

The Refugee Question: Answered by Christian Mercy or the Sword of the State?

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There's been an unfortunate mix-up. It's happened because a lot of people, non-Christians as well as (very unfortunately) Christians, have not properly applied certain Scriptures that apply to two very different realms. In some of these Scriptures, Jesus Christ gives commands to His followers. Other Scriptures express God's expectations for civil government. So, we have the followers of Jesus, and we have civil government. You might think it would be easy to keep these two distinct. But that's not what's happened. They keep getting confused.

This confusion has come into the spotlight recently because of the refugee question. This question might be expressed, Should nations freely accept refugees even when some among them might be criminals, subversives, terrorists, and threaten national security and safety because turning them away—or even delaying their entry while they are vetted—would be contrary to Christian principles? This question is kind of long, but from this question, you can begin to see the problem. It's about a matter of governmental policy—how to deal with refugees—but it's based on Christian principles that Jesus gave to His followers. Confusion.

Similar questions have been around for a long time. Should governments show Christian charity and mercy in granting amnesty to illegal aliens? Should judges apply Christ's teachings about forgiveness when convicting and sentencing lawbreakers? Again, these are questions of governmental or judicial policy, but they stem from teachings that Christ gave His disciples. The Scriptures most often cited are these: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Matthew 19:19). "Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). "If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him a drink" (Romans 12:20). "Don't judge, and you won't be judged. Don't condemn, and you won't be condemned. Set free, and you will be set free" (Luke 6:37). "Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father, who is in heaven, may also forgive you your transgressions" (Mark 11:25).

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Two Realms

The confusion that brings rise to these questions would never occur if everyone understood that God works in two realms or kingdoms. Even though I've already addressed this truth from a somewhat different perspective in "Sorting Out the Two Kingdoms" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/twokingdoms.htm>), I want to address it here in relation to these questions concerning refugees and criminal justice.

In His prayer to the Father, Jesus said His followers were in the world but not of it (John 17:11 and 14). Jesus' followers are representatives of the kingdom of God, ambassadors of the Gospel to this world (2 Corinthians 5:20). Just like ambassadors, they are in the place they are sent to, but they are not of it. So, one realm is the kingdom of God. It is not of this world, but Jesus' followers are its representatives in this world. The other realm, the kingdom of the world, is administered by the civil authorities, the governments of this world. God created both realms, but He has entirely different purposes for each one.

Jesus gave His followers, as representatives of the kingdom of God, the commission to bring the Gospel to the world: "He said to them, 'Go into all the world, and preach the Good News to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who disbelieves will be condemned'" (Mark 16:15-16), "Therefore go, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I commanded you. Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen" (Matthew 28:19-20). He also told us to love one another, forgive one another, love our neighbors, and love our enemies. But remember, these are orders Jesus gave to His followers who are ambassadors from the kingdom of God to the kingdom of the world. Jesus did not give these orders to the governments of the world. Yes, when someone from the world is born again and believes the Gospel, God transfers his or her citizenship from the kingdom of the world to the kingdom of God (Philippians 3:20; Ephesians 2:19). The Holy Spirit then leads that person to follow Jesus' commands. God has different intentions for the governments of the world, however.

Jesus taught his disciples, "You know that the rulers of the nations lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you, but whoever desires to become great

among you shall be your servant. Whoever desires to be first among you shall be your bondservant" (Matthew 20:25-27). Notice the distinction between the two kingdoms that Jesus made: the rulers of the nations lord it over and exercise authority over their people. Christians, on the other hand, are to take the role of servants. Elsewhere, Jesus told His followers not to seek honor and prestige because "all of you are brothers" (Matthew 23:8). Filling the role of a ruler who lords it over others and exercises authority is contrary to filling the role of a servant. Yet, as at odds as it might be to our twenty-first-century ideas of egalitarianism, we not only need Christian servants to preach the Gospel and do charitable works in this age, we also need rulers who lord it over others. We need rulers to keep law and order in a world of carnally minded people.

The Duties of Worldly Rulers

In Romans 13, the apostle Paul explains the function of the governments of this world. In verse 1, he explains that all authority is from God, including worldly government. In verses 3-4, Paul specifically states the purposes for civil government: "For rulers are not a terror to the good work, but to the evil. Do you desire to have no fear of the authority? Do that which is good, and you will have praise from the same, for he is a servant of God to you for good. But if you do that which is evil, be afraid, for he doesn't bear the sword in vain; for he is a servant of God, an avenger for wrath to him who does evil."

Paul wrote these words during the reign of the Roman Emperor Nero. Nero was a tyrant who freely executed anyone he imagined opposed him or was no longer convenient for him to have around. After Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, Nero persecuted Christians, infamously using some Christians as human torches. How could Paul say to obey this man? Paul does not name Nero, but Paul points out that the authority rulers exercise is from God. Jesus implied the same thing when He said to Pontius Pilate, "You would have no power at all against me, unless it were given to you from above" (John 19:11a).

Are we to be in subjection to rulers even when they are evil? Yes, although this does not mean to assist them in doing evil (see the quote below from Acts 5:29). As is so often the case, context helps to explain. Immediately before Paul begins writing about rulers in Romans 13:1, he says, "Repay no one evil for evil. Respect what is honorable in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as it is up to you, be at peace with all men. Don't seek revenge yourselves, beloved, but give place to God's wrath. For it is written, 'Vengeance

belongs to me; I will repay, says the Lord.' Therefore 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in doing so, you will heap coals of fire on his head.' Don't be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:17-21). These are the very same commands that Jesus gave us. If you have an evil ruler, be good. The exception is when the ruler tells us to disobey God. When Jewish leaders told the apostles to stop preaching in the name of Jesus, "Peter and the apostles answered, 'We must obey God rather than men'" (Acts 5:29). Peter also adds something to our understanding of this subject when he writes, "For what glory is it if, when you sin, you patiently endure beating? But if, when you do well, you patiently endure suffering, this is commendable with God" (1 Peter 2:20). Christians should have a reputation for abiding by the law of the land in which they live.

