

Ep #17: Walking Both Sides of the Border with Michael DeBruhl



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Hosts

Tracie L. Morgan & Ashley Glimasinski

[Hope In Action: Navigating Immigration with Faith and Care](#)

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Tracie: Governments do have a legitimate responsibility to know who's entering the United States, or any country. Security matters. Laws matter. But none of that answers the Christian question of how we see and treat the people involved. You can enforce a law without hating the person subject to it. You can advocate for immigrants without believing every government officer is the enemy. And you can believe that we need border security and still ask whether a particular policy is humane or effective.

Ashley: Which takes us right back to Zechariah: administer justice, show mercy, show compassion, not one instead of the other. Instead of deciding which categories of people deserve our compassion, we practice becoming the neighbor. We care for our neighbors because it really can be that simple.

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Tracie: Hi, I'm Tracie.

Ashley: And I'm Ashley.

Welcome to Hope In Action, where we offer clear insights, practical tools, and inspiring stories to navigate immigration with confidence, compassion, and faith.

Each week, we break down the law, share real-world examples, and help you speak up, live out your values, and make a difference in your community.

Whether you're looking to understand immigration through a faith-driven lens, have courageous conversations with those who matter to you, or take small steps toward justice, you're in the right place. Let's dive in.

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Ashley: Welcome back to Hope in Action. I'm Ashley.

Tracie: And I'm Tracie.

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Ashley: So Tracie, when somebody says "the border," what do you picture?

Tracie: Honestly, there's a great local Mexican restaurant down the street called The Border. But what I think about the actual border is probably what most people actually picture, right? The wall, barbed wire, vehicles full of Border Patrol officers with their big muscles and big guns. I think about people crossing the desert, maybe with empty jugs of water. And I think, too, about the people we see on the news, people who are lined up at the border waiting to be processed.

Ashley: I concur with all of that. That's kind of the image I had of the border before I went, and some of that still lingers even now. And I think that's interesting because most of us have a really clear picture in our minds even though we've never actually worked there or even been there.

Tracie: Exactly. And man, do we have some strong opinions. We hear things like "secure the border," "close the border," "open the border," "we have a border crisis," or "there's a border invasion." But I don't know how often we actually stop and ask what happens at the border, or even what "secure the border" might even actually mean.

Ashley: Yeah, and then there are people in those images, too, just like you mentioned. There's the Border Patrol agents, but there's also the migrants. There are families, and there are officers. There are people living in border communities. And depending on the news source you're watching or the political conversation you're having, usually one group becomes the hero and another becomes the villain.

Tracie: Yes, so true. And I think Christians have to be really careful about that, about that dichotomy, because one of the most basic things scripture teaches us about human beings goes all the way back in Genesis: that people are created in the image of God. We've talked about that before in this season and past seasons, and I think that means that the immigrant at the border bears the image of God. But

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here's the part that I think sometimes we forget in our immigration advocacy: the Border Patrol agents standing across the barbed wire from them, they also bear the image of God.

Ashley: That is so true. And today's guest has actually been both the person enforcing our immigration laws and later the person welcoming and caring for migrants after they arrived.

Tracie: Which is why I've been so looking forward to this conversation, because Michael DeBruhl spent 26 years with U.S. Customs and Border Protection with Border Patrol. And after he retired, he eventually found himself serving migrants through Sacred Heart shelter in El Paso. And I don't want to tell his story for him because I want us to hear how he understands his journey. But I do want to help us frame the conversation with a passage I've been thinking about, and that's Zechariah 7:9-10, which says, "Administer true justice. Show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor."

Ashley: And as we've talked about on this season, justice and mercy, those are so important in our conversations, in our perspectives as we view immigration in our country. And maybe that's the question underneath today's conversation, because what does it look like when you're actually the person responsible for enforcing the law? Can you believe borders matter and still welcome the stranger? Can you enforce laws and still show mercy? And what happens when you've spent enough time with the people on both sides of that encounter that neither one can remain a political caricature anymore? And fortunately, today, we don't have to guess.

Tracie: Michael DeBruhl spent 26 years with the United States Customs and Border Protection agency, eventually serving in senior leadership positions within that organization. After retiring, he returned to serving his El Paso community and

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eventually became director of the migrant shelter at Sacred Heart Church. So he has seen the border from a perspective very few of us ever will.

