

Southern Swimmers

Psalm 146: 6-10 He is the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them-- he remains faithful forever. ⁷ He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets prisoners free, ⁸ the LORD gives sight to the blind, the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down, the LORD loves the righteous. ⁹ The LORD watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked. ¹⁰ The LORD reigns forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD.

Jeremiah 7: 3-7 This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. ⁴ Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!" ⁵ If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, ⁶ if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, ⁷ then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever.

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Sometimes people tell me that they like it when a sermon applies to their everyday life. Well, I hope that every Sunday you hear God's message for your life, even if the sermon isn't clear or direct. I fervently pray the Prayer for Illumination, asking for the Holy Spirit to make sure that we hear God's will, regardless of the clarity of the sermon! As it turns out, I was out of the office about half of the week, so this morning I'll need your help with the sermon.

Words have definitions and then they have connotations. When I was a small boy in George West, Texas, I heard people use the term, "*wet-backs*." You probably haven't heard this term used, so it not only has no definition, it also has no baggage, no connotation. Not knowing what a "wet-back" was, I asked my folks. "A *wet-back* is someone who swam across the Rio Grande River from Mexico to Texas. They did this because they didn't have the official papers that would allow them to walk across the bridge over the river." The connotation was, a *wet-back* is someone who really needs a job. But as I grew older, I heard people use *wet-back* as a term of ridicule, sarcasm, or derision – a very negative connotation. So, in searching for a neutral expression, instead of titling this sermon *wet-backs*, I've called it *southern swimmers*.

The Hebrew word is *ger*. In the King James Version it's translated as "stranger." In the 1600s you were most likely to live in a rural setting or a small village. You knew everybody. If someone was a stranger to you, it was because they were from somewhere outside of your world. So, the New Revised Standard Version translates *ger* as *alien*. The NIV in the pew racks uses "foreigner," the Common English Bible says *immigrant*, and sometimes you will find the word translated as *sojourner*. In our world today, the person who lives next door or five doors down the street may well be a stranger to you. So the terms alien, immigrant, or foreigner are more accurate translations of the old Hebrew word. So, what do the scriptures say about foreigners?

Do Not Oppress

NIV Leviticus 19:33 'When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them.

NIV Malachi 3:5 So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me," says the LORD Almighty.

In both a book of the law and a book of one of the prophets, we are warned not to mistreat a foreigner. Those who do are in a list that includes adulterers, people who lie under oath, and oppress

widows and orphans. This behavior toward foreigners is prohibited in more than the two verses we heard read.

Have Compassion For

NIV Deuteronomy 24:19 When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.

NIV Deuteronomy 26: 12 Then you and the Levites and the foreigners residing among you shall rejoice in all the good things the LORD your God has given to you and your household. When you have finished setting aside a tenth of all your produce in the third year, the year of the tithe, you shall give it to the Levite, the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied.

NIV Leviticus 25:35 "If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them as you would a foreigner and stranger, so they can continue to live among you.

Not only are we commanded not to oppress the immigrant, but we're to have compassion on them. Leave food in the field – just like the story of Ruth going to gather grain from the field of Boaz. The third verse we heard is quite odd. It doesn't say, "treat the foreigner as good as you do your fellow countryman." It assumes that you treat the foreigner well, and commands us to treat a fellow countryman just as well. Again, there are more verses about compassion for the immigrant.

Have Same Regulations

NIV Exodus 23:12 "Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest, and so that the slave born in your household and the foreigner living among you may be refreshed.

Leviticus 24:22 You are to have the same law for the foreigner and the native-born. I am the LORD your God."

NIV Ezekiel 47:22-23 You are to allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the foreigners residing among you and who have children. You are to consider them as native-born Israelites; along with you they are to be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. In whatever tribe a foreigner resides, there you are to give them their inheritance," declares the Sovereign LORD.

NIV Numbers 15:15 The community is to have the same rules for you and for the foreigner residing among you; this is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. You and the foreigner shall be the same before the LORD:

NIV Deuteronomy 27:19 "Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow." Then all the people shall say, "Amen!"

Yet again, there are many more passages that speak to this same theme. The texts are so clear: everyone is subject to the very same laws. You are not to have different rules for citizens and foreigners. In fact, Ezekiel the prophet said that when the land was divided up, the foreigner was to get the same inheritance as anyone else. The scriptures say that all people are the same before God. Perhaps we should all recite the last text that was read. "Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow." Then all the people shall say, "Amen!"

