

“Leading With Grace”

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[SLIDE #1] Well as we wrap up a sermon series on missions and looking beyond our country you can tell by our scriptures we are talking about a very important topic today. And that’s the topic of immigration. Now immigration is important for us to talk about because it’s is a major topic in our country now, isn’t it? It’s been a huge part of the natural conversation in recent years. Like so many other countries we are struggling with this issue. In fact some have said it’s even one of the great issues of our time. Because now we live in this globalized world there are so many people that are immigrating and travelling between countries either because they’ve been displaced by conflict or because of economic opportunities. And there are some real challenges that come along with people moving between countries. And we hear politicians with all sorts of different approaches. But as we think about this it’s important to ask the question what does the Bible say to us about how we should approach this issue, right? What does the Bible actually say about it?

Well it turns out the Bible says a lot about it. It's really something that is a theme throughout the Bible. Did you know that there are actually over 150 times that immigration is mentioned throughout the Bible? Over 150! If the Bible mentions something over 150 times you get the sense that it's saying something kind of important. Now when it comes to these 150 passages that mention this in some form or fashion the vast majority talk about one thing: taking care of the immigrant or the foreigner. We heard some of the passages earlier. For instance:

Leviticus 19:33-34 "When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your G."

Deuteronomy 26:12-13 "When you have finished paying all the tithe of your increase in the third year, the year of tithing, then you shall give it to the Levite, to the stranger, to the orphan and to the widow, that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied. "You shall say before the LORD your God, 'I have removed the sacred portion from my house, and also have given it to the Levite and the alien, the orphan and the widow, according to all your commandments.'"

Zechariah 7:9 “Long ago I gave these commands to my people: ‘You must see that justice is done, and must show kindness and mercy to one another. Do not oppress widows, orphans, or foreigners who live among you, or anyone else in need.’”

Jeremiah 7:5-7 ESV "For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the stranger, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever.”

Hebrews 13:2: “Do not forget to show hospitality to the foreigner or stranger, for by doing so some of you have entertained angels without knowing it.”

Now those are just a few of the 150 passages that talk about this issue. But they really illuminate the Bible’s perspective. Because the Bible consistently says that strangers or foreigners (which in Hebrew is also translated immigrant) is one of the groups of people that we should take special care of. So we can say right at the outset that when it comes to this issue the Bible is unambiguous. It says that God wants us to take care of immigrants and foreigners. That’s the primary teaching

about this issue. If there's one thing you get out of this sermon I hope that's it.

[SLIDE #2] We're command to take care of strangers and foreigner. It's simply part of who we're called to be as Christians. Even so much that God will judge us upon it. Remember Matthew 25? We will be judged on taking of the naked, the hungry, the imprisoned, and who? The stranger. So matter what our political views are, whether we're Republican or Democrat or independent, we can't escape the fact that fact. We can have some debates about different polices and laws that can be changed. But the call from God always remains the same.

So when we think of immigration we know God wants us to care for those immigrants and the question is why would God care about this so much? Why would it be so important to God that we take care of them? Well biblically there's a very good reason. And it's because God has taken care of us when we were foreigners or strangers. Yes all of us were once were foreigners or strangers. Look at Ephesians 2. It says, "Remember that formerly you who are Gentiles (or non-Jews) by birth, ¹² were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁹ Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his

household, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.” And then it later continues that we should be “be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Live a life worthy of that calling.” So we were once stranger, aliens, far off from God. But then God opened His arms to us and cared for us. And that’s why we take care of the strangers and foreigners that reside among us. In fact, that we take care of anyone. **[SLIDE #3]** Because God first did the same to us.

So God graciously accepted us into his kingdom. We didn’t earn it, we didn’t deserve, all we can do is receive it. And so because we have been aliens and strangers into to God’s kingdom we are supposed to take care of the immigrants and aliens in our kingdom, our country. It part of our calling.

But you know it doesn’t take very long until there’s a little bit of a complication here, right? Because most people agree with that, they say sure I agree God cared for us so we should care for immigrant. Sure. But that doesn’t mean we need to take care of the ones that come here of the immigrants who come to our country illegally. We shouldn’t help those that are breaking the law. The Bible doesn’t say we need to do that. Right?