Ashley: And I met Michael when I first went to the border in 2022 on a border encounter with Abara, which is an organization in El Paso, Texas, that does border encounters on both the El Paso and Juárez side of the border. And Michael spoke to our group about the history of the border and shared his own story. And at the time, the border was experiencing a record-breaking number of migrant encounters, and also policies like Title 42 and Remain in Mexico that returned most migrants back to Mexico. So let's just say our group didn't have a high opinion of Border Patrol at the time. But meeting Michael and hearing his story gave me a different perspective, and I'm so glad that we can hear from him today. Michael, welcome to Hope in Action.

Michael: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

Tracie: Wonderful. We're so grateful that you're here. And Michael, if it's okay, let's just start at the beginning. You grew up in El Paso, so the border was part of your life long before it became your career. Why did you decide to become a Border Patrol agent?

Michael: It's kind of funny because when I was growing up, my father worked along the border at the ports of entry here in El Paso, Texas. And I, in my rebellious youth, I wanted to do anything besides being an immigration agent or officer. And so I grew up, I went to the Navy. I came back after my stint in the Navy. And my father and I used to have a discussion that went kind of like this. He'd say, "You need a job." And I said, "Father, I have a job. I'm doing great. I'm a disc jockey. So obviously, I'm set." He's like, "Well, no, maybe insurance would be great if you had a job with insurance or something like that."

But anyway, it's funny. So this was the conversation that we had. And one day we were at a mall here, and they were having a gigantic job fair, I remember. And he

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pointed me towards a table and said, "Sign up there." And it happened to be the Border Patrol table. And so over the period of a year, I went to different interviews, and I went, got medical screening, language testing, et cetera. And eventually, I was sent a large envelope and told to report to South Texas, where I worked as a field agent for about a decade.

Ashley: Wow, that's amazing, Michael. I'm so curious how your story went from the rebellious youth to the upstanding Border Patrol agent. But I'm curious also, as you were in that work, who did you see being drawn to the table with you in that time or just over time as you worked as a Border Patrol officer? Because I think people may have a stereotype about who becomes a Border Patrol agent. What kind of backgrounds did the people you worked with have?

Michael: That's also interesting because I think way back now, my father was actually in the Border Patrol for about five years in the '50s. He was a tall man, very light-complected. He looked Anglo. And there were, I mean, there were very, very, very few Border Patrol agents who were Hispanic. But now, I think there's over 50% now. I think 50.7% that are Hispanic.

Along the border, there are a lot of Hispanics that know about the Border Patrol. They grow up with the Border Patrol. So a lot of those people are drawn to the Border Patrol, and also because of the language requirements. You have to know Spanish. I also saw a lot of people that worked outdoors, people who worked on ranches, et cetera. But these were people who were drawn to law enforcement work. A lot of them had put in for jobs in the city, county, federal jobs, et cetera. And the Border Patrol was the one that happened to pick them up, and they began working in the Border Patrol. Now, some were not suited for it and went on to other jobs, but it was really kind of across the strata, and a lot of Hispanics.

Tracie: Yeah, I can definitely understand the need for the language. But I'm also thinking there are a lot more languages we're seeing at the southern border these

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days, too. And just thinking about your day-to-day life, there's probably not a great answer for this because I can't imagine what a normal day is in the life of a CBP officer. But as best you can, can you tell our listeners what a day at the border actually looks like for someone in your former position?

Michael: It varies along the border. When I started in my career, I worked in South Texas, which was all basically private land, these huge ranches. And then like in El Paso, Texas, here where I am now, it's mostly urban. And then where I was in charge of the Caribbean and Puerto Rico sector, the Ramey Sector, and that's on the water, work with the Coast Guard a lot.

But when I joined the Border Patrol, the first thing that I was kind of surprised by was that there's a significant amount of independence. Like I say, I had to work on the ranches and along the border itself. So I'd get there at 6:30 and check my vehicle, grab my keys, and I would go out and patrol the border. And I generally wouldn't get back until 6:00 or 6:30 that evening. So there was a lot of independence out there. You work alone a lot unless you help other Border Patrol agents in their work during the day. It was kind of a lone job that you performed by yourself most of the time.

