

FAITHFUL RESPONSES TO ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Address by JAMES R. EDWARDS JR., Founder and Principal, Washington consulting firm Olive, Edwards, & Cooper L.L.C

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To address tonight's topic, we must first ask: Why does civil government regulate immigration? There are several reasons.

First, God providentially places each person under certain earthly authorities. This is part of His common grace. It's one way God protects us. We live in a fallen world where evil exists. Every human being has a sin nature.

By God's grace, we find ourselves under the authority of parents, employers, school and church leadership, and civil government. God has set up these authorities to protect those under their care against the consequences of sinful humanity.

Second, God is a God of order. He holds us individually, morally responsible to obey both Him and those authorities He puts us under. People who rebel against God-ordained authorities are rejecting God's provision for them. If you've read Romans 1, you know how ugly this lawlessness gets. The curse and consequences of people becoming a law unto themselves are serious. Scripture gives many examples of God's displeasure at sin, rebellion, and lawlessness—the Fall, the Tower of Babel, the Flood, the exile of the Israelites.

Rebellious people face consequences from their decision. For instance, the runaway teenager rebels against parental authority, and so faces exploitation and danger all alone. This rebellion is sinful, because it's rejection of God's grace and order. Those who break immigration laws flout God's provision for their own and their fellow man's well-being. They choose disorder over order—lawlessness over lawfulness—disobedience over obedience.

Scriptures like Romans 13 couldn't be clearer: "The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted. ..."

From Mount Sinai through Jerusalem and Athens to Rome, we've inherited the great blessing of the Western world, the Rule of Law. This is one way God provides for His creatures made in His own image. Civil authorities exist to protect the innocent and punish the wrongdoer within their jurisdictions. Thanks to the Rule of Law, they do so according to duly enacted civil laws. The Rule of Law gives America what John Adams called "a government of laws and not of men." Judge Robert Bork has

called the Rule of Law “the foundation of our freedoms.”

Third, civil government has a God-given duty to protect its citizens. Romans 13 and I Peter 2 spell this out.

The government can’t let in just everyone who wishes to immigrate. Under a laissez faire approach to immigration, innocent citizens would suffer, especially the poor—society would be at risk of losing its character—and mass immigration would equate invasion. You’d see disorder, lawlessness, and anarchy. Open borders would translate into the death of a nation by the loss of law and order.

In America, immigration is such a hot-button issue because the federal government has fallen short on its duty to protect citizens. Our government has allowed immigration to reach overwhelming levels. It’s failed to enforce our immigration laws—not only against illegal aliens, but against illegitimate employers and others who profit from illegal immigration. The consequence of this failure reflects the curse described in Deuteronomy (28:43): “The alien who lives among you will rise above you higher and higher, but you will sink lower and lower.”

We are sinking low. Legal immigration now stands at more than a million a year. Compare that with the historical average. From 1776 to 1976, it was a quarter-million a year. That is, annual immigration is now more than four times our historical average. Plus, nearly a million new illegal aliens settle in this country every year. The current visa system feeds chain migration—where the original immigrant’s distant relatives get visas. Immigration runs on automatic pilot. The sheer numbers of yearly immigration cause less necessity for and more resistance to assimilation.

The biblical standard required immigrants to assimilate, not force their customs on and transform the receiving society. For instance, Deuteronomy (16:9-15) reflects this assimilation ethic. God required aliens in Israel to observe the Jewish feasts and Sabbath rest. Yet today, Census figures show that about a quarter of immigrant households don’t speak English. The rebelliousness seen in this level of refusal to assimilate seems at odds with the biblical ethic.

Clearly, immigration is something civil governments rightfully regulate. No Scriptures command open borders. No commandments prescribe a particular system of immigration, visa preferences, or visa quotas. The most often cited Scriptures that talk about foreigners only say not to “mistreat or oppress” resident aliens. Verses like Exodus 22:21 speak of fair treatment, like equal justice under law, not how many or which aliens to admit, or on

what basis.

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So, from Scripture, immigration policy is left to prudential judgment—to be set by a government according to prevailing circumstances, good judgment, and considering the best interests of its own citizens first. And it's appropriate to expect immigrants to assimilate to the host society. It follows that people who break a nation's immigration laws are fostering disorder and shaking their fists in God's face—just like any other kind of lawlessness. Someone might say, we're called to love our neighbor as ourselves. Doesn't that include aliens and strangers? They're created in God's image, too. They can't help where they were born.

Well, no doubt, every human being is an image bearer of the Creator. Every human life has inherent worth because of man's unique place in creation. However, that's as true of the American high-school dropout as it is of the Mexican farmer or the Indian computer programmer or the German engineer. So, it's a bogus argument to say someone can go wherever he wants on Earth just because he has God's likeness. We all bear God's image, so that claim gets us no where toward setting immigration policy. We also know, as I said earlier, every human being possesses a sin nature because of the Fall. We humans have inherent value, but we're also flawed at the core. Christ's salvation is our only hope of beginning our repair. Francis Schaeffer puts it well: "Having been made in the image of God, man is magnificent even in ruin. God made man to be responsible for his thoughts and actions . . ."