Love and Rejoice with Them

NIV Leviticus 19:34 The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God

Deuteronomy 26:11 NIV¹¹ Then you and the Levites and the foreigners residing among you shall rejoice in all the good things the LORD your God has given to you and your household.

Instead of seeing all of this as a burden, we're told to love the immigrant as ourselves and rejoice with them in all of God's blessings. Rejoicing with the immigrant is **not** defined as dropping into La Carreta Mexican Restaurant to have the Speedy Gonzales lunch special with a Margarita!

We've looked at several verses. I'm not suggesting that the more a command is listed, the more important it is. Instead, I suspect that we find commands about how to treat aliens so often because we are so resistant to obeying them. This isn't something that seems to come naturally to us. Maybe that's because we're very protective about what belongs to us. It's our country, our town, our neighborhood. Except, it isn't. We are lying to ourselves and believing the lie. In **Leviticus 25:23**, **"The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers."** It all belongs to God. All of us, whether our ancestors came over on the Mayflower or we're a "southern swimmer," all of us are squatters on God's land.

But all of these texts are from the Old Testament! Aren't these "just" Old Testament rules? It would be very convenient to forget that Jesus said that the second greatest commandment was to love our neighbor like ourselves. And then Jesus told a story about who is a neighbor, a story about a Jew and a Samaritan, people from different countries who disliked each other, but who were in the same place on God's earth.

There are some interesting parallels. The Hebrews had been slaves in Egypt. We had been in economic bondage to landowners, in religious bondage to the state religion, or in physical bondage as we arrived from Africa. The Hebrews were not invited into Canaan and neither were we invited to the New World. And we, like those ancient Hebrews, forget that we were once in bondage and that we were once aliens in our land.

Not everything that we're told to do is easy or something that we want to do. But we should be VERY cautious that we don't slip into trying to find ways to weasel out of the crystal clear and often repeated will of God. Not only does this call for many of us to change our mind about what is right, it also calls for us to change what we do. And that means we may find ourselves differing in thought and action from family and friends. We will need moral courage to keep from waffling. Mark Twain said, "It is curious that physical courage should be so common in the world and moral courage so rare."

St. Louis is a city with a flavor all its own. Part of the unique character of the city is the steadfast affection and support for the St. Louis Cardinals. In front of the baseball stadium is a statue of Stan Musial, "Stan-the-man." Stan Musial had moral courage. When the first African-American baseball players came into the league and the Cardinals clubhouse, they were shunned and ignored by the white players. Stan knew that wasn't the kingdom of God, on earth like it is in heaven. So he walked over to where the Black players were playing cards in the corner of the clubhouse –and he said, "Deal me in."

It's past time for us to say, "Deal me in." Each one of us needs to look at immigration issues with fresh eyes and deal ourselves in. Think about all the ways you can influence policies that affect immigrants and deal yourself in. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,
Now is not the time to say "But this" or "But that."
Now is the time to say, "Yes, Lord. Deal me in."

Do Not Oppress

Exodus 22:21 Exodus 23:9
 Leviticus 19:33 Deuteronomy 23:7
 Deuteronomy 24:14 Deuteronomy 24:17
 Jeremiah 7:6-7 Jeremiah 22:3
 Ezekiel 22:7 Ezekiel 22:29
 Zechariah 7:10 Malachi 3:5

Have Compassion For

Leviticus 19:10 Leviticus 19:34
 Leviticus 23:22 Leviticus 25:35
 Deuteronomy 10:17-19 Deuteronomy 14:29
 Deuteronomy 24:19-21 Psalm 146:9
 Deuteronomy 26:11-13 Isaiah 56:3

Have Same Regulations

Genesis 17:12 Genesis 17:27 Exodus 12:19
 Exodus 12:48 Exodus 12:49 Exodus 20:10
 Exodus 23:12 Leviticus 16:29 Leviticus 17:10
 Leviticus 17:12-13 Leviticus 17:15 Leviticus 18:26
 Leviticus 24:22 Numbers 9:14 Numbers 15:14-16
 Numbers 15:29-30 Numbers 19:10 Numbers 35:15
 Deuteronomy 1:16 Deuteronomy 5:14 Deuteronomy 24:14
 Deuteronomy 24:17 Deuteronomy 31:12 Deuteronomy 27:19
 Joshua 20:9 Ezekiel 22:29 Ezekiel 14:7
 Ezekiel 37:22-23

Love and Rejoice with Them

Leviticus 19:34 Deuteronomy 16:11
 Deuteronomy 16:14 Deuteronomy 26:11