Ashley: Wow, that sounds kind of lonely. I mean, I've seen the desert, and I can just imagine what it's like to be out there in your truck all by yourself just cruising along.

Michael: Well, there's significant beauty out there also. The Rio Grande is beautiful. Some nights, I hear hundreds of coyotes howling out there. It's really its own kind of has its own kind of beauty.

Ashley: That's so true. It is beautiful in its own way. And I'm also thinking, too, that when you were out there by yourself, when you encountered someone crossing the border, how much discretion did you actually have? Was there a prescribed

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process that you followed, or were significant decisions being made by just you right there?

Michael: That's an interesting question because although the Border Patrol has great discretion in who they stop and talk to, they have really very little discretion once there's an immigration violation involved. They have zero discretion in that. They have to take action. But they do have wide latitude while they're doing their job and who they speak to and who they question. But it's not like being a patrol officer to my point, in that you might get a warning from a police officer, et cetera, but in the case of immigration violations, there's really no discretion for that officer involved.

Tracie: Understood. And I can imagine over the course of 26 years, the thousands of thousands of people that you encountered. Keeping the story anonymous, what sticks with you from those experiences?

Michael: The thing about patrolling the border, what sticks with me is that people are just people. I realized that first when I was in the Navy and traveled into different countries, that people are just people. We're all the same. Except the people that are crossing the border are people in extraordinary circumstances. And that is the only difference between them and me, for example, or even the officers they encounter or any of us. They are people in extraordinary circumstances.

Ashley: I love that. One thing that we do on this podcast is we try to humanize both the immigrants and the people that we're speaking with, the Border Patrol agents, the asylum officers, USCIS officers. And I'm curious if there was anything as you were working on this job that something about the humanity of the job, the humanity of the officers, the people you worked with, was there something that surprised you?

Michael: Well, let me say that you cannot be a Border Patrol agent and not be affected by the humanity of the trek that people are making across several

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countries and to get into this United States. When I reflect back on that, I see that the Border Patrol agents are really closest to the humanity of that of what's involved in that travel. They see people who are close to being to their destination and feet from a highway, and they don't make it. People who are taken advantage of by coyotes, people who are lost out there, children, et cetera. So it's a very difficult job, and you cannot be a Border Patrol agent and not be affected by that.

Tracie: And I hear that. And having been to the border, thinking about being with people in that moment of trauma, when they get to me in a law office in Atlanta, they're out of that. So I think just that sense of urgency that you had to encounter had to be so hard and on such a frequent basis.

Kind of looking at this from the flip side, though, what is something that you wish people understood about the human beings doing this job as a CBP officer?

Because, I think sometimes we don't always see a positive portrayal in the media, or we just don't, in general, have a great opinion. We tend to dehumanize officers. So what should we know about the people doing this work?

Michael: What I remember a lot is also the thousands of acts of kindness that I saw during my 26 years in the Border Patrol, especially when I was a field agent. I was in a very small town, and I can remember agents driving through the drive-through fast-food restaurants to buy food for a family that they had encountered, paying for that food with their own money, buying coats, jackets, gloves, beanies for kids, et cetera. So this is something that I would see all the time. So I think that the public doesn't see that. These hundreds and thousands of acts of kindness that happen every day by and that are enacted by agents that we don't see.

Ashley: I love that. I think that does give us kind of what we've been seeing throughout the season so far is that there is really a human side at play also on the other side of the table from the immigrant. The table, the border, the other side of the seat in the car. I think there's a human aspect to it that we can often overlook,

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just as we can overlook the humanity of the migrants and the immigrants that we're seeing, too. So thank you for sharing that with us.

Michael: Sure, my pleasure.

Ashley: I also wanted to say you worked at the border for more than two decades, so you also watched the national conversation around immigration change. How did the public narrative about the border affect the people actually doing the work? Did you hear from your colleagues or others that, "Man, I just can't believe this is happening," they've got it wrong about us, or they've got it wrong about the people we work with? Did you hear anything from the public narrative that affected your work?

