

The Untouchables

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[0 : 0 0] Probably one of my all-time favorite crime movies is the 1987 movie The Untouchables with Kevin Costner.

Anybody seen the movie? Not many people. I recommend it. It's a bit heavy, I must say. It's a crime movie after all. But it is a very interesting and it was a very popular movie when it came out in the 80s.

Kevin Costner starred as Elliot Ness. It's based on a true story, true characters. Elliot Ness was the federal agent who was responsible for bringing down the famous Chicago gangster Al Capone.

Now these gangsters in the 1930s, it said in the 1930s, and these gangsters had such a good operation going that they were even paying off the police to keep quiet, to turn a blind eye to their activities.

And everything was going smoothly and the gangs were running well. The police were getting their payouts. Until, of course, Elliot Ness and his group of untouchables arrived and frustrated the gangsters no end.

[1 : 0 2] Because no amount of pressure or bribery would work on this small group of men. That's why they were called The Untouchables. And it was a very popular movie.

It's based, as I say, on a true story. There's also a series called the same name, The Untouchables, in the 1950s. You may be old enough to remember that.

Which looked at the same story. And it's a famous part of American history and law enforcement history. And we love stories like that, don't we?

We love stories of people who are untouchable, who can't be corrupted, who uphold justice at any cost and are not swayed by pressures around them, threats or bribes.

And I think we love stories like that, especially in South Africa. Am I right? In a country where we face incessant load shedding, it's precisely because people have been corrupted and people have taken payouts and turned a blind eye to crime happening even within ESCOM.

[2 : 0 6] We've seen the news recently. And we all, I think, want, we long for, we wish that there were more untouchables in our country. More people like Elliot Ness in ESCOM and in our government who are immune to being manipulated, immune to bribery, immune to pressure, and who uphold the right thing and justice at any cost.

We want to see more people like that in our world, right? Well, that need, that desire, that need of any functioning society to have people like that is not new.

We see it right back in God's law thousands of years ago. God's law to Israel where he was giving them, now remember this is no ordinary law. It's law for a particular nation in a particular time of history, but it comes from the mind of God himself.

And he knows the best way that society should run. The things, the ingredients that are vital for society to work properly.

So we've been looking the last few weeks at some of these laws, and we've seen that even though they were given to a particular nation all that time ago, the principles that underlie these laws are so vital for us today in our societies.

[3 : 22] We've seen how they uphold, for example, the value of life, the importance of protection of property and restoration of loss, the protection of the vulnerable, all the things that we know are vital ingredients for a society to work properly.

Well, as we come to Exodus 23, and I encourage you to have it open in front of you, in the first nine verses, we come across a group of laws that give another vital ingredient to a society working properly.

One of these vital ingredients that we see in this law here is how God wanted all of his people, not just the law enforcement officers or the judges, but all of his people at every level to be untouchable.

To not be swayed by pressure and money, but to uphold justice. To not be swayed by self-interest, but to be truly fair in their dealings, and not just the high-level dealings, but all of their relationships.

To be fair, to be impartial, to be unbiased. I don't know if you've come across that word, impartial. It means the ability, this is the definition, the ability to judge or consider something fairly without allowing your own interest to influence you.

[4 : 40] That's what these laws here in Exodus 23 are about, the laws of impartiality. And God's expectations are actually no different for his people today. He wants his people to be people who uphold what is fair, what is right, who are impartial, unbiased in all their dealings.

But, as we read through these laws, we discover that's not easy. It's not easy. It's nice. It's a nice thought, but it's difficult to get right.

And so that's what I want us to see as we look at these laws. Firstly, the difficulty of being impartial. The difficulty of impartiality. So have a look at Exodus 23.

These laws in the first nine verses not only call Israel to a high standard of fairness, but they're particularly laws about when that is difficult.

When it is difficult to be fair. When it is difficult to be impartial. So, for example, verse 2. You must not follow a crowd in wrongdoing. Do not testify in a lawsuit and go along with a crowd to pervert justice.

