was called to become a sojourner, an alien, an immigrant, from whom a great people grew, only to experience enslavement and suffering in Egypt. They themselves were sojourners, aliens whom the Lord would rescue and bring into a land of their own. Their identity was grounded in a sense of wandering, a risky and perilous journey toward the fulfillment of God's promises. By recalling their own story, and reflecting on their own experience, God's

people could also remember how they're called to show care and empathy toward the weaker and more destitute members of society.

As with God's people Israel, so with God's people in Christ, the church. Our own thinking about immigration, and our response to immigrants, needs to be grounded in who God is, what God is like, what God's priorities are, and what God has done for us through Jesus Christ. The Jesus who knows firsthand the experience of being uprooted when his father and mother took him and fled to Egypt to escape the cruelty of a political ruler named Herod. Then, after getting used to life in Egypt, they had to go back to Israel. Remember that the holy family wasn't on vacation. They were sojourners, seeking refuge and safety. If this story sounds familiar, it's because the way Matthew narrates it, Jesus is re-living the story of Israel. He fulfills the story of Israel, our ancestors in the faith, who were aliens and sojourners in Egypt.

So our own Lord Jesus is no stranger to being a stranger. And when we think about, talk about, and respond to the strangers at our nation's border, we need to do so in light of who Jesus is and what he calls us to do. He doesn't call us to ignore the rule of law or to take a cavalier attitude toward the legal system. There needs to be structure, order, and process in the way that we handle border security. Matters of safety and national security need to be taken into consideration. Not everybody who wants to come into America has good intentions and a clean record. But the fact is that the great majority of people who are trying to enter our country are doing so because they're seeking a better, and in many cases safer, life, for themselves and their families. They're looking for more economic opportunity and greater political freedom, including freedom from violence, oppression, and persecution. In short, they're longing for a better country.

Christians, of all people, should understand and appreciate that reality. After all, our primary citizenship is in heaven. While we acknowledge our devotion to our country, we also reaffirm that our highest love is for the Lord, and our deepest allegiance is to the kingdom that is both inaugurated and yet to be completed, through Jesus Christ. For now, we are, as today's Scripture from Hebrews puts it, "aliens and strangers on earth" (11:13). We long for a better country, the life of the world to come, a world made new through the crucified and risen Lord.

He has shown us that we can't be committed to him and his kingdom without also being committed to our fellow citizens on earth. What was asked of God's people in today's Scripture from Deuteronomy could be asked of us as well: "And now, O followers of Jesus and citizens of heaven, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, . . ." (v. 12). This is inseparable from loving your neighbor, which as one person has put it, "includes the neighbor knocking on the national door. For that particular neighbor comes poor, afflicted, afraid, and confused"²

May the Lord our God, who loves the alien, call forth our own love for the alien. And may God give divine wisdom and understanding to our nation as we make decisions about how to seek not just our own welfare but the welfare of the sojourner at our border.

¹ The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "Few Say Religion Shapes Immigration, Environment Views" (September 17, 2010).

² Mark Galli, "Loving Our Neighbors Knows No Borders—Even Political Ones." Christianity Today website. June 20, 2018. Accessed June 28, 2018 < <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/june-web-only/loving-our-neighbors-knows-no-borders-even-political-ones.html>>.