Michael: Well, the public narrative, that is a fairly recent happening. There were a lot of changes that happened during the time that I was in the Border Patrol. It changed significantly. But you really have to take the long view when you look at the border. Between about 1982 and 2006, there were 24 million people that were encountered on the border. And there was no infrastructure, no technology, very few Border Patrol agents. So a lot of those people probably got through that came to the border. But the public was not aware of that at all. It was not on the news. The politicians were not talking about it, et cetera.

So I think in terms of how we think about the border, we think probably about like the Biden administration. There was 6.4 million encounters on the border during that administration. But I think we think about that, and the narrative changed because of that, because, for example, like in Operation Lone Star, Governor Abbott here in Texas has Operation Lone Star. Now, in Operation Lone Star, they bused 100,000 migrants into cities like Chicago, New York, et cetera, a few other cities.

So for the first time in history, the border was just not here in El Paso, Texas, and San Diego, et cetera. It was in all of our living rooms. So we really became aware

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of it, and it changed the national narrative as never before in history. And then that changed how people started to think and talk about migration, et cetera. So I did notice a change in enforcement, of course, and all the things we heard. But that is a relatively new happenstance.

Tracie: Yes, we have definitely seen a demonization, I would say, perhaps of the immigrant over the last few election cycles. And definitely, it becomes a talking point in election campaigns. And without naming names or calling out specific terms that may have been used, is there an experience where you have felt like the politicians or others who are describing immigrants publicly were just wrong, where you said, "That's not actually consistent with the people I encounter every day"?

Michael: Yes. So I retired, and I worked for a few years as a consultant, et cetera. I worked in other countries as a contractor. And I think in about 2017, I started hearing kind of what we all hear, that everybody crossing the border are criminals, they're murderers or rapists, they're being released from insane asylums, et cetera.

And this was something that I knew was not true not only from my experience in management at CBP, but even along the border when I was a field agent. When someone's encountered, you have to interview them. I interviewed hundreds, literally hundreds of migrants, and that was not what I found at all. The vast majority, 99%, were what we would probably call economic migrants. There were some that were fleeing persecution for different reasons, so good candidates for asylum. And there were some criminals, but very, very, very, very few. I mean, you would be surprised how few criminals there were.

Since then, I thought, "Well, maybe things have changed." So I read a bunch of studies regarding criminality and the rising immigrant population in the United States. And what I found almost in all cases was that crime has decreased as our migrant population has increased. And don't get me wrong, there have been some

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very heinous crimes committed by migrants, but that's really the minority and not my experience at all in my decades along the border.

Ashley: That's so true. We've talked about that before on this podcast, that immigrants are likely to commit less crimes than American-born citizens. And I think about just so many of them have fled crime in that way, too. They don't want to bring that to the communities here. They are looking for a safe community, for a safe life for themselves and for their children. So thank you for bringing that up.

Michael: Sure.

Ashley: And we've talked a little bit about this already, I think, but when we come to public policies or rhetoric, some of the stories, I know that most of this came up after you left working with CBP. But even as you viewed the news from outside of that space, was there a particular point when you realized that something had shifted in the rhetoric around Border Patrol, around migrants, and what was your reaction to that first and then over time?

Michael: Well, when I, like I said, in about 2017 when I started hearing the narrative that we all hear, I really started to feel some unease about what was being put out by our government because this was not what I knew through my depth of experience. So I began to feel a little bit uneasy about what I was hearing. I thought, "Well, why are we putting out this information, which is not necessarily true?"

But what really concerned me was that people were starting to believe it. That really I started feeling as if I might be compelled to kind of act, and that kind of led me to where I am today. It was a very kind of slow trip, but I think that's what started propelling me towards the path of working in the migrant community.

Tracie: It's like you read our minds. That's such a great transition into talking about your work with Sacred Heart. I think someone who hears your résumé might think,

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"Wow, 26 years with CBP. That's hardcore." And now here you are running a shelter that serves migrants. How did that happen?

Michael: Well, as I stated before, I started to feel uncomfortable with the narrative that I was hearing coming out from our government, which I knew to be untrue in many aspects. And so that was really crystallized by when we started separating children from their families, et cetera. It was just something I could not abide by.