[5 : 48] Okay, so it doesn't just say, you know, be fair and testify fairly. It says don't follow the crowd. Because that's when it's difficult, right? When everybody around you is saying one thing and you know that actually another thing is right.

God expects his people here not to be swayed by the majority. But that's often hard. In the playground. Boys and girls.

At school. When everybody is picking on the nerd. Right? And what's the easy thing to do? The easy thing is actually just to join the crowd and stand at the back.

And do the same as everyone else does. The hard thing is to go, no, that's wrong. And to go support the guy who's innocent. And who's being picked on. That's the hard thing to do.

But it's not just hard for boys and girls in the playground. It's just as hard for grown-ups in the office. When everybody is choosing to go one way and do something that you know is wrong. To stand against that crowd and to say, no, I stand with what is right.

[6 : 50] It's hard to do that. Or in the courtroom. Because we know, even with the justice system today, often matters are decided by the court of public opinion on Facebook before the judge even gets to pass a verdict.

So, that's the first way that God wants His people to be impartial. Not to be swayed by the crowd. And that's when it's difficult. When everybody around us is going one way to stand and say, no, that is wrong.

I'm going to go another way. But look how else God wants His people to be impartial. Verse 3. Now, this is a surprising one. Do not show favoritism to a poor person in his lawsuit.

Now, that's surprising. We would have expected the opposite, right? Because we've just had laws we saw last week on helping the vulnerable, protecting the vulnerable. But now it's saying, don't show favoritism to the poor person.

Why is that here? Well, I think it's here because we all tend to want to side with the underdog, don't we? And this is primarily in the context of a courtroom.

[7 : 56] And often when a poor person is standing up against rich people, the tendency is to go, he must be right, they must be wrong. Rich people are always wrong, right? That's how we think. We assume the rich are in the wrong.

And we want them to pay kind of because we're jealous that they have so much money. And we love to see an example of where the underdog gets his way. And so we tend to automatically side with the underdog, right?

You watch a sports game where there's two teams. Maybe you're neutral to them, but one of them is really the underdog and one of them is superior. You kind of tend to side with the underdog.

I recently watched a documentary on Netflix called Pepsi, Where's My Jet? And it's a true story about a guy who entered a Pepsi competition and claimed he took Pepsi to court because he claimed they owed him a jet because they implied that he could win that in the competition.

And the amazing thing is that, I mean, it was a crazy claim. No one took it seriously. And yet a whole lot of people supported this 19-year-old who was taking this multinational conglomerate to court because he's the underdog.

[9 : 01] Just because he's the underdog. Not necessarily because he had a good case. But God's people don't do that. God's people don't just support the underdog because they're the underdog. They take all the evidence and they're fair to each party.

But to balance that out, look a few verses forward to verse 6. It's the opposite. You must not deny justice to a poor person among you in his law.

So did you see the point? You know, whether he's poor, whether he's rich, it doesn't matter. What matters is who's right. Who's got a case. Don't let your opinion of the person influence your judgment of the situation.

Because here, verse 6, the opposite temptation is to side with the rich because you want to make friends with the rich more than you want to make friends with the poor. Because they can help you, right? Because they've got money. They've got means.

And so whether it's the temptation to side with the underdog, the temptation to side with the person who can benefit you, the temptation to go with the crowd, it's all the same principle here.

[10 : 03] And especially when the rich actually offer you a decent amount of money to side with them, it's very easy just to turn a blind eye, isn't it? Look at verse 8.

He must not take a bribe. For a bribe blinds the clear-sighted and corrupts the words of the righteous. It blinds you. When money is in the picture and you can get something out of this, it blinds you to what is right very quickly, very easily.

We see it all over our country, of course. But you see, the point of all these laws is the principle of not giving in to pressure that make you show favoritism to one person over another.

