

## Immigrants—Legal and Illegal

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### 1. Does the Bible distinguish between legal and illegal immigrants?

Yes, OT Scripture made such a distinction within Israel.

“Aliens” were not native Israelites, but had moved there to become legal residents.

They enjoyed almost all the same benefits and protections as Israel’s citizens.

Jewish culture was designed to fully integrate these people into society.

“Foreigners” (a different word in Hebrew) were visitors who showed no interest in becoming Israelites themselves.

They did not receive the benefits and protections afforded to aliens.

### 2. How were aliens treated differently from foreigners?

Financially, Israelites were not to charge aliens or citizens of Israel interest on their loans (Lev 25:35-37).

Foreigners, however, could be charged interest (Deut 15:1-3).

Legally, aliens enjoyed the same protections of the law as citizens; foreigners did not.

Num 15:15—*“There shall be one statute for you and for the **alien** who sojourns with you, a perpetual statute throughout your generations; as you are, so shall the **alien** be before the LORD.”*

By the same token, aliens were to obey the law just like citizens, and couldn’t plead exemption because the laws in the country of their origin were different.

If they violated Israel’s laws, they received the same punishments as citizens.

Socially, aliens received the same welfare benefits as citizens who were widows or orphans.

Deut 24:19—*“When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the **alien**, for the orphan, and for the widow, in order that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.”*

In addition, Deut 26:12-13 required Israel’s farmers to set aside 1/10 of their produce every 3 years for charity to aliens, widows, orphans, and Levites in their area.

And Lev 19:33-34 told him to do such things out of love for these people.

On the other hand, there is no mention in the OT of such benefits to foreigners at all.

Religiously, aliens who wanted to celebrate Passover were allowed to do so after they had become circumcised (Ex 12:48), but foreigners were not allowed to do so (Ex 12:43).

Lev 16:29-30 included aliens in Day of Atonement celebrations as well.

As in the case of citizens, aliens were to be punished for violating the religious laws.

Ex 20:8—*“The seventh day is a Sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your **sojourner** [alien] who stays with you”* (see also Lev 17:10).

### 3. Is enforcement of the immigration law “unchristian”?

In 1996 the U.S. Congress passed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant

Responsibility Act, which required states, counties, and cities to cooperate with the federal government in the apprehension of illegal immigrants.

Congress had every right to create such a law; their doing so didn’t violate Scripture.

It has the responsibility for protecting U.S. citizens from outside threats.  
The President could have vetoed it if he thought it unenforceable; he didn't.  
The intent of SB 1070 is to facilitate its enforcement.

Every country has both the responsibility and the sovereign power to protect its citizens and its own self-interests in the same way.

For example, to receive a permanent (FM3) work visa in Mexico, the Mexican government requires each applicant to provide a birth certificate, a marriage certificate (if married), high school transcripts and proof of graduation, two letters of recommendation from supervisors, a letter from one's local police chief guaranteeing no arrests or outstanding warrants, and a personal letter from the applicant explaining why his professional skills are important to Mexico and why there is no one else in Mexico who can do the same job.

Adherence to such laws is not only Christian, it is obedient submission to an institution which God Himself has established for the welfare of mankind—government.

The truly Christian thing to do is to submit to government authority.

Refusal to do so is a moral issue, for which the violator is guilty before God Himself.

Rom 13:1-2=> *"Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, & those which exist are established by God. / Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves."*

Believers are even to submit to established government authorities who are evil.

1 Pet 2:13-14=> *"Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, / or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right."*

When Peter wrote this, the "king" was a wicked man—Nero—who would burn Rome to the ground a year later and blame Christians for it.

This does not mean Christians are to blindly submit to their government even when it demands that they disobey the Lord or His Word in the process.

In a case like this, Acts 5:29 applies—*"We must obey God rather than men."*

When the government leaves us no option but either to disobey it, or to disobey our Lord (with no middle ground for compromise), we disobey the government.

But we avoid, as long as possible, direct defiance of government authority, because it is a God-ordained institution.

When the Roman Catholic Church gives "sanctuary" to illegal immigrants, they violate the principles of Romans 13 and I Peter 2, repudiating their God-given obligation to submit to human government.

They would have no biblical right to do so even under a totalitarian government such as Nero's, much less in a democracy.

When "sanctuary cities" such as San Francisco, New York, and Denver refuse to cooperate with federal authorities in identifying and deporting illegal aliens, they assume to themselves greater authority than that of the federal government.

The Civil War began when southern states asserted they had greater authority than the federal government, and it tore our country apart.

In the midst of that war, Abraham Lincoln quoted Jesus' words in Mt 12:25—*"Any house divided against itself shall not stand."*

Presidents and police chiefs who publicly proclaim their intention to disregard the law are playing with the same fire that severely burned this country 150 years ago.