So one day I was in church, and they were passing out flyers for volunteers at migrant shelters. And although I was very aware that I was just an old, retired person, and that anything I did would probably have minimal impact, I decided, "Okay, that's what I'm going to do. I'm just going to volunteer at a shelter and just see, take it from there." Compelled to do something, and that really crystallized it for me in church that day.

So I began to work with the Annunciation House here in El Paso at a large migrant shelter on the east side of town. As a matter of fact, unbeknownst to me, it was the largest migrant shelter on the Southwest border at that time. And then that led to one day I was contacted by the pastor for Sacred Heart Church, which is one of the oldest churches here in El Paso. It's in a very, very poor neighborhood, and you can actually see the border from the front of the church. It's very close. And I was called by the pastor, Father Garcia. He asked me if I would help him run the shelter. And I told him, "Well, let me just show up and see what's happening there. Maybe I can help." And so I did. I showed up at the shelter, and I was there for the next two years as director.

Ashley: That's so amazing, Michael. And I also just have to speak to your comment that the old, retired people feel like they don't make a difference. But as a former volunteer manager for a nonprofit, I can tell you that the old, retired people are the backbone of nonprofits. The work could not be done without them. So thank you for stepping up and for taking that challenge.

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Michael: Well, I didn't want to overstate my importance at the time. I thought, "Well, gosh, what can I do? I'm just one person." But I think that is really important, especially now, that if someone feels compelled to act, they should act within their own comfortability, if you will. Perhaps they just want to donate clothes. Perhaps they want to give rides. Perhaps they want to show up at court, et cetera. But you have to find your place if you're compelled to act, your zone of comfort, and act within that zone.

Ashley: That's so true. There's always something for each of us to do. And coming back also to your experience at the Sacred Heart shelter, and also as you volunteered at Annunciation House and working with migrants, did you see anything differently from that perspective being a volunteer in these spaces than you had as a Border Patrol agent?

Michael: Well, you might think that those two things are opposites, but they are not, really. They're very close together because it was really all the same forms, all the same languages, all the same laws, et cetera. So I was surprised by this myself. I found it to be something that was not opposite so much of what I was doing: talking to migrants, explaining things to them, looking at their forms, helping them contact sponsors, et cetera. So it was not as far removed from what I was doing before as you might think.

Tracie: Well, that is good to hear. I feel like advocates and government officials, we're trying to work towards the same goals, even if we are on opposite sides. That doesn't mean we're adversarial. So I think that is such a great perspective because you're on the opposite side, right, now with the shelter as opposed to being an officer. But it's not adversarial. We're all trying to strive to get the right person the right benefit at the right time. And so thinking about your new role there with the shelter, how did you process that in conjunction with what you were doing at CBP? Did it make you rethink anything, or just, yeah, how did you process your past life with the one that you have now?

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Michael: Tracie, I think that every country has probably a responsibility to their citizens to create and enforce immigration laws along the border. That's fine. Keeps us safe. We also have a responsibility to ensure that there's compassion, that there's order, et cetera. It didn't really make me rethink my job in the Border Patrol. I just think that you have to - what I saw was that we all really have to work together. As you mentioned, we're all on the same side, in a sense.

And especially in El Paso, Texas, it was interesting because everyone worked together: the NGOs, all of the federal entities. Everybody wanted to ensure that the transition from south to north or the other way around was as seamless as possible. So everybody kind of worked together towards that end, and I think that's really the way it should be.

Ashley: I agree with that. I think that the more the organizations, both the federal agents and also the NGOs, as you mentioned, work together, it can create that seamless transition to help people. We do want to have secure borders, but we also want to have compassion and show compassion. And I know Tracie has a question she's been burning to ask you. We'll get to that in just one second, because I want to ask about your faith in all of this. As you approached your role as a Border Patrol officer, as you were the director of a shelter, as you volunteered in these places, how did you see your faith directing your decisions during this time, and did you ever consider what you were doing as a calling?

Michael: Well, there's a funny story about that because one day the father and I, Father Garcia and I, were in the shelter, in the middle of the shelter, and we were talking about religion and the shelter itself, and the people coming to the shelter, et cetera. And Father Garcia, I told him, "Listen, Father, I'm not really here because of any kind of religious calling. I mean, I'm here because I think that we need to look at how we're talking about migrants and how we're working with migrants, et cetera. So that's really what propelled me here." And he said, "Well, I'm not so sure about that."

