

be-coming-us

Sermon #2: Refugees, OT Perspective

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Text: James 1:27

Theme: Caring for the plight of displaced peoples abroad.

Intro: This message is designed to do three things. First, I want to introduce the plight of refugees in our world today. Second, I want to let God speak His heart on the issue. Third, I want us to imagine together what we can do as a church to provide a loving response. There are two helpful TED Talks that might help frame this message in a global context:

http://www.ted.com/talks/alexander_betts_our_refugee_system_is_failing_here_s_how_we_can_fix_it

http://www.ted.com/talks/melissa_fleming_let_s_help_refugees_thrive_not_just_survive

- I. **The State we're in** [The following website provides excellent graphics.]
 - A. Total displaced, 65.3 million; Refugees, 21.3 million; Stateless, 10 million; >50% are under 18. One in every 113 people on earth are displaced.
 - B. Host nations: Turkey 2.5 million; Pakistan, 1.6 million; Lebanon 1.1 million; Iran 0.979 million; Ethiopia 0.74 million. [The U.S. doesn't even make the top list.] 86% of refugees are in the developing world. No, we are not overwhelmed as a nation.
 - C. Relevant charts, graphs, and data: <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/576408cd7.pdf>
 - D. For photos, sign in to: http://media.unhcr.org/C.aspx?VP3=CMS3&VF=Home#_ga=1.11882932.1210595050.1469128458
- II. **The World God envisions**—Most of us are familiar with the famous statement in James 1:27, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” What we may not be as aware of is that God’s heart for widows and orphans, and particularly those displaced by war and political trauma, is not NT. If we go clear back to the founding documents of ancient Israel, we will see that God’s call to His people to welcome refugees has never changed. Notice how the plight of the widow and orphan is consistently connected with refugees in the Bible, Deut 10:18-19, The LORD your God “defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.” This principle is embedded in every level of government in ancient Israel:
 - A. **National Politics:** Going back to the first national “by-laws” of Israel, God demanded that she treat immigrants and exiles with compassion, even at the threat of death: Exodus 22:21-24 (ESV) ²¹“You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. ²²You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. ²³If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, ²⁴and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children

fatherless.” Nearly identical advice is given in Leviticus 19:33-34, just a few verses after “Love your neighbor as yourself” (v. 18).

1. Notice this follows on the heels of the 10 commandments. This was to be a national characteristic, not an isolated campaign for compassion.
 2. Notice also that the foundation of this command comes from the fact that Israel herself had been a displaced people in Egypt. Israel’s genesis was to mark her genetics.
 3. Is that not also true of America? We began as a nation of immigrants fleeing political persecution and searching for freedom. Our heritage must mark our nature as a nation if we expect to keep God’s hand of blessing. Jesus said, “To whom much is given, much will be required.” We cannot afford a spiritual isolationism. Nor can we trust secular government to adopt the heart of God for displaced peoples. This is the calling, the word, the responsibility of God’s people.
- B. **Religious systems** of compassion: The aliens, fatherless, and widows actually got shares of the tithes along with the Levites: Deuteronomy 14:28–29 (ESV) ²⁸“At the end of every three years you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in the same year and lay it up within your towns. ²⁹And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do.” (See also Deut 16:11, 14; 26:12-13)
1. The priests, because they were consecrated to the Lord, did not share in the allotment of land, but were therefore cared for by the community, providing them with food.
 2. Likewise, the aliens, fatherless, and widows, victims of displacement, were as sacred to the Lord. And though they had no land, they were sanctified by the sacred provision of food.
- C. **Social Prophets** predict destruction of those who oppress the poor: Jeremiah 49:11 (ESV) “Leave your fatherless children; I will keep them alive; and let your widows trust in me.” Malachi 3:5 (ESV) “Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts.”
- D. **Summary:**
1. The care for widows and orphans in James 1:27, the purest kind of religion, has its background in the political struggle of aliens and refugees. This ministry is as sacred to God as the priests in His temple!
 2. This issue is not one of private piety, but national priority—not the secular state, but the kingdom of God, inherited from Israel and embodied in the Church. This cannot be a tangential issue.

III. What must we do?

- A. Move from fear to faith.

1. Much of the rhetoric on immigration and refugees has as its background 9/11 rather than the Bible. We are more concerned with securing our borders than our eternity. The theology we just walked through is undeniably biblical. Will you (will we) operate out of national fear or international responsibility? That's our first decision: To be led by fear or faith.
 2. This will mean prioritizing our commitment to be God's people above national or personal interests. Even so, recognize that what made this nation great is its welcome of all people.
- B. Personalize the alien: What if this were you?:
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RBQ-loHfimQ> or
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9stzTcqCXU>
1. Our language on immigration and refugees is filled with "other" talk: They, them, Muslim, criminal, terrorist. God uses words like: creation, child, human. They are us! It's not just Israel that was displaced. So was Abraham (Gen 12:10), Isaac (Gen 26:1-3), Joseph (Gen 37:28), Moses (Exo 2:15; Heb 11:27); David (1 Sam 21:10); Elijah (1 Kings 17:7-9); Daniel (Daniel 1:2-4); Jesus (Matthew 2:13-14); Christians (Acts 8:1; James 1:10); Peter (Acts 12:17). They are us! 1 Peter 2:11 (NIV), "Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul."
 2. We also need to recognize that many who are doing the best work in this area will have different (or no) faith backgrounds than you. They may vote differently in the presidential election. Our priority must be platform, not background. If a pagan is accomplishing God's will, am I not obligated to support, partner, and learn from him/her? There are some local and international agencies that we will support and be supported by to address the human need.
 3. Here's what I know, we will never be fully human until we humanize the other. It is in giving dignity that we find our own. Whenever an alien is welcomed, two people are saved—the refugee and the rescuer.
- C. Leverage your influence—You can expect this church to communicate, validate, and promote both internally and externally this dire agenda that breaks the heart of God. As your pastor, I'm asking you to be the voice in the community and in your circles of influence to leverage people's gifts, positions, and resources to support the cause of the poor. Here are some practical ways to help.
- <http://embrace-refugees.org/>
1. You could host a refugee to show them around your city. Welcome them to a new culture.
 2. As a local church, we are going to lean into their expertise to guide our conversation and mobilize our resources and efforts to most effectively address the needs of the most vulnerable. Be prepared to join us in a compassionate expression to meet the physical, educational, and emotional needs of a people group living on the edge of existence.

- IV. **Take Away:** We are going to have a time of prayer. Our elders and local leaders are going to be [down front or in a room off the lobby] to meet with those who have experienced similar pain. If you are suffering, we want to listen to your story. We want to come alongside you, and we want to share Christ with you. You need to know, you are a priority to him today and in this place.
- A. This is a helpful handout for your congregation to debunk some common myths: <http://iafr.org/downloads/handouts/10myths/10%20Common%20Myths%20Concerning%20Refugees.pdf>
 - B. This essay is a helpful guide for church leaders wanting to take practical next steps: <http://iafr.org/downloads/handouts/justice-compassion-response/Justice%20and%20Compassion-Responding%20to%20the%20Refugee%20Crisis%20in%20Europe.pdf>