But to be totally fair, even being fair to a person who hates you. Even being fair to your enemy.

Have a look at these interesting case laws in the middle of the section, verse 4 and 5. Verse 4 and 5.

[11 : 06] If you come across your enemy's stray ox or donkey, you must return it to him. If you see the donkey of someone who hates you lying helpless under its load and you want to refrain from helping him, you must help with it.

You see, these are very dispersed among all of these laws are these interesting cases where it's really getting to the heart of what these laws are about.

This is actually the opposite of favoritism. Favoritism is you show someone favor because of who they are. This is you treat someone especially nastily because they're your enemy or they hate you or they've done something against you.

I don't know. We don't really have ox or donkey walking around. And so these laws don't directly apply to us. But the modern version might be, I don't know, you've got this horrible neighbor who's always nasty to you.

And he's got one of these small, yappy, irritating dogs. You know the kind that I'm talking about? The dog that at 2 o'clock in the morning you just hear it go, whew, whew, whew, whew, whew.

[12 : 13] And it's just horrible. And then one day you actually look out your window and you see it's got out the front gate. And you just turn a blind eye. And you, you know, let natural selection take its course.

See, I guess that's an example of someone you don't like. You just, you don't give them the courtesy that you would give anybody else.

But God's people don't do that. God is calling his people to a very high standard of impartiality. Do you see that here? There's a very high bar of being impartial.

And that's what all these laws are about. Not even treating your enemy different to how you would treat someone else. That's how neutral and unbiased and impartial God's people must be in their dealings with each other.

So that's what these laws are about. But the question is, why is it so important? Why this principle, given so much space in the Bible, why is it so important that God's people are like this and are so unbiased and so impartial?

[13 : 18] And it's not just because that's the way a justice system should run. And that's the way that a society will work properly. It's also because, like in all of the laws we've seen so far, this reflects the character of God.

See, these laws are meant to help God's people reflect his character to the world. And these laws are important because God himself is impartial.

And this is an aspect of God that the Bible teaches over and over again, but we really need to get this morning. This idea that God himself is completely impartial.

That God does not show favoritism. God does not show favoritism. And that is a phrase that is repeated in the Bible over and over again.

God does not show favoritism. And so he doesn't want his people to. But that aspect of God actually took Israel a long time to get.

[14 : 20] They knew God right from Exodus, well, right from Abraham. But, you know, they really started to get to know God and his character after the Exodus. But it took them still centuries and centuries to actually get this one attribute of God that he is completely impartial, that he does not show favoritism.

It took them a while to get it. They always assumed, you see, the Jews always assumed they were the favorites. They assumed that God favored them over everybody else in the world.

And they lived in that way and they assumed they had God's special favor. I mean, it seems that way as you read through the Old Testament.

But then you come to Acts chapter 10 where Peter is told, this is after Jesus has risen and ascended and the apostles are going out sharing the gospel.

But they still haven't shared the gospel with the Gentiles, with the non-Jews. They're still sharing it among the Jews. And then there's this one place in Acts 10, you can read the story later, the whole chapter.

[15 : 28] But Peter is told, go to Cornelius. Now, Cornelius is a Gentile. And Peter is shocked. And he doesn't know how he can go and spend time with Gentiles. The Jews didn't do that. But then God convinces him to go and share the gospel of the Jewish Messiah, even with this Gentile.

And eventually he goes and it gets to the point, I'll just read Acts 10, 34 to 35, where he says this, Peter began to speak, now I truly understand that God doesn't show favoritism.

But in every nation, the person who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. It took the Jews centuries to get that about God, that he actually, despite the fact that they were part of his plan for the world, he still doesn't show favoritism.

That is part of his character. He's completely impartial, completely unbiased. And this was an assumption that they needed corrected, because it's a dangerous assumption.

And it's not just Jewish people who make it. It's religious people. It's people in every religion who make the assumption that God favors them over other people.