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So I think in retrospect, he was probably onto something there. When I look back, I think that God really puts you where you're supposed to be, and sometimes without you knowing it. So it was not a faith journey for me. It was really about me trying to do the right thing, trying to take action as compelled. But it was probably more than I realized at that moment.

Tracie: I feel that every day, right, that we are made for times such as these. And it's like, I didn't choose this. I didn't choose who was going to be president while I was running my law firm. But here we are. God has his hand in everything, and there is trust.

All right, so the million-dollar question, probably billion-dollar at this point, trillion-dollar question: we hear constantly that before we can make any changes to immigration, have any sort of comprehensive immigration reform, we have to secure the border. And you spent 26 years doing that. So what does a secure border actually mean or look like?

Michael: I heard that a lot, Tracie, regarding you have to secure the border before you make changes to immigration. But I mean, that's really kind of an impossibility. This is the busiest border in the world. There are 350 million legal crossings annually on this border. Every day there are tens of millions of personal vehicles, commercial vehicles. I mean, the border is extremely busy. You have to kind of work on the plane as it is flying. So I never really understood when people would say, "Well, we've got to secure the border before we make any changes to immigration." That's really not the way it works. So there are a lot of things that go into this framework that we call immigration here in the United States, and all of those things act in concert to secure the border.

Ashley: So is there such thing as a completely secure border, then? And if not, what would make our border more secure?

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Michael: The Border Patrol defines a secure border as being able to detect, react to, and resolve any occurrence at the border. That is it's kind of a working definition, if you will. But as I said before, immigration is extremely complex. There are a multitude of things that go into this immigration process as we know it. All of those things are supposed to work in concert, and most of the time they do not. A lot of times the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing, et cetera.

But all of these things work together to create a secure border, and that's what would make it more secure. The definition of a secure border, the government, in the Secure Fence Act of 2006, it is defined as completely stopping traffic on the border. But the Border Patrol uses a more of a working definition. There are a lot of things that go into that.

Ashley: That's so interesting. I bet it's really complicated. Just knowing how complicated immigration law is, I cannot imagine being in the place where you enforce it on the spot as well. Like you talked about earlier, sometimes it is just you making those decisions. There's not much discretion, but it's just you having to make them as you encounter people. So that's really complicated. Thank you for all the time you spent doing that, and then for the time you spent with people as well.

Michael: Sure.

Ashley: And I want to come back to a scripture that we started with today because Zechariah says to administer true justice and to show mercy and compassion. And like we said, you were literally a government officer responsible for enforcing the law. Did you ever feel a tension between that, between enforcing the law and showing mercy?

Michael: Well, Ashley, I'm often asked that, but I think that I took an oath to uphold the laws of the United States, and so I was compelled to do that. But I think what's important is the day that I graduated from the Border Patrol Academy, my father, who, as I mentioned, worked along the border as an immigration officer for

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decades, he pulled me aside and he told me today your life is going to change.

"Please remember that you are not a customs officer. You will not be dealing with widgets. You'll be dealing with human beings. So please remember to always show everybody respect. Allow everyone their dignity in everyone that you encounter. Remember that we're all the same." So I carried that in my career as a Border Patrol agent and beyond. When you talk about Zechariah, it really underscores how we're supposed to treat each other as human beings.

Tracie: Your father sounds like an incredible and wise man. I think we all could have benefited from some of his mentoring. And you may have just touched on this, but I'm curious if you have any other examples, because one of the things that we've been looking at this season is what it looks like to be a Christian inside these government systems, not standing outside and criticizing them. That's easy for us on the outside. But what does it actually look like for the person inside who's been entrusted with that authority? And did your faith affect how you exercised that authority?

Michael: Well, I am no Bible scholar. As a lapsed Catholic, I don't profess to know a lot about scripture. But going back to Zechariah, that really captured God's expectations as to how we should treat each other. And as a Catholic, I know about rituals. There are a lot of rituals in religion. But I think what Zechariah kind of underscored is all these rituals that we do, that we perform in our religion, are not important if they are not imbued with morality.