Well, that's not quite how the Bible puts it. Because it commands us over and over to take care of the stranger and the aliens and it never makes any qualifications. It doesn't say: "When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, unless he's undocumented. It doesn't say' Do not oppress widows, orphans, foreigners who live among you, or anyone else in need, unless they're undocumented." No there are no qualifications like that in these commands. And it's not like this isn't an issue that couldn't have been addressed. Because there were illegal or undocumented immigrants in biblical times. In fact when the Bible talks about strangers or aliens it's talking about people that are from enemy lands. People that would have been considered illegal because they didn't follow Jewish law. And yet God still gave all these commands to his people to take care of them. Even in the New Testament it says if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. And so for us today, it's clear. Even when it comes to those who are in our country illegally, we are called to take care of them.

Now why does it not offer any qualifications on who we should take care of? It goes back to the question of God welcoming us in. There are no qualifications on who we should take care of because there were no qualifications for God when He took care of us. Remember God saved us when we were breaking the law. While

we were yet sinners. See we were all judged unworthy and unfit to be citizens. We would seem, by some, to have been “undocumented immigrants” “or aliens” in God’s kingdom. And He graciously allowed us over the border separating us from Him. He brought us into his kingdom and forgave us. Thank goodness God didn’t deport us out of his kingdom. Thank goodness God didn’t build a wall against us. Thanks goodness he instead naturalized us as citizens through Jesus Christ. Thanks goodness. That’s called grace. That’s called grace. And that’s what we need to remember.

When we talk about immigration we begin with grace because, God began with grace for us. [SLIDE #4] Even when we broke his laws, we were shown grace. And that sounds a lot different from the rhetoric about simply deporting all the immigrants who live here, or building a wall as our first priority. Is that really the biblical response to illegal immigrants? Is that what Jesus would say to someone? Because that wasn’t Jesus’s response to us. Now when I say that I want to be clear. This doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t have any borders. It doesn’t mean we shouldn’t have laws. It doesn’t mean we just let everybody in no questions asked. It doesn’t mean we don’t need those things. No of course we need commonsense checks and restrictions. But what it does mean is that as Christians we should always start with grace for people and let that guide what we do. As we talk about

the people who come into our country, as we serve them, as we advocate for them, and develop laws, we lead with grace.

And by the way, the truth it's a lot more complicated than simply saying that these are that illegal immigrants should have come here legally. That they're criminals, lawbreakers, munchers. The truth is isn't so simple. Because coming here legally is a lot more complicated than we might think.

First of all, it takes years to come through this country. In fact, in many cases it may take up to twenty years. Now if you are coming to be reunited with other family members who are here, who you desperately want to see you don't have twenty years to wait. I know one immigrant, one of the pastors from the churches that worships here, he has a couple kids that were just born when he immigration and a wife and he hasn't seen them for over five years. Because he had to come to make a new life and they're waiting their turn. But most people don't want to have to wait like that to see their family. I mean I don't know if I could do that. That complicates our view a little bit.

Secondly, coming here costs a lot of money. Did you know on average the process of coming to the U.S. legally costs on average about \$4,000 to \$5,000? Now imagine you're a poor immigrant you're coming here because you can't find work where you're at. Perhaps you're making just a few dollars a day and literally barely surviving. Often times with a wife and kids and extended family to support. Are you going to just be able to round up \$4,000 to \$5,000? Probably not I mean, I don't know about you, but I don't have \$4,000 or \$5,000 to just pick so I can pay the cost to live in America.

And, thirdly, to make it all even more complicated if you want to come here you have to be able to read and write to understand all the paperwork. I mean imagine when you sell a house or you get a new apartment, it's tough to understand all that. I think of a mortgage for a house. And the immigration paperwork is way more complicated than that. Imagine if you're poor and had to drop out of school and can't read well, maybe you're illiterate like many people are. And it's not like you have money to hire a lawyer to help you figure the process out. It's a lot more complicated than simply saying, those illegal immigrants they should have come here legally. And if they didn't come here illegally, kick them out. And by the way, what's more is that there was a survey that 96% of economists said that illegal or undocumented immigrants actually help our economy. Because contrary to popular

belief they pay millions of dollars in taxes every year, they work jobs that Americans don't want to, and they bring a strong work ethic. They enrich our economy. Even our baseball, as I said earlier. So that's another thing to consider. Again, that's not to say there shouldn't be any laws or restrictions. There should be 100%. But the picture is more complicated than a 30 second commercial or soundbite on TV let's on. Let me tell you a story.