So, we're back to the fact God provides for each of us providentially through His common grace. In His wisdom, God places individuals in certain families, tribes, nations, under certain authorities. Why? For their protection, His purpose, judgment, and discipline. Passages like Genesis 10, Deuteronomy 32 (v. 8), and Acts 17 (v. 26) show that the Lord establishes people groups in particular locations and raises up leaders for them.

Accordingly, we have certain priorities in our obligations.

For instance, we owe higher duties to our immediate family (I Tim. 5:8) and to those God has placed alongside us under each authority. As hard as it is to understand, that's how two Christians can be on opposite sides in a civil conflict—yet each be within God's will. While

they live ultimately side-by-side in the City of God, they reside on opposite sides of the track in the City of Man. The United States couldn't possibly let immigrate every foreigner inclined to live here. The nation wouldn't survive. U.S. citizens would face destructive consequences and a wrecked economy. Remember, the average Mexican earns 1/12th the average American's wages. Some 4.6 billion people in the world make less than the average Mexican. America can't possibly be the world's "economic lifeboat" without drowning many Americans. Moreover, the most vulnerable Americans are the losers from the effects of mass immigration—legal and illegal. Lower-income and less-skilled citizens, particularly minorities, see wages depressed. Immigrants balloon the labor pool and directly compete for jobs. Harvard economist George Borjas, Northeastern University's Paul Harrington, and others have documented this wage-depression effect. Taxpayers end up subsidizing immigrants through welfare programs, public schools, housing, and health care. Who wins? The wealthy benefit from low-cost foreign labor. Elites privatize the benefit and socialize the costs. James 2 warns against showing favoritism to the rich. James calls this favoritism sin. Granted, we have the blessing of being a nation that literally millions would like to live in. Yet it would be wrong for the government to open the borders. So, we have to set limits and priorities for selecting immigrants. We have to guard against unlawful immigration. We must patrol our borders and certain worksites. Not to protect the rights of our own people through law enforcement means God's protector of innocent citizens isn't living up to its calling. Illegal immigration, immigration fraud, and the like are not victimless crimes. American citizens suffer the consequences of such lawlessness. Enforcing our immigration laws promotes and preserves justice. Now, our hearts may go out to the illegal alien who seeks a better life here. So, how ought the government to balance justice and mercy? Is it merciful to legalize the status of illegal immigrants? Or open America's doors to more legal immigration? To whom much is given, much is required, the Bible says, and America has been given much. First, we Christians know the Lord doesn't contradict Himself. His perfect principles of justice and fairness complement His principles of mercy. It's important to note that elements of both justice and mercy apply to us as individuals and as a body politic. But they don't apply equally.

For instance, the Golden Rule and Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount apply predominately to individuals, not civil government. For instance, Luke 6 (v. 30-31) says, "Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you." This is a high moral standard from Christ's lips. You and I as faithful believers try to live up to that standard. But it would be unjust for civil government to attempt that kind of mercy. Second, for civil government to exercise mercy like that, the result would be injustice against society—against the majority of citizens. With civil authorities, God's agent for justice, this kind of mercy—which you and I as Christians are to exercise—would be unwise and profligate with public resources. Why? Because the state can't turn the other cheek. The state can't give its tunic. The state can't ignore when someone's wronged it. The state can't forgive someone 70 times seven times.

Mercy is hard for civil authority to exercise because the very nature of mercy is willingly to incur injustice. When you and I faithfully follow Jesus on these points, we willingly, for God's glory, incur an injustice. You and I
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can personally make that sacrifice. And we honor God by showing mercy.

But civil government itself can't show mercy. Civil authorities have only the resources the public has entrusted to them.

By legalizing millions of illegal immigrants, government doesn't show mercy. Rather, it obligates its citizens to bear the injustices aliens have committed against the body politic.

The nature of civil authority is coercive. You know this every time you pay taxes. At its essence, "mercy" is government using coercion to force its own people to swallow injustice.

What might be mercy when done by an individual isn't mercy at all, but injustice, when forced by civil government.

This argues for clear consent of the governed.

Meanwhile, the alien isn't absolved of responsibility.

Even though our government hasn't faithfully enforced immigration laws. Even though it's turned a blind eye toward many immigration violations. And lawbreaking aliens bear moral responsibility for their unlawful actions.

Even desperate circumstances don't justify their illegal immigration. Proverbs 6 (v. 30-31) says, "Men do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy his hunger when he is starving. Yet if he is caught, he must pay sevenfold,

though it costs him all the wealth of his house.”

Did you hear that? A guy’s starving. He steals food to keep from starving. We all can understand the desperation that led to his lawbreaking. But despite his sympathetic circumstances, he still stole. He took what wasn’t his. He stole, got caught, and now faces punishment. He has to pay restitution—even to the point of bankruptcy. Why would God set such a high bar? Can’t we make just one little exception for a starving man? The private owner can; government can’t. The larger principles involve his willfully breaking God’s commandments. The man could have asked people for bread. He could have looked for other, lawful options. He could have prayed and asked God to supply his need. Even this desperate man wasn’t at liberty to take matters into his own hands. He wasn’t free to become a law unto himself.