[16 : 38] That God favors their group because they have subscribed to a particular grouping, or they have done a particular set of things, or they have believed a particular set of propositions. Therefore, God is favoring them.

He's going to treat them differently to how he treats everyone else. That's a religious assumption. It's actually the key assumption of every religion, but it's not right according to the Bible. You see, the Bible actually teaches God will judge each person impartially.

He does not show favorites. And he will judge each person. Now, this might come as a shock. Each person, the Bible says, will be judged according to what they have actually done.

Romans 2, verse 6. We'll put it up on the screen behind me, so you don't have to turn there, but listen again to what this says. He will repay each one according to his works.

I'll read on. Eternal life to those who by persistence in doing good seek glory and honor and immortality, but wrath and anger to those who are self-seeking and disobey the truth while obeying unrighteousness.

[17 : 49] There will be affliction and distress for every human being. Every human being who does evil, first for the Jew and also for the Gentile, but glory, honor, and peace for everyone who does what is good, first for the Jew and also the Greek.

And then Paul ends off this teaching by saying, verse 11, for there is no favoritism with God. Okay, we read those words and they seem pretty shocking, right?

God's actually going to judge each person according to what they've done. And what's the knee-jerk Christian reaction? Oh, well, just as well it's not talking about us. You know, just as well we're not going to be judged by our works.

Phew. But if we think that, we'd be wrong. Look at what 2 Corinthians 5 verse 10 says. 2 Corinthians 5 verse 10, Paul is writing this letter to Christians.

These are people who believe the gospel. They have the Holy Spirit. They exercise spiritual gifts. What does he say to them? 2 Corinthians 5 verse 10, For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may be repaid for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

[19 : 08] These are words written to Christians. This is God's truth that we need to know, that he is revealing through the Apostle Paul in this letter. And it's something we don't often think about.

Let's be honest. We don't often think about this consistent biblical teaching that all people will be judged according to what they've done. But it makes sense.

Because God cannot defy his own character. And deep within God's character is that he does not show favoritism to anyone. He is impartial.

He cannot defy his own character. He cannot show favoritism even to Christians. Even to those who have great quiet times. Even to those who sing really well in church.

Even to those who are in church each Sunday. That's not going to cause God to show favoritism to you. Don't assume it will. On the day of perfect justice, which is coming to this world, no sin will be overlooked.

[20 : 15] Nothing will be swept under the carpet. Everything you've done will matter. Think about that. Everything you've done in your life will matter.

Nothing will be overlooked. And everything will come to light, both good and bad. And it will all be put forward as evidence on that great day when perfect justice comes to earth.

When Jesus Christ returns. That is the consistent teaching of the Bible. And so don't fall for a Christianity that avoids talking about that judgment day.

Don't fall for a Christianity that says what you do doesn't matter. It's all covered. Don't worry about it. Don't listen to preachers that avoid preaching this.

And many will. Many churches you will go to, you will never hear this teaching. Why? Because it's uncomfortable. It's uncomfortable for me to preach it. It's uncomfortable to hear it. And it seems to contradict the gospel, doesn't it?

[21 : 22] Because the gospel that we've heard is, we're saved by grace. We're not saved by works. And so to hear that we'll still be judged according to works doesn't fit. And so because preachers can't quite fit that into the gospel, they ignore it.

They put it aside. They sweep it under the carpet. But we need to hear it. But the question we need to answer then is, well, how does that square with the gospel? How does that square with the gospel of salvation by grace?

Which is also what the Bible teaches for those who have come to Christ. Well, to answer that question, let's see what the Bible actually says is going to happen on the day of judgment.

And this is something that, no matter who you are, if you're, you know, maybe you're visiting church, maybe you've been dragged to church, maybe you wouldn't consider yourself a Christian, it doesn't matter. You need to know what's going to happen on that day because it's going to happen.

