

OVER THE FENCE AND UNDER THE RADAR

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The Poor Next Door- A Christian Look at Illegal Immigrants in the US

Bible references: New American Standard Bible Update

Hours before sunrise, Teresa starts the day on her knees. Like millions of other moms in America, she asks God to please watch over her family, keep her car running, and give her strength for the day. She counts her blessings while she feeds the family; then it's off to the school bus for the kids and several stops in the carpool for her.

Unlike millions of other moms, she drives about five miles an hour under the speed limit and carefully obeys the traffic laws to avoid attracting the attention of law enforcement officers. She'll spend the next nine or ten hours on her knees again, this time cleaning tubs and toilets. All but invisible to the hotel guests, she smiles and nods to the ones who do acknowledge her existence, pretending to understand the English words that fly past her in a blur. Always on the lookout, she watches from the corner of her eye for unexpected visitors: the INS, known to her as *Immigración*.

An hour before that same sunrise, Pat starts the day on her knees. A business owner for many years, she's part mom, part employer, and witness to the Lord to sixty or so people at any given time. People love to work for her, in part because she's always provided health insurance for them and their families. In the last few years, though, the cost of providing this benefit has risen so dramatically that she is wondering how she can keep the business going and insure her people as well. Every year, she laboriously applies with a different insurance company, wondering how long these rates can continue to skyrocket. *Lord*, she says, *what would you have me do? How can I afford to keep this up?*

Illegal immigration: is it sharing the wealth, or spreading the hardship? Teresa's life in Mexico was one of abject poverty. Every toilet she cleans in the US sends money home to support her aging parents. Every tub she scours brightens the future for her children. But indigent health care swamps our nation's emergency rooms, and Pat pays the cost in skyrocketing health care premiums. Millions of legal citizens are uninsured due to inconceivably high prices, and are therefore denied health care. Similar burdens are placed on school systems and law enforcement agencies. A dilemma of Biblical proportions requires Biblical perspective as it unfolds before us in the United States. How do we as Christians determine what our attitude is to be?

Why Do They Come, and How Do They Get Here?

The subject of illegal immigration, specifically from Mexico, sizzles like fajitas on a cast iron skillet. Newspapers, magazines, web pages, blogs, and the airwaves are filled with statistics and opinions about how to stem the tide of aliens who cross our borders everyday in search of a better life. Unscrupulous smugglers prey upon desperate families who pay thousands to be escorted through the desert, while others drown trying to swim

the All-American Canal.¹ In 2003, in one of many trucks seized by immigration officials, nineteen people died out of the seventy who were stuffed in an airless tractor-trailer in Texas, in which the temperature reached 173°. A five-year-old boy's last breath drew in the overpowering stench of vomit amid a stack of bodies four feet high.²

So why do they risk it? What could possibly be worth the trip? Their impetus is an escape from poverty. Working in the United States, even in menial jobs, provides an income and standard of living that far outweighs what they left behind in Mexico. According to statistics compiled from two philanthropic organizations (Mexico Child Link and The World Bank),³ as well as The New York Times Almanac 2004 and other internet databases, the minimum wage as of July 2002 was forty pesos a day, or about \$4.00 US. There is little or no welfare state, and no unemployment distribution. The bottom 40% of the population share only 11% of the wealth and are considered to be living below the Mexican poverty line. In 2002, half the population was living in poverty, and between four and nine percent live still live on less than a dollar a day, a level close to that found in some of the world's poorest countries.⁴ Trying to imagine life under those circumstances begins to explain why they risk heatstroke, lightning, drowning, and suffocation to reach a country just next door that provides a glimmer of hope for their family's future.

The Impact on the US

There is no shortage of opinions or statistics regarding the financial impact of illegal immigration in the United States. Although many contradict each other and economists are divided on the real impact, many Americans are angry at what they perceive to be non-English speaking freeloaders invading the United States. A group of Latinos congregating in the supermarket parking lot can evoke a knee-jerk reaction of fear or anger based on vague suppositions that are reminiscent of every immigration movement our country has ever experienced. However, we as Christians are bound to the standard of seeking wisdom from God's Word in every aspect of our lives.