This understandable, but lawless act wars against the peace of society. Civil government is there to preserve the peace. If we let this guy off easy, what message does that send? What will this guy do next time? What will others do who saw how the authorities handled this? Remember, almost no illegal alien is fleeing starvation or physical danger. A Pew study found that most illegal aliens quit their job back home in order to break our immigration laws to make more money.

Switching gears a little, consider President Bush’s guestworker plan. He’d match any “willing worker” with any “willing employer.” But a “willing worker” and “willing employer” aren’t the only affected parties. The President’s plan ignores many things a prudent plan would take into account. If we as a nation believed in an entirely privatized right to employment contract, then we’d have no child labor laws—no workplace safety laws—no right-to-work laws—no employment or fair-wage standards. When a “willing worker” is in another country, then the government of the employer’s nation rightfully regulates this transaction, to protect the public interest.

There’s nothing inherently wrong with arranging private employment. But like the starving man in the proverb, other factors come into play. It’s the “social contract” aspect. With immigration, those factors include the effects on the national labor pool, the well-being of native-born workers, and the national and local economy. When governing authorities regulate things, even things without inherent moral dimension, morality attaches. Murder clearly has inherent moral implications. Which

side of the road we drive on doesn't. But once established that we drive on the right side, then as Paul Marshall has put it, "these actions take on a whole new context and become matters of morality." Marshall describes illegal aliens much like Proverbs describes the starving thief. Most "simply desire a better life, and are willing to risk their lives in striving for it. ... If there were no border then who could object to what they do? It is the fact of a border, a political invention, that makes their action wrong."

Note the term "wrong" in that quote. A moral dimension.

It indicts the border crosser, the wrongdoer. A

wrongdoer does what? He disobeys God. He loves not his neighbor. To illegal aliens, especially those who claim to be Christians, we must say: Anyone who claims to love God yet hates his brother is a liar. (I John 4:20)

Obedying a nation's immigration laws is the practical application of the paramount two commandments—loving God and neighbor. Disobeying those same immigration laws dishonors God and shows hatred for neighbor.

As I John 5 (v. 20) says, "For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen."

In short, illegal immigrants are being disobedient—of God's provision, of man's law. That disobedience is sinful because it's failure to trust the infinite, personal Creator—our loving God who promises never to leave or forsake us. And we have to ask illegal aliens this question with eternal implications: What cost to your soul is this sin worth? Is getting relatively more money, acquiring more material possessions, gaining earthly comforts really worth second-guessing God? "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:36) Illegal aliens are morally responsible before God for their actions, including taking the law into their own hands concerning their migration.

The same questions go to illicit employers. They have the same moral responsibility to obey God, love neighbor, and submit to earthly authorities. They can rationalize all they like. The biblical bottom line is the bottom line.

Illegal aliens themselves, their illicit employers, smugglers, document forgers, aiding and abetting family members, home-country officials who urge them to go

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and view them as "cash cows" for their remittances, all bear moral guilt. Most bear legal guilt. These, as well as

the apologists for lawbreaking and amnesty, should recall Isaiah's sobering words: "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight." (5:20-21)

I'll conclude on the amnesty question. Amnesty is pardoning a set of people for their crime. It has the same root word as "amnesia." In immigration, it means rewarding illegal aliens with the object of their crime. Black's Law Dictionary uses our first big immigrant amnesty in 1986 as an example.

Is amnesty ever justifiable? In some cases, maybe. But the biblical standard for government is the Rule of Law. Granting amnesty should be the rare exception because, by its very nature, amnesty undermines the Rule of Law. Considering amnesty as a policy option requires prudential judgment. It needs clear-eyed assessment of history and experience. It involves appropriately balancing competing interests—not the least of which are those of American citizens, especially the most vulnerable citizens who'd be most harmed by legalizing millions of aliens. It requires prudently weighing current circumstances. Thinking about amnesty of illegal aliens today, we know we've tried amnesty before. It resulted in more illegal immigration, not less; it caused pressure for more amnesty, not less pressure. In 1986, we amnestied 3 million illegal immigrants. We've had six more amnesties since then, legalizing 2 to 3 million more illegal aliens. Amnesty not only hasn't solved the problem; it's made things worse.

Our lower-income citizens, recent legal immigrants, veterans, the disabled, the unskilled, native-born minorities, Americans with a high school education or less—these people have been hurt the most by amnesty's consequences—and by mass immigration. They face the fiercest job competition. Their wages have fallen the worst. They increasingly find themselves disadvantaged in every area of life because of illegal immigrants, amnesty recipients, and distantly related chain migrants. It seems to me we've skated mighty close to showing favoritism to foreigners and our own rich, and disdain to our fellow citizens, to whom we owe a greater temporal allegiance.

I'll end on this: Immigration policy forces us as a nation and as a people to address big questions. As Christians, let's approach them with I Peter 2:17 firmly in mind:

“Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.”

james r. edwards jr.

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