God has set a day when He will judge the world with justice. Perfect justice is coming. The God who made you, who made us, is a God of justice. And that justice is going to come. And you're going to stand before Him.

[22 : 22] And every single human being that God has created needs to hear what is going to happen on that day. And so turn with me to Revelation 20. Because God revealed in this picture painted for John just what is going to happen on that day.

Legally, what is it going to look like? Revelation 20, it's the second last chapter, third last chapter of your Bible. So it's easy to find. And I'm going to read from verse 11.

Revelation 20 from verse 11. This is this vision that God has given John to help him to communicate to us what's going to happen on the day of judgment.

Then I saw a great white throne and one seated on it. Earth and heaven fled from His presence and no place was found for them.

I also saw the dead, the great and the small, standing there before the throne. and the books were opened. Just pause there.

[23 : 41] So you see how not even death, not even dying is going to be an escape from this day. God is going to raise people just so that they can face perfect justice.

That's how perfect God's justice is. And the great and the small, no matter what position you were in life, nothing will be overlooked and all will be held to account.

Let's read on. Another book was opened which is the book of life and the dead were judged according to their works by what was written in the books.

Then the sea gave up the dead that were in it and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them. Each one was judged according to their works.

Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

[24 : 43] So, what do we learn from the day of judgment, from that vision? Well, the books will be opened. That's what we learn. The books are going to be opened.

What does that mean? Well, what that tells us is that God who is the perfect judge of all humanity has a file on every person which contains in it everything you've ever said and everything you've ever done.

Jesus himself said every idle word spoken will be brought up on that day. This file exists and you will face a God of perfect justice and you know what's in that file and there is no escaping that day.

Don't think you can. And we don't want to think about that. We don't want to face that day. We don't want the books to be opened.

But the Bible says they will be. And so, it's just as well there's another book. Did you notice it? The book of life.

[25 : 56] What is in the book of life? Well, we know from elsewhere the book of life reveals the names of all those whose sins are already paid for because they trusted in Jesus Christ with their lives and his death paid for their sins on the cross.

But that's the book of life. The book with all that you've done or said will also be open and those books will be put next to each other. And those sins that have been paid for already by the death of Jesus for his people those will be marked off in the other book and they will be marked paid paid paid and then what remains will come to bear because that will be the evidence that your life is indeed eternal.

what remains will be the evidence that you were indeed given the grace of God and his Holy Spirit the works of love and kingdom living by which you will then receive your eternal rewards.

That is what the Bible teaches will happen on that day. So everybody will be judged according to what they've done. So do you see why the gospel is so vital for us?

Do you see why the gospel is something that you can't just look at from a distance? Do you see why the gospel is central to any hope that we have and not just the gospel that we are justified if we come to Christ from our sins but that we are transformed to live new lives?

[27 : 37] Do you see why that is so essential? The gospel is not a way to avoid being judged by your works. The gospel is necessary because you will be judged by your works. And knowing that, knowing that God's perfect justice will not sweep anything under the carpet but all will come to light both the good and the bad you've done knowing that will cause us to live very carefully, won't it?

Listen to what 1 Peter 1 says. 1 Peter 1 16 to 17 for it is written, Be holy because I am holy.

If you appeal to the Father who judges impartially according to each one's work, you are to conduct yourselves in reverence during your time living as strangers.

Another translation says reverent fear, good fear, knowing that what you do now matters in eternity everything will come to light.

And so if you know, and you see, did you notice there, if you appeal to a Father who judges impartially, doesn't show favorites. That's the day that is coming.

[28 : 54] And we need to live our lives in light of that day. And don't presume that your name will be written in the book of life if you therefore have no holiness to show. That's what Peter is saying here.

Be holy because of the day that's coming that everything will come to light. So don't presume your name is written in the book of life if your life does not show that you are one of those people now.

Don't think that if you've pretended to be a Christian all your life you'll be safe even if you've fooled all the people around you. Even if you've fooled your wife or your husband or the people at church.

