

# How Should Christians Treat Immigrants?

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Christians today find themselves navigating a deep moral tension. On one hand, Scripture calls believers to respect governing authorities, to uphold order, and to act with integrity under the law. On the other hand, the same Scriptures repeatedly command God's people to show mercy to the poor, to welcome the stranger, and to defend the vulnerable. In public discourse, these commitments are often placed in opposition, as though faithfulness requires choosing one and abandoning the other.

This tension has become especially pronounced in conversations about immigration. Fear-driven narratives, political rhetoric, and selective readings of Scripture have shaped how many Christians understand the issue. Appeals to law are sometimes used to silence compassion, while appeals to compassion are sometimes used to dismiss the rule of law. Both approaches flatten the moral complexity Scripture presents.

The question before Christians, then, is not whether law matters or whether mercy matters. Scripture affirms both. The more difficult question is how obedience to God should shape our posture toward those who arrive at our borders seeking safety, work, or survival—often carrying stories of violence, hunger, and desperation that resist easy judgment.

This paper seeks to approach immigration not first as a political problem, but as a moral and theological one. It asks how Scripture speaks to authority, sin, compassion, and responsibility, and how Christians are called to respond when human laws intersect with human suffering. Rather than beginning with conclusions, it begins with careful attention—to facts, to Scripture, and ultimately to Christ, who stands as both Savior and Judge.

## Fear, Crime, and False Narratives

One of the most common claims raised in opposition to immigration is the assertion that undocumented immigrants are more likely to commit violent crime. This belief is widespread, emotionally charged, and frequently repeated. It is also not supported by evidence.

From the 1990s through the early 2010s, the foreign-born share of the United States population grew substantially. During this same period, FBI data show that violent crime rates declined by nearly fifty percent across major categories, including murder, robbery, and aggravated assault.<sup>1</sup> Multiple studies have found no positive correlation between increased immigration and increased violent crime. In many cases, communities with growing immigrant populations experienced significant crime reduction.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> American Immigration Council, *Criminalizing Immigration in the United States*, summarizing FBI crime data from the 1990s–2010s.

<sup>2</sup> Migration Policy Institute, *Immigrants and Crime: Research Evidence*, showing no correlation between immigration and violent crime.

Undocumented immigrants, in particular, tend to avoid contact with law enforcement precisely because of their legal vulnerability. Most are focused on work, family survival, and remaining unnoticed rather than engaging in criminal behavior. While the act of unlawful entry or overstay is itself a violation of immigration law, it is categorically different from violent criminal conduct.

When Christians accept false narratives about crime, the result is not merely a policy disagreement but a moral distortion. Fear replaces discernment, and human beings are reduced to threats rather than neighbors. Scripture consistently warns against bearing false witness and against allowing fear to justify hardness of heart. A faithful Christian response to immigration must begin with truth, not assumption, and with facts, not fear.

## Authority and Obedience: Reading Romans 13 Faithfully

Romans 13 is often cited as a decisive answer to questions of immigration, law enforcement, and public order.<sup>3</sup> The passage calls believers to be subject to governing authorities, affirming that authority itself is permitted by God and serves a purpose in restraining evil and promoting the common good. Christians are therefore not free to dismiss civil law casually or treat obedience as optional when it is inconvenient.

At the same time, Romans 13 does not teach blind or unqualified obedience. Scripture consistently presents earthly authority as derivative rather than absolute. God alone is the highest authority, and human rulers are accountable to Him. The same Bible that calls believers to respect governing authorities also records faithful disobedience when human commands directly contradict God's moral law. The Hebrew midwives who refused Pharaoh's orders, the prophets who confronted kings, and the apostles who declared, "We must obey God rather than men," all testify to the limits of human authority.

Paul's description of governing authorities as those who punish evil and commend good assumes that authority is functioning according to its intended moral purpose. When authority acts justly, it serves God's design. When it acts unjustly or contradicts God's commands, it remains an authority, but it does not become morally infallible. Submission in such cases involves conscience, discernment, and accountability rather than passive compliance.

Romans 13 must also be read in light of the broader witness of Scripture. Paul wrote these words under Roman rule, a regime capable of profound injustice and violence. His call to submission was not an endorsement of every action of the state, but a recognition that social order is preferable to chaos, and that Christians are to be known as people who seek peace, not upheaval. This call to peace, however, never nullifies God's repeated commands to love the vulnerable, protect the innocent, and resist injustice.

For Christians, obedience to governing authorities is therefore real but not ultimate. It is shaped by conscience, bounded by God's moral law, and informed by the character of Christ. Appeals to

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<sup>3</sup> All Scripture quotations are from the *English Standard Version* (ESV).

Romans 13 that ignore mercy, deny human dignity, or justify cruelty do not reflect the spirit of the passage. They reduce obedience to compliance and faithfulness to fear.

## The Sojourner, Hospitality, and Moral Failure

Throughout Scripture, God reveals a particular concern for those who live on the margins of society. Among these are the poor, the widow, the orphan, and repeatedly, the *sojourner*—the foreigner who lives among a people not his own. This concern is not peripheral to biblical ethics; it is woven into the law, the prophets, and the teachings of Jesus Himself.

In the Old Testament, Israel is commanded again and again to remember its own history as a people once vulnerable and displaced. “You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt” (Exod. 22:21). God’s law does not merely prohibit harm; it calls for active care. “When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall love him as yourself” (Lev. 19:33–34). Hospitality toward the foreigner is presented not as optional kindness, but as covenant faithfulness.