So, God gives worldly rulers their authority, and they have that authority to fulfill the role of being a terror to doers of evil. If they become tyrants and run a jackbooted police state, we Christians should respond with an abundance of good works. Instead of tearing leaders to shreds on social media, the Bible tells us to pray for them: "I exhort therefore, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and givings of thanks, be made for all men: for kings and all who are in high places; that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and reverence" (1 Timothy 2:1-2).

If they still persecute us, we are not to fear; we are to remember that it is happening within the will of God. Bear in mind, too, that rulers are "a servant of God to you for good." They are to benefit their law-abiding citizens, and they are to be avengers to those law-abiding citizens by bearing the sword (punishing evil-doers), which, in turn, also causes evil-doers to fear them. In other words, the rulers are to avenge the victims of the evil doers on behalf of God (whether the rulers understand their role in God's plan or not). They are to take out wrath on them.

To put it plainly, the rulers of this world do not have a commission from God to love their enemies and to forgive transgressors. They are fierce beasts, as the Bible often depicts them in prophecy. If they behaved as Christ instructed His followers and mercifully forgave criminals and let them go, they would be violating their God-given responsibilities and the trust their people put in them to protect them.

Now, there may be additional actions authorities can take to lower crime and reduce recidivism and, thus, protect residents. These must

not, however, take the place of the just punishment and removal from society of dangerous criminals. I know of no place in the Bible that charges civil authorities with rehabilitating criminals. Their commission is to protect their law-abiding citizens and punish the law-breakers.

Refugees and Undocumented Aliens

What about the refugee and illegal alien question? An obvious implication of Romans 13 is that God expects national rulers to look after the interests of their own people. If the population of a nation, such as the United States, has compassion on refugees fleeing persecution and aliens fleeing poverty and wants to let them into the country, the leaders could carry this out after certain considerations, such as the safety of their citizens, the possible criminality of those coming in, the impact on the nation's economy, and whether the people will successfully assimilate into the laws and culture of the country. Even when its citizens might want to admit refugees or immigrants, the government still has the primary responsibility to protect its citizens by, for example, weeding out evil doers among the refugees. "But that's not Christian," you say. Don't confuse the Bible's commands for Christians with the responsibilities for rulers. The Bible says that rulers are to be terrors for those who do evil. Rulers are not to let crime go unpunished or enact policies that endanger citizens.

To protest delaying or even refusing immigration as unchristian shows a lack of understanding of the responsibilities the Bible places on rulers. Individual Christians and Christian organizations have a responsibility to treat people with love. Nations do not. The ways nations might respond to refugees range from vetting them before admitting them into the country to refusing their entry altogether if the government sees them as too big a threat.

Mixing the Two Kingdoms Doesn't Work

How should a ruler behave when he or she is a Christian? How can he defend his country against an enemy intent on conquering his nation while loving and feeding that enemy? How can a judge be an avenger and a terror while forgiving those brought before him? I have no question in my mind whatsoever that when a Christian tries to become directly involved in the leadership, the judicial system, or the military of the kingdoms of this world, he or she will quickly fall into a quagmire from which it will be impossible to come out clean. Questions will immediately arise that will cause the person to have to choose either to violate Christ's royal law of love that He has given Christians

or to fall short of his or her responsibility to act in the best interests of the citizens and government of the country. When we expect rulers to act as Christians, we cause confusion that hinders decisive action.

You might also like to read: "Should Christians Seek to Be Magistrates?" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/christianmagistrate.htm>)

Although the two realms (Christianity and civil government) are separate, western governments, and governments in other parts of the world that have descended from them, tend to be what I might call "informed by Christianity." That is, the fact that western nations have for centuries been populated largely by professing Christians has had an effect upon them. Governments tend to reflect the cultural standards of their people. When populations in western nations see videos of people being beheaded in the Middle East or hear about Chinese companies adding toxic ingredients to baby foods to increase their profit, they become outraged because, whether or not they are professing Christians, their moral standards have been formed by Christianity. The leaders of these countries come from these same cultural standards. But that doesn't relieve them of their responsibility to protect and avenge their citizens and punish evil doers.

Because of the sinful nature of man, when people—even well-intentioned ones—call for governments and their leaders to act according to Christ's laws of love, they are really calling for the good citizens to be unjustly punished by crime, the criminals to be undeservedly rewarded and encouraged in their crimes, and the national security to be jeopardized by both external and internal threats. God's grace and Christ's law of love are for regenerate believers, not for the general populace and its civil government.

In summary, then, the Bible tells us that God acts in two realms or kingdoms. In the kingdom of this world, the rulers and governments of nations are to proceed in the best interests of their citizens, protect them, avenge them when they are wronged, and be a terror to wrong doers by punishing them. Christians act in the realm of the kingdom of God. We are to love one another, love our neighbors, love even our enemies, and be forgiving and merciful. Since this is so, Christians should be careful not to get a reputation for having such worldly traits as being war hawks, demanding justice, and being unloving toward refugees and immigrants.

Everyone suffers when the kingdoms are confused. Leaders make weak laws and policies. Judges hand down light sentences for serious

crimes. Governments become neither a terror to wrong doers, nor an avenger of the victims, nor a protector of potential future victims. And Christians cease being a beacon to the world of the love and forgiveness we can receive by trusting in Jesus Christ as our Savior.