What the Bible's Romans 13 says about asylum – and what Jeff Sessions omitted

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The US attorney general, Jeff Sessions, kicked up a storm when he invoked a line from the Bible to defend the Trump administration's policy of separating thousands of parents and children during immigration investigations.

Sessions quoted a line written by the apostle Paul to a small community of Christians living in Rome around 55AD to defend the Department of Justice's approach. He said:

I would cite you to the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13, to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained them for the purpose of order.

Sessions used the Bible because one of the most vocal opponents of the crackdown on asylum cases has been the Catholic Church. It's no surprise that Sessions appealed to Romans chapter 13 verse 1 in response: not only did he hope to undermine Catholic authority by using the Bible against them, he cited a statement so broad that one might use it to defend anything a government does, good or bad.

The problem for Sessions is that the historical situation in which Paul wrote his letter to the Romans does far more to undermine his policy than to support it.

The origins of Paul's letter

The actual date and origin of the letter is not totally certain, but scholars think it was sent to the Christian community in Rome around 55AD. This was a few years after the Roman Emperor Claudius exiled Rome's Jewish community in 49AD. That Jewish community included many people who had become Christians and were connected to other Christians in Rome. Paul himself was a Jew who had become a Christian. After his conversion he began travelling around the Mediterranean, starting Christian communities, and instructing them how to live.

Shortly before Paul wrote his letter to the Christians in Rome, many of the Jewish people who had been forced to leave Rome began to return, the city now safe for them again after the death of Claudius. Paul wrote the letter in part because he was worried that things would go badly when these Jewish Christians tried to integrate back in with the non-Jewish Christians in Rome. Paul feared their earlier exile by the emperor would keep them from being welcomed back.

It is for this reason that Paul spends so much time in his letter discussing the way Jews and non-Jews should live with one another (see, for example, chapters 2–4, 9–11 and 14). Paul argues that the Romans should openly welcome those Jewish members who had been forcibly removed some time ago; the church should return them to their places within the community and honour them. Perhaps these Jewish people were not completely unknown to the Christians left in Rome, but they were returning after a long absence. They were, for all intents and purposes, immigrants entering a host community that wasn't sure it could trust them and probably didn't want them around.

Paul is vehement about one thing that those who remained in Rome should not do: conclude they

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were any better or different than these Jewish migrants. That is why Paul famously says that "all" – Romans and Jews – "have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Paul marvels that anyone would "pass judgement on your brother or sister" (14.10), for "each of us will be accountable to God" (14.12).

Love a foreigner

In the 21st century American context, Paul's statements serve to emphasise the similarities between immigrants and non-immigrants, not any differences between them.

Sessions argued that the current approach "protects the lawful". He also suggested the policy was an extension of the revocation of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy, which had suspended immigration enforcement against undocumented migrants brought to the US as children. Defending the end of DACA in September 2017, Sessions said a failure to enforce immigration laws strictly had "put our nation at risk of crime, violence and even terrorism".

This particular point makes Romans an even worse defence of the policy Sessions is pursuing. Just before the line Sessions recently quoted from Romans 13, Paul wrote that:

> *If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.*

And just a few lines after requiring respect for the government, Paul sums up his point by encouraging the audience to: "Love your neighbour as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

Paul's familiar language about loving one's neighbour – like Jesus of Nazareth before him – alludes to Leviticus 19, verse 18. While few people today know the content of Leviticus 19, Christian and Jewish audiences in the first century AD would have known it. That texts also commands people to create a system of economic care for migrants from potentially dangerous foreign countries at their own financial expense:

> *When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field … Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner.*

The command to love a foreigner and to let them freely gather food that belongs to you puts us a long, long way from Sessions' arguments about obeying governments to ensure safety for Americans.

The logic of Paul's words might have sounded helpful to Sessions in isolation, but the letter they come from undermines nearly everything Sessions wants them to support.

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