Scripture: Does it raise more questions than answers?

There are no easy answers to the questions raised by the illegal immigration debate, even among evangelical Christians. The Old Testament reveals a recurring theme in how God's people were to relate to strangers in their land.

EX 22:21 " You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Ps 146:9 The LORD watches over the alien.

¹ New York Times, "Immigrant Death Rate Rises Sharply in Barren Areas", by Evelyn Nieves, 8/06/02.

² © 2005 Associate Press, downloaded from NewsMax.com Wires 3/24/05.

Also CNN.com transcripts, live from 5/14/03, "Eighteen Suspected Illegal Immigrants Dead."

³ 2006 The World Bank Group, all rights reserved. Poverty in Mexico Fact Sheet.

⁴ <http://www.mexico-child-link.org/mexico-factfile-statistics.htm>

While the Bible clearly states that we are not to oppress the alien in our land, the apostle Paul states that the law is to be obeyed in no uncertain terms.

RO 13:1 Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.

RO 13:2 Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.

Wisdom comes in resisting the temptation to use one or more Scriptures to support the position with which we feel the most comfortable. Rather, prayerful consideration of this difficult issue, along with a heartfelt desire to follow the Lord's leading, should guide the actions of every believer in our day-to-day opportunities to share the love of God.

So What Is Our Perspective to Be?

No journey is more personal than that of our individual walk with the Lord. As I struggle with this issue in prayer, the same verse comes to me again and again. Though I consider my income to be meager, Jesus clearly wants me to help care for my fellow man.

MT 25:40 “The King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.’

On a daily basis, this means I must care for the poor next door, and trust God to fulfill His promises. He is more than able to provide for my financial needs, even my family's own self-employed, sky-high health insurance premiums.

MT 6:31 “Do not worry then, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear for clothing?’

MT 6:32 “For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.

MT 6:33 “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

MT 6:34 “So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”

The simple question is, “Will I have enough?” The hard questions are, “Do I trust God to provide for me and my family? Enough to love the poor next door? Do I treat every person with the respect that Jesus showed to the blind, the lame, and the sinner? Do I love my neighbor as Christ loved and forgave those who persecuted, and ultimately crucified, Him?”

When today's only answer is a Kingdom perspective.

Long after sunset, Teresa is just another American mom, doing dishes and folding laundry. By now her knees are too sore for prayer, so she lies in bed and briefly gives thanks to God before blessedly drifting off. *Gracias, mi Señor.* Today was a good day. On the other side of town, Pat deposits the day's receipts, and she also thanks God. Just for today, the checkbook balance is written in black ink, a positive number in an uncertain world. All that lies between her and peaceful slumber is a pile of clean clothes to be folded and a sink full of dirty dishes. We share much more than faith in God; but when faith in God is what we share, can this faith not move mountains?

4:19 And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

SIDEBAR: The Amen is the same: Mountain View Church and Iglesia Roca de Refugio, Glenwood Springs, Colorado.

Early on a cold and sunny morning in the Colorado Rockies, bundled families carry steaming covered dishes to the front door of Mountain View Church. As they kick the snow off their boots, warm handshakes and hugs open the door for warm sweet rolls and tortillas. Two cultures, two congregations, are bringing their best for the celebration. Rather than their usual back-to-back Sunday services, the host church and their mission outreach gather this morning for their first-ever blended service.

**i Dios esta bueno, todo el tiempo!
God is good, all the time!**

Pastors Dave Pearson and Juan Lopez lead the worship of this same Jesus, using the same Bible. Under one roof, for this one morning at least, they are all sinners saved by grace and a part of la familia de Dios, or the family of God.

In 2003, Mountain View Church sought God's wisdom in regard to church planting. A demographic study revealed that their local region was home to approximately 11,000 Latinos, who were being served by three small Protestant churches. Calling their congregation to prayer resulted in a decision to minister to their neighbors. Through the General Baptist Convention they called Pastor Juan. They provided him with a salary, office space, and Sunday afternoon use of the sanctuary. Pastor Dave's summation? "Legal or illegal, they're here, and they're people with needs. What can we do for them?"