#### 4. **Do Christians have a right to ignore the needs of immigrants?**

No. While adhering to their understanding of the government's authority, Christians must also love strangers.

Israel was told (Lev 19:34)=> "*The **stranger** [aliens] who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall **love** him as yourself; for you were **aliens** [same as "stranger"] in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.*"

Not only were Jews not to mistreat immigrants, they were to help them.

Deut 26:12=> "*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.*"

But immigrant rights in Israel applied only to those who had entered the country legally, and intended to make it their new home.

They were recipients of all the benefits of native-born citizens, but they were also expected to adhere to the law like citizens.

Aliens were often poorer than citizens because they were at a disadvantage economically.

Unless they married into a particular tribe, they couldn't even own land.

And yet God said in Lev 22:18-19—"*Any man of the house of Israel or of the **aliens** in Israel who presents his **offering**, whether it is any of their **votive** or any of their **freewill offerings**, which they present to the LORD for a burnt offering —/for you to be accepted—it must be a male without defect from the cattle, the sheep, or the goats.*"

This offering was a voluntary contribution for the maintenance of the Temple.

In other words, aliens were encouraged to become fully integrated into the society and religious life of Israel by giving something back to its newly adopted homeland.

But even as they did so, they were to follow the requirements of God's Law.

The Israelites were to love and take care of immigrants, but they were to hold them accountable for obeying the Law, just as they did themselves.

And they were to encourage them to become loyal citizens of Israel.

In today's world, the Christian should apply this same dual-principle in his relationships with immigrants.

#### 5. **Where does Christian compassion fit into all this?**

Knowing that aliens and strangers are at a disadvantage within our society, should we apply a different legal standard to their conduct out of Christian compassion?

When the law is applied to individuals by the judicial system, the question of guilt or innocence ultimately comes down to reason—Is there a "*reasonable doubt*" that the defendant violated the law?

Adjudication of legal cases always turns on 2 objective questions=>

\* Is what the person is accused of doing illegal (forbidden the law)?

\* Can it be proven that he actually did that forbidden thing?

When judicial decisions depart from proving crimes through the presentation of objective facts, emotions (including compassion) muddy the waters, becoming a notoriously unreliable criterion for decision-making about defendants' guilt or innocence.

The decisions of jurors are then based on how they feel about the "victim" or the defendant or the offense for which the defendant has been accused.

Israelites were required to make impartial judgments, not "compassionate" ones.

Ex 23:2-3—"*You shall not follow a multitude in doing evil, nor shall you testify in a dispute so as to turn aside after a multitude in order to pervert justice; nor shall you be **partial to a poor man** in his dispute.*"

Decisions based on "compassion" become subject to emotional appeals by attorneys, the outward appearance of plaintiff and defendant, the time of year, the jurors' own backgrounds, and many other illegitimate (but compelling) factors.

Particular jurors' feelings of compassion in one case, may not be replicated by those of jurors in other cases, creating inconsistencies and inequities throughout the legal and judicial systems as a whole.

The same might be said of police officers—those in one county might feel very differently about certain crimes or certain potential suspects from those in another county.

The net effect would be unequal treatment under the law, depending on how the people enforcing the law were feeling at any particular time of any particular day about any particular issue or suspect.

The result would be a legal mess—whimsical versions of "justice" that are unreliable and lead to blatant abuses.

Government laws, their enforcement, and their adjudication must be based on reason and objective facts, not on emotional sentiments—including compassion.

Compassion can/should be taken into consideration in the writing and amending of those laws, so that the special needs/problems of immigrants are considered.

And also to the extent that it can be given weight in its enforcement and adjudication aspects without creating inconsistencies, partiality, and injustice.

But ultimately, neither compassion or any other emotional issue should become the final criterion by which a law or a legal proceeding is to be judged.

Ultimately, the issue of illegal immigrants is a question of law, not of compassion.

## **6. So how should I, as a Christian, respond to an illegal alien myself?**

With personal compassion and love, but without condoning his illegal behavior or status.

In his excellent book on this subject, *The Immigration Crisis*, James Hoffmeier writes:

George was trembling because he had overstayed his visitor's visa and feared deportation. He desperately wanted to stay & seek the better life that Canada afforded him. The law required George to apply for immigrant status outside of the country, but he felt that if he left, he might not get it. He also knew that if he were deported, he would never get back in. So he came to me for counsel. "What should I do?"

I felt for George. His dilemma was real. My instincts told me he should do what was right and legal and trust that things would work out for him. So I helped him think through his options and encouraged him to leave Canada and apply for landed status.

As it turned out, George followed Hoffmeier's advice trusting in God's sovereign will.

He received his resident status, and is now living in western Canada.