And it does not only encompass what I did, but what we do in our everyday lives. So I think that's what's important about Zechariah and what was said in the Bible. It really is an ongoing theme in the Bible as to how we treat each other: not to oppress people, to treat people well, et cetera. So these rituals that we all go through in our religion are not really important if they're not imbued with this heartfelt morality.

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Ashley: I so believe in that as well. I think the rituals help us remember what is important to God and helps us remember what is important to God. That's the most important piece: to care for each other, to love God. And sometimes going through these rituals and these actions can help us do that.

And I want to come to a question that we've been asking all of our guests this season, because they've seen parts of the immigration system that most of us haven't. And in your case, you've seen the border as someone who grew up there, as a Border Patrol agent, as a leader, and then from the shelter side. So our question that we've been asking is, if you could change the immigration system, what would you change? Try to pick one, and I know that's hard, but if you could change one thing, what would you change?

Michael: Well, I'm a pragmatist, actually, so I would say that when you take the immigration system as it exists today, I would take it from where we are today and move forward from there. I think today what's happening is they're trying to eradicate the migrant, or all foreigners from the United States. I mean, that's really not realistic. I think that we have to celebrate our differences and what that brings to the United States and what it has brought to us, historically speaking.

So we need to start from today and look at how our immigration system is working, and make sure that it's optimized for all of us, not only for the United States citizens, but all who consider this country home. There are 171 million workers, for example, any given day in the United States. I think 25 million are foreign-born. And so we need to ensure that whatever we do, that it optimizes and makes our country better and stronger, and the migrant is obviously part of that.

Ashley: That's so true. I know that it's important that we have systems that work for everyone, for both the migrants, for the immigrants, for the people who are working in the offices, who are processing the paperwork. And it's been so interesting to hear everyone's answers this season. So thank you for sharing that

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perspective with us, too. And I want to come down to just the last couple questions. I can't believe it. But our podcast is called Hope in Action, and I'm curious, after 26 years in Border Patrol and everything that you've seen since then, what gives you hope right now?

Michael: Well, so obviously, in my role talking to people, et cetera, I consume a lot of information having to do with migration. So we're always on pins and needles regarding what are the courts going to do? What does the enforcement look like, et cetera?

But really, what gave me hope this year was I speak to a lot of people, and I happen to speak to two groups, but one group from Minnesota at the time when we were having a lot of upheaval, immediately after we had a lot of upheaval in Minnesota. And so when I was through with the group, I asked the group, "Listen, I have a question for you all. Now since you're in the epicenter of what's been happening in immigration, why was it Minnesota that changed how this government looked at immigration or enforced its immigration? They were forced to take a step back and look at how they were enforcing the immigration and kind of change that path."

And one lady said, "Well, we care about our neighbors." And it struck me that sometimes it's as simple as that: we care for our neighbors. And that sometimes can really change the world. We just have to remember to care for our neighbors. So the people, the people give me hope.

Tracie: That's amazing, and I'm going to sit with that for a while. Caring for our neighbors, as simple as that. So true. I can't believe we're at the end of this segment, but Michael, thank you so much for joining us and helping us understand what the border looks like from such a unique perspective. Most of us may never visit the border, certainly may not ever work for CBP, but this has been informative and wonderful. So thank you.

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Michael: Well, thank you. I hope my time here will be of some benefit, but it was an honor to be here. Thank you so much.

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Ashley: Tracie, what are you thinking after that?

Tracie: Yeah, that was so good. And I'm thinking about how much harder it is to turn someone into a category once you actually get to know them. And I think that's true in both directions. It's easy to say "illegal immigrant." It's easy to say "Border Patrol" and have images come to mind. But it's harder, right, when there's a name and a face and a story attached to those titles.

Ashley: I totally agree with that because it's also making me think of another scripture, the story of the Good Samaritan. That story begins with someone asking Jesus a question: "Who is my neighbor?" And as Michael just told us, sometimes it's just that simple: we care for our neighbors.

Tracie: And in that story of the Good Samaritan, that person just wants a definition: "Who is my neighbor? Who counts? Where does my responsibility start and stop?" And Jesus responds with a story that completely disrupts the categories that people expected.