This moral priority is reinforced in Deuteronomy, where God is described as the one “who executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing” (Deut. 10:18). To fear God, then, is to reflect His character in how the vulnerable are treated. Neglect of the sojourner is not framed as a minor failure, but as a serious breach of justice.

The prophets sharpen this warning. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is often reduced to a single category of sexual sin, but Scripture itself offers a broader indictment. Ezekiel identifies their guilt as pride, excess, indifference to the poor, and failure to aid the needy (Ezek. 16:49–50). Their sin was not only what they did, but what they refused to do. They possessed abundance and security, yet closed themselves off from responsibility toward others.

This biblical pattern matters deeply for contemporary discussions of immigration. Scripture does not deny the importance of law, borders, or order. It does, however, judge nations and peoples by how they treat those who arrive in weakness rather than strength. Prosperity without hospitality, security without compassion, and law without mercy are repeatedly shown to invite divine judgment.

To acknowledge the sin of unlawful entry does not absolve societies of their own moral obligations. Scripture recognizes degrees of responsibility, mitigating circumstances, and the realities of desperation. Violence, starvation, persecution, and exploitation shape the decisions of many who cross borders without authorization.<sup>4</sup> When legal systems become so restrictive or

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), *Asylum in the United States*, Form I-589 and credible fear procedures.

convoluted that they effectively foreclose lawful entry for those in genuine need, the moral failure shifts from individual disobedience alone to collective hardness of heart.<sup>5</sup>

The Bible's concern for the sojourner does not erase complexity, but it does set boundaries. God's people are never permitted to use fear, pride, or excess to justify neglect. Hospitality is not naïveté; it is obedience. And indifference, especially when cloaked in righteousness, is treated in Scripture as a grave moral danger.

## The Final Measure: Matthew 25 and the Judgment of Nations

Jesus' teaching in Matthew 25:31–45 brings clarity to questions that resist easy resolution. In this passage, the Son of Man is portrayed not as a political ruler or legal theorist, but as Judge. All nations are gathered before Him, and they are separated not on the basis of power, prosperity, or legal precision, but according to how they treated the vulnerable.

Jesus describes the judgment plainly. Those welcomed into the kingdom are not praised for correct ideology or strict enforcement of law, but for acts of mercy: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting the imprisoned. Those condemned are not accused of overt cruelty, but of omission—of seeing need and turning away.

The category of “the stranger” is not incidental. It appears alongside hunger, thirst, sickness, and imprisonment as a condition that reveals the heart. In identifying Himself with “the least of these,” Jesus collapses the distance between religious faith and concrete action. How people respond to vulnerability becomes, in His teaching, a response to Him.

This passage does not abolish law, nor does it deny the legitimacy of nations or borders. What it does is establish a higher measure by which all human systems are judged. The question asked at the final judgment is not whether laws were enforced efficiently, but whether mercy was practiced faithfully. The defense “we were protecting ourselves” or “we were simply following policy” does not appear in Jesus' account.

What is striking is that both the righteous and the condemned are surprised. Neither group fully recognizes the weight of their actions at the time. This suggests that judgment is not based on self-awareness or intent alone, but on what love was actually extended—or withheld—when opportunity arose.

For Christians, Matthew 25 reframes the immigration debate entirely. It moves the discussion beyond fear, legality, and identity, and places it squarely within discipleship. The passage does not invite believers to abandon discernment, but it does remove the comfort of moral distance. The stranger is no longer an abstraction, a statistic, or a threat. He is someone with whom Christ has chosen to identify.

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<sup>5</sup> American Immigration Council, *Migrant Protection Protocols (“Remain in Mexico”)*, outlining access and due-process concerns.

In light of this teaching, Christians are called to examine not only personal attitudes, but collective postures. Nations may write laws, but believers answer to Christ. Obedience to earthly authority is real, yet it is never final. The final word belongs to the One who asks how we treated those who came to us in need.

Matthew 25 does not permit indifference. It does not allow fear to excuse neglect. And it does not grant righteousness to those who preserve order at the cost of compassion. It stands as both warning and invitation: a warning that faith without mercy is hollow, and an invitation to recognize Christ in the face of the stranger.

## Conclusion: Faithfulness Under Judgment

The question of how Christians should treat immigrants cannot be answered by slogans, fear, or selective readings of Scripture. It requires holding together truths that are often pulled apart: respect for law, reverence for authority, commitment to truth, and obedience to God's command to love the vulnerable. Scripture refuses to let any one of these eclipse the others.

Romans 13 reminds believers that order is a gift and authority is not meaningless. The teachings on the sojourner remind us that God's concern for the vulnerable is neither optional nor secondary. Matthew 25 brings these threads together and places them under the searching light of Christ's judgment. It is there that faith is measured not by intent alone, but by response—by whether mercy was extended or withheld when it was within reach.

This does not yield a simple policy prescription. It does, however, establish a moral posture. Christians are called to resist fear-driven narratives, to speak truthfully about human beings rather than abstract categories, and to examine how personal and collective decisions reflect the character of Christ. Obedience to law is real, but it is not ultimate. Compassion is commanded, but it is not careless. Faithfulness requires discernment shaped by Scripture and guided by love.

In the end, Christians do not answer first to public opinion, political movements, or national borders. They answer to Christ. The One who taught about authority also identified Himself with the hungry, the imprisoned, and the stranger. How His followers respond to those realities is not peripheral to discipleship—it is central.

As with all Christian discernment, dignity must remain prior to disagreement.