

Just Mercy to the Refugee and Immigrant

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Just Mercy

Matthew 25:35

There are more than 71 million people worldwide who have been forced to leave their homes – because of wars and gang violence and starvation. Nearly 26 million people who have been persecuted due to their religion, race or politics have been forced to go to another country. We are experiencing the largest wave of refugees the world has seen since the Second World War. More than half the refugees are children. Six million people alone have been forced from their homes in Syria. Nearly five million Venezuelans, over 15% of the entire population of Venezuela, have emigrated from the country because of the political and economic turmoil there over the past 15 years.

The refugee situation from Syria was dramatically portrayed a little more than four years ago by that photo of the lifeless body of a three year old boy named Alan Kurdi

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Photo of Alan Kurdi

Alan's body washed up on a Turkish beach after a failed attempt to reach safety in Europe.

Again, it's important to remember that the global refugee crisis is mainly about children.

I want to talk for a moment about how those of us who are followers of Jesus ought to form our perspectives about immigrants and refugees as well as other subjects.

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The source of our views of immigrants and refugees

There was a recent Life Way research survey that said that only 12% of Christians in American who call themselves "Bible believing" said that they formed their perspectives on immigration primarily from the Bible. When they were asked what influenced their thinking the most about immigration, the combined answers of the Bible, their local church, their pastors and Christian leaders was completely outweighed by the media and politics. People who self-identify as Bible believing Christians said that their views on how we should relate to immigrants and refugees was way more shaped by the media and by politicians than by the Bible, the church, the pastors, Christian leaders, and Christian books combined.

Part of the problem is the church because less than one in five Bible believing Christians say they have ever been encouraged by their local church to reach out to immigrants or refugees in their communities. Very few Christians have ever heard even part of a message on the subject of immigrants or refugees. So we Christians are profoundly undisciplined in our thinking regarding what God's Word teaches about refugees and immigrants.

Now, there are lots of political issues that are not addressed by the Bible. The Bible says nothing about what the corporate or individual tax rate ought to be in a country. There's nothing about tax reform. There's nothing about whether you should be in favor of Medicare for all or employer provided plans or individual payment. The Bible doesn't even say anything about gun ownership or gun control. There are lots of really important subjects that Christians of good will legitimately debate with each other and no one should say "You are unbiblical because you hold a different view than me." Lots of current political topics are not found in the Bible.

But when we consider how we ought to treat immigrants and refugees as followers of Jesus, we discover that the Bible has a ton to say about this subject.

The Hebrew word *ger* is translated in our English Bibles as immigrant, foreigner, alien, stranger, sojourner.

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Ger = immigrant, foreigner, alien, stranger, sojourner

That word is found 92 times in the Old Testament. 36 times the word *ger* is joined to two other groups – widows and orphans – as particular subjects of God's concern and our concerns. 36 times the Bible tells us that a follower of Jesus should no more treat an immigrant or refugee badly than we should treat a widow or an orphan badly. You want to know how important caring for immigrants and refugees is to God? One theologian put it this way:

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"Welcoming the stranger... is the most often repeated commandment in the Hebrew Scriptures, with the exception of the imperative to worship the one and only God." – Orlando Espín

Wow! The second-most often repeated commandment in the Old Testament is to care for immigrants!

My favorite Old Testament theologian, Christopher Wright, said this:

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“The Old Testament has some very clear teaching about God’s standards for sexual behavior. These teachings permeate the Law, the Narratives, the Prophets and the Wisdom literature. The Bible clearly condemns deviations from God’s sexual standards. Yet these condemnations are outweighed in volume by the deluge of texts dealing with God’s concern for justice and compassion for marginalized people, including the persistent mention of foreigners and immigrants. Among Christians who claim to honor, believe, and obey the Bible, how does this weigh in our scale of moral values? Do we share anywhere near the same degree of ethical concern, let alone political passion, for refugees or immigrants?”

We just got done celebrating Christmas and Christmas pageants usually involve the Magi coming to give gifts to the Christ child. Virtually every Christmas pageant ends there with the Magi bowing down and worshipping Jesus with their gifts. But the story in Matthew goes on. Immediately after the Magi visited, Jesus along with his mother, Mary, and his father, Joseph, were forced to be refugees to escape a tyrannical government.

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The model of our Lord who was a refugee

Slide Matthew 2:13-15

¹³ When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”

¹⁴ So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt,
¹⁵ where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

It’s good for us Christians to remember that Jesus our Lord was a refugee. It makes one wonder, how was Jesus and his mother, Mary, and his father, Joseph, treated when they fled to Egypt to escape persecution? Were they welcomed and cared for by the communities there? Were they seen, instead, as a threat or a nuisance and burden? Did the local carpenters protest because Joseph was driving down their wages because of unfair foreign competition? Was Jesus suspected of carrying a disease? Did people say this was a foreign invasion?

One thing is clear. Our Lord Jesus personally identifies and has compassion for the 70 million refugees in our world today. In fact Jesus said whatever we do for immigrants, we do for him

Slide Matthew 25:35, 36, 40

³⁵ 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, ³⁶ 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.'

⁴⁰ "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.'

For those of us who are biblical Christians, it's important to remember that many of our forefathers were refugees. Jacob fled his homeland because he was afraid of being killed by his brother, Esau. Moses fled Egypt to Midian because Pharaoh sought to kill him. And David had to run from King Saul and fled into the land of the Philistines. The same is true with Elijah. In the New Testament, the church fled persecution. The Bible is a story of refugees and immigrants if we have eyes to see it.

You know, the Bible tells about two different Pharaohs and two different responses to immigrants.