Ashley: Isn't that what Jesus always does? He comes in and disrupts our nice, neat little boxes that we have people in. And the person who acts like a neighbor isn't the person the audience would have expected. That's just what Jesus intended, because the person is the Samaritan, the outsider. That's the person who is maybe what you would say the hero of the story. The person belonging to the group they had been taught to distrust was actually the one who showed love and mercy to his neighbor.

Tracie: And I think there's something really relevant for us in there, because our immigration conversations are filled with these categories, right? Like illegal,

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asylum seeker, Border Patrol, ICE, criminal, refugee. And some of those are legal categories, and some are job titles, and some are political labels. But none of them tells you everything you need to know about a human being.

Ashley: And Jesus ultimately flips that question. When the lawyer asks, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus ends by essentially asking, "Who acted like a neighbor?"

Tracie: Those pesky lawyers. And this is the part of the story I love, right? Because maybe the Christian question at the border isn't primarily, "Which of these people am I required to consider my neighbor and care for?" Maybe it's, "What would it look like for me to have a neighbor here?" And that's a totally different question.

Ashley: It certainly doesn't solve border policy.

Tracie: No, and I do want to be clear about that. Michael didn't say that borders don't matter. He spent 26 years enforcing one. Governments do have a legitimate responsibility to know who's entering the United States, or any country. Security matters. Laws matter. But none of that answers the Christian question of how we see and treat the people involved.

And I think maybe that's where Michael's story challenges some of our usual categories. You can enforce a law without hating the person subject to it. And you can advocate for immigrants without believing every government officer is the enemy. And you can believe that we need border security and still ask whether a particular policy is humane or effective.

Ashley: Which takes us right back to Zechariah: administer justice, show mercy, show compassion, not one instead of the other. So here's our conversation question this week. Ask someone: when you hear the phrase "secure the border," what do you think that actually means?

Tracie: And maybe don't stop with your first answer. What are we trying to secure it from? What would tell us that the border was secure? And what would we want

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to remain possible at a secure border? Trade? Tourism? Families visiting one another? People lawfully seeking protection? What's important to us?

Ashley: And, as always, maybe ask this question to someone who sees immigration differently than you do, not just to debate them, because remember, this is about being curious and building bridges to conversation. Just ask: when you say you want a secure border, what would that look like to you?

Tracie: Because definitely after hearing Michael, I think that's a much more complicated and more interesting question than the slogan makes it sound.

Ashley: And here's our small action this week. The next time you hear someone described only by a category in an immigration conversation, put an actual person back into the sentence. If you hear "illegals," ask yourself, "Who are we actually talking about?" If you hear someone dismiss all Border Patrol or ICE officers as cruel, ask the same thing: "Who are we actually talking about?"

Tracie: And you don't have to change your opinion about the policy.

Ashley: Exactly. This is not an exercise in agreeing with everybody. It's an exercise in remembering something Christians believe about everybody: they bear the image of God. And maybe that's one way we practice Jesus's answer to "Who is my neighbor?" Instead of deciding which categories of people deserve our compassion, we practice becoming the neighbor. We care for our neighbors because it really can be that simple. And we want your questions, too. At the end of the season, Tracie and I are doing our Conversations for Curious Christians: Ask Me Anything episode. Mark your calendar for October 14th at 12:00 p.m. Eastern Time.

Tracie: And after this episode, maybe you have a border question. Maybe you've always wondered what happens when someone actually crosses that border. Maybe you're wondering what asylum at the border actually means and looks like. Or maybe you just want to know what a CBP officer can and cannot do.

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Or maybe you're wrestling with some of the faith side. Can Christians actually support deportation? What does scripture actually mean when it talks about the foreigner? And does welcoming the stranger mean a country can't have borders?

Ashley: Send us those questions. The complicated ones are welcome. We will take them all. So until next time, thanks for listening to Hope in Action.

Tracie: Keep asking questions. Keep listening.

Ashley: And keep looking for that one small way...

Tracie: To put hope into action. We'll see you next time.

Tracie: This podcast is to inform, educate, and entertain and does not constitute legal advice. If you are making decisions related to immigration or any legal matter, please consult a licensed attorney in your state of residence.