You can't fool a God of inescapable justice who will consider every aspect of your life and who has no favorites. Your name will not be in the book because you came to church or because you lived an approximately Christian life.

Your name will only be in that book of life if you've submitted your life completely to Jesus Christ as your Lord and your life has testified to that fact because he is the only one who has ever paid the just penalty for your sins and he is your only hope when we face perfect justice.

[30 : 12] And that's a scary thing that that day is coming right? And it should be. Peter says even for Christians it should cause us to live in reverent fear. It should cause us to be very careful how we live. It's a scary thing but it is also a deeply good thing to know that that day is coming.

Isn't it? That justice is going to win one day. Perfect justice is going to win. Every wrong ever done in history will be put to right.

In a world where it seems like it is so often not. In a world where wrong so often seems to get away it is a profound and good thought to know that there will be a day of perfect justice that God has planned.

He will not sweep anything under the carpet. Justice will win. And that is why God calls His people to be people of justice, to uphold justice, to do right in all of their dealings even when it's hard.

God calls His people, you and me, to be the untouchables, to show fairness without bias or favoritism. That will show that we are God's people because we are reflecting God's character of impartiality.

[31 : 36] And so what does this look like in the Christian life? Well, before we end, I just want to go to a few passages. James 2 is a great example of what this looks like in a Christian life, this upholding of impartiality.

James 2 1-4 It goes like this.

My brothers and sisters, do not show favoritism as you hold on to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. For if someone comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes and a poor person dressed in filthy clothes also comes in, if you look with favor on the one wearing the fine clothes and say, sit here in a good place, and yet you say to the poor person, stand over there, or sit here on the floor by the footstool.

Haven't you made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? See, it's a very practical example that James gives here.

Someone comes to church, and this is something that actually staff and pastors also are very tempted to do. When we see someone coming to church and he seems well-dressed, he's got a nice family, and you go, he could be an asset to the church.

[32 : 59] He could be a source of income. And then you're like, hey, come, come, welcome, where are you from? We should meet up for lunch. Why don't you come over to our place for lunch afterwards?

And then just behind him is this divorcee wife who's struggling with alcohol addiction, she's got her one noisy child with her.

What do we do? Baby's room is over there. Please go sit there. And so I know that I can be tempted to that kind of favoritism, but I think we all can, right, in all aspects of our life, because we tend, without thinking, to favor people who will benefit us in some way, don't we?

To make friends, to invest time in people who we know we will get something from. We don't say that, it's not conscious, but we know we'll benefit from their company, we'll benefit from whatever they can possibly give us, but you know what the Bible calls that?

Evil. It's no different to a judge receiving a bribe. So we are not to show favoritism, we are to reflect God by treating people fairly, no matter who they are.

[34 : 09] Likewise, we are not to be swayed by the majority, we are not to gang up against people, whether that's on social media or in the playground. And we are to be completely fair, even to our enemies and even to those who hate us.

How hard is that? Listen to what Jesus says in Matthew 5, you can just listen, you don't have to turn there, Matthew 5 from verse 44, but I tell you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

See, if we are truly children of God, we will show His character to the world and we will be the untouchables who value justice highly, no matter how hard that is, because we serve a God who does, and so let's live our lives in reverent fear of that God as we wait for His justice to come to earth.

Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Oh Lord, we love it when we learn about You, who You are, but we also admit that often that causes us to tremble when we learn that You are a God of complete justice, perfect justice. Fearfully perfect justice.

[35 : 44] And Lord, we know that that character of you will never change. And so we thank you, Lord, for Jesus Christ who came so that even though perfect justice will be done, we have a way to be justified.

And we pray, Lord, that you would help us to live in light of perfect justice. Not only to live lives that are fair and just, even when it's hard, but to live lives that are lived every day in light of your perfect justice that is coming to this world. To warn people and to make sure we are prepared for that day. Help us to do this. In Jesus' name. Amen.