It's the story of twins. Which is something I know a little bit about. Their names are Brizzia and Maria Munoz Robles. **[SLIDE #5]** The twins were born in a poor part of Mexico. It was a place where there were not many options. It was controlled mostly by drug cartels and was very dangerous. There were few opportunities to work. For men, it was really working long days in the fields seven days a week for low pay or getting involved in the drug running and cartels. And the women were expected to stay home and tend the house and if they didn't they could easy get raped or sexually abused. Unfortunately there was no good place to escape to in the area. It was a little like Detroit or Flint, Michigan, where the region has just died and people have no opportunity and couldn't entertain that dream of a good life. Where they can't even get clean water. But even worse than that. There was simply no hope.

So when the girls were little their dad started mysteriously taking bus trips where he would go far away to work for several weeks. The girls really didn't know where he was going, just that he was going somewhere where there was much better pay than the few dollars a day he could get where they lived. Later they found out that he was taking a bus to the border so he could work as a migrant worker a few weeks a year. He would then travel home and be able to bring some money home for his family.

Well at the age of five the situation had gotten really bad. Their situation was really hopeless. They really only had a few possessions, in fact the only toys the girls had were a doll for of them to play with. So with their mom and dad they took that long bus trip to the border until they finally reached it. And then they settled in Nevada, where their parents were able to work full time. It wasn't easy, but it was a much better life then back at home. It was awkward when the girls went to school though. They had to learn fake names and could absolutely not slip up. They couldn't tell people where they were from even when they were obviously not from around the area. They had to live in secrecy. When they neared 16, while all their other kids were getting ready to get their driver's licenses, the girls had to

find excuses for why they weren't getting theirs. And even more awkward was the fact that the girls were phenomenal students, at the top of their class, graduating with honors, but they didn't ever talk about going to college like the other students. That's because they would need public assistance to do that and of course they couldn't ask or file with government.

Until one day in 2012 when there was a new program created called DACA, which made it possible for illegal immigrants who were children to come out of the shadows. They could get workers permits, they could borrow money which would be easier to attend college, and most importantly, they wouldn't have to live a lie anymore.

Well it turns out that the girls, who were devout Catholics, graduated as the first twin valedictorians of their high school in 2014. They took all the honors classes, they were in all sorts of clubs, one twin played the flute and the saxophone. And so they were offered scholarships and accepted into one of the best universities in the country, Notre Dame.

Unfortunately, when they got to Notre Dame they had to once again hide their identity to many people. And they were particularly concerned in the last election when there was talk about illegal immigrants from Mexico and the negative things said about them. They were scared .But thankfully they courageously decided to speak up and shatter the silence; to tell their story. And we need to hear it. As the University of Notre Dame Magazine said, “it’s hard to make Brizzia and Maria Munoz Robles that villains. “They represent the best of American ideals and American hopes and the American dream. They are putting a face on an abstract challenge, transforming people’s picture of “illegal aliens”

What a powerful story. These twins were lucky. But so many aren’t. Scott Hicks, who is a United Methodist pastor of a church about 30 minutes from here and also an immigration attorney posted just this week that he came home from a hearing crying his eyes out because he had to tell a wife that her husband and the father of their three children is going to get deported the first week of June. There are people like these all around us that are in limbo and separated from their families. Think about the churches that meet in our building. Some of them upstairs right now worshipping. I wonder about their stories. What they’ve gone through. Think about the people in our community. Right down the street at Belmont High School

there are 23 languages spoken, people from all continents Even Connie your husband Alex's story immigrating from Cyprus. What a powerful thought. And what an opportunity to serve.

I'm so proud that our church has done that. We open our arms and host the three other churches that worship with us here so they can have a place to gather, we host ESL programs for immigrants that want to learn English, we had an immigration forum last year to help educate people, and Randy and I as your pastors have been on a taskforce helping churches address the needs of immigrants. Randy's been especially involved. So this is something that as a church we've been faithful in doing. And that means will be judged well.

Because Jesus says whatever you have done to the least of these, the poor, the hungry, the naked, the imprisoned, the stranger you have done it unto me. **[SLIDE #6]** And Jesus would know, because he was a foreigner and a stranger when he had to flee the country when he was born. So when you show grace towards the immigrant, to the stranger among us, you might just be showing it to Jesus. Amen.