

THE UNTOUCHABLES

Directed by Brian De Palma
Produced by Art Linson
Distributed by Paramount Pictures
Released in 1987

Jesus got angry. He wasn't some deep-thinking hippie out of step with the times. He was strong, outspoken, and he knew the cost of justice.

Is Eliot Ness, as portrayed in *The Untouchables*, a Christ figure? No one can emulate Christ in toto, but approximations are helpful, both to inspire us to be more than we are, and to humble us with the realization that, to some extent, we are born to fail.

The major difference between Eliot Ness and Jesus Christ may concern murder. Jesus never killed anybody, while Eliot Ness does. The issue is whether it's murder. Jesus speaks to this: the failings of our hero are tempered by the realization that he faces impossible odds.

Seeing the film in this light, the climax is Eliot's decision to hurl Frank Nitti off the roof. This is the man that threatened Eliot's family (he probably realizes this), killed the little girl (he couldn't know this), killed Oscar and George (he could guess this), and killed Malone and shot the bailiff and two bystanders in the courthouse (of this Eliot is sure). Eliot spares the man's life when he's dangling from the rope, but has second thoughts when he dismisses Eliot's remonstrations about the electric chair. Will this guy get convicted in a town this corrupt? If he escapes death after bragging about his crimes to Eliot, is that justice?

Moreover, Eliot wants to protect his family. Leaving this man alive puts them at risk. If—if—Eliot throws Nitti off the roof with dispassion, as an executioner vaguely authorized by the State to take such action, is that murder? If he does it in anger, is it okay as long as it's a righteous anger not tied up with selfishness or vain conceit?

Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount:

Ye have heard it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca [empty fellow], shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. (Matthew 5:21-22)

Let us also consider Numbers Chapter 35, where God gives Moses instructions regarding the cities of refuge (designated areas where a man who had killed another could wait, being spared revenge by the victim's family until the people judged him in a trial). God said that if an instrument of iron, a stone, or a hand-weapon fashioned from wood was used to kill, then that is murder.

[And] if he thrust him of hatred, or hurl at him by laying of wait, that he die; or in enmity smite him with his hand, that he die: he that smote him shall surely be put to death; for he is a murderer: the revenger of blood shall slay the murderer, when he meeteth him. But if he thrust him suddenly without enmity, or have cast upon him any thing without lying of wait, or with any stone, wherewith a man may die, seeing him not, and cast it upon him, that he die, and was not his

enemy, neither sought his harm: then the congregation shall judge between the slayer and the revenger of blood according to these judgments [...] (vv. 20-24)

Life is sacred, and the irony is, by not taking life to avenge a murder, we risk minimizing the life that was taken. King David was authorized by God to destroy many of Israel's enemies in war, but when the king tried to begin work on God's temple, God said no. Though He still dwelled in the Tabernacle, which was just a fancy tent, God told David that his son would build the temple because David was "a man of war, and hast shed blood." (1 Chronicles 28:3) So God doesn't like killing even when it's not murder. It may not be sinful, per se, but it somehow taints us. So what is worse? Is it to take the life or spare the life?

Ness doesn't use a weapon to kill Nitti. He "thrust[s] him suddenly" "without lying of wait" but does he do so "without enmity"? Using Jesus's amplification of the rules on killing, anger that is "without a cause" risks judgment. Ness obviously has a cause—Nitti is contemptuous, bragging about killing Malone. So Ness is angry, but it seems to be a righteous—or justifiable—anger. The Apostle Paul wrote: "Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord." (Romans 12:17-19)

Our hero relied on the courts to take down Capone, after wanting to kill him in the hotel. He took no pleasure in killing the gangster in Canada when he refused Ness's order to put down his weapon. He has no love for death, he does not use a weapon against Nitti, he acts quickly without much contemplation, he is an agent of the state, and he fears a miscarriage of justice if this matter is left to the courts.

Ness does what he feels he must. And even if it is wrong, we still cheer. Is it because we revel in wrongdoing? To some extent that is true, and the movies can be a vicarious release for our most embarrassing and destructive desires. But here we cheer because we want to be spared the cruelties of a man like Nitti. If he dies then he cannot menace us and our kin. We cheer for Ness because if there is blood-guilt, the blood is on his hands, not ours.

But as Jesus reminds us, the critical thing is the heart—if we do the right thing for the wrong reasons then it's still wrong. Ness, who kills, could be innocent; while the citizen who reads in the newspaper about Nitti's death could be guilty!

Jeremiah 17:9 urges extreme caution: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" We should be slow to condemn the avenger *and* slow to cheer the bad man's death. The more we know of ourselves, the less palatable the lie becomes—the lie that we can make it without God.