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The responses of two different Pharaohs

Way back in the book of Genesis, there was a man named Joseph. His family came to Egypt to escape a famine. The Pharaoh at the time welcomed these foreigners. Here's what we read:

Slide Genesis 47:5-6a

⁵ Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Your father and your brothers have come to you, ⁶ and the land of Egypt is before you; settle your father and your brothers in the best part of the land.

The Pharaoh gave these foreigners the best of the land.

But there was a second Pharaoh who came along years later. Here's what we read:

Slide Exodus 1:8-10

⁸ Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt.

⁹ "Look," he said to his people, "the Israelites have become far too numerous for us.

¹⁰ Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country."

The second Pharaoh saw the foreigner Israelites as a threat – a security threat, an economic threat. It says that he didn't know Joseph. He didn't personally know the name, the faith, the story of Joseph or of any Israelite. For him, immigrants were just a

nameless, faceless mob invading his country. What did he do? He enslaved the Israelites. He treated them horribly.

Of course, the question we can ask each other is which Pharaoh are we most like? The first Pharaoh knew Joseph. He knew his gifts and his potential. He knew his contributions to the society. He welcomed him and he welcomed his family. Or the second Pharaoh who didn't know Joseph, didn't know the Israelites. He just felt threatened by this foreign invasion. Many Christians living in America would say, "I don't know any immigrants or refugees personally. I've never sat down and had coffee with an immigrant or been to their home or had an immigrant or refugee to my home."

Many of us Christians in America would have to confess if we were honest before God, "I am like the second Pharaoh! To me, immigrants are just a foreign invasion of my country." They seem different and threatening. I am afraid to get to know them."

Today, instead of labelling some nameless, faceless group called immigrants from a distance, I want you to get to know one woman, Irene Casale-Petrarca, who along with her family left Venezuela because of the socialist dictatorship that took over there. She and her family came to the United States back in 2006. Let's welcome Irene to our stage.

Interview:

1. Irene, you were not born in the United States? Where were you born?

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Map of Venezuela

2. Tell us about your childhood. What it a happy home?
3. What did you do for work in Venezuela?

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Picture of Irene as a doctor

4. You were a professional, you had so much professional success. You had a successful husband, a nice house. But were you happy?
You know, feeling of emptiness are universal. We sometimes think that if someone is from another country they must feel very differently from the way we feel as Americans. But everybody in the world has feelings of emptiness that all the things of this world can't fill. Everybody gets depressed. Everybody thinks there's got to be more than just material.

5. You were thinking about getting divorced, but you didn't get divorced. What happened?

6. Jesus was not Lord of your life, was he?

7. Why did you leave Venezuela when you were both very successful?

8. How did you come to the United States? You left everything behind?

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Photo of Irene and kids at airport

9. The situation in Venezuela has gotten worse. Tell us about it. It's affected your family. (Talk about her mother and her sisters; starvation; collapse of schools.)

10. How was it for you when you first came to the United States? (Talk about it not easy. Irene couldn't work as a doctor. Daniel couldn't work as an engineer. There was a barrier of language – schools, the health system. She had to start from scratch. She worked as a babysitter. Her husband worked as a server.)

11. Irene, how did you end up coming to Vineyard? (The importance of inviting to Vineyard. Communion was in Spanish.)

12. You grew as a Christian here at Vineyard, didn't you?

13. But even after you got to America and you joined the church, things weren't perfect or easy for you, were they? You had a crisis. (Talk about real conversion here.)

14. How did you get into Christian leadership here at Vineyard?

15. You had a growing sense of calling to leave your medical career and serve the Lord via pastoral ministry.

16. How did La Vina get started?

17. La Vina, along with VC, has been reaching back to Venezuela. How have we helped?

18. We tend to think of immigration as a political issue. We tend to think of immigration and refugees as an economic issue – whether people are going to take jobs or create jobs. But behind immigrants and refugees coming to America is God. Why do you think God brought you and your family to America? Why do you think God is bringing so many immigrants to America?

The incredible opportunity of immigrants coming to America

19. Irene, what would you want to say to our church about welcoming immigrants to our church and to our city?

You know, there's something really troubling about the way that many of us as Christians relate to Jesus' command to go out to all the world and make disciples of all nations. Christians and churches across America spend millions, indeed, hundreds of millions and billions of dollars to send missionaries out around the world so that people from every nation can hear about what God has done for us in sending his Son, Jesus Christ, to die for our sins and to overcome death. For an immigrant to come and live near us, we won't even cross the street or drive a few blocks to meet them. God is bringing the world, not just to America but specifically here to Central Ohio, people from every nation. And I think that part of the reason that God has brought people here to America and to Central Ohio is for them to meet Jesus.

Do you know that Ohio's population would have shrunk during this last decade because of declining birth rates, people leaving the state and deaths if not for immigrants? Immigrants start twice as many new businesses as do native born Americans. They employ more people, pay more taxes, and commit way fewer crimes, than their share of the population. And while some Millennials are walking out the back door of churches in our country, immigrant communities are flooding through the front door. I believe immigrants hold the key to the renewal of the church in America.

When Craig Heselton and Bill Christensen kept inviting Irene's husband who was a server at a Mexican restaurant to Vineyard Columbus they had no idea that God would call this guy's wife, Irene, one day to be a pastor here at our church. They had no idea that every week here at Vineyard this waiter's wife would pastor over 200 adults, dozens and dozens of children, and through her ministry hundreds of people would accept Jesus Christ.

We don't know what God is up to in someone's life. Maybe the immigrant that we befriend will become the next Iraqi or Syrian Billy Graham. Maybe they will become a pastor like Irene. Or a church planter like Akwasi Boakye who emigrated with his wife and family from Ghana. We sent Akwasi out a few years ago to plant a new church in our city called Vineyard North Side.

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- II. The model of our Lord who was a refugee
- III. The response of two different Pharaohs
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