

Notes for “The Chosen” series (Season 3) small groups Pastor Barry Foster

The following notes offer some background information, brief explanations related to Scriptural content and context, and suggestions for things to look for when viewing the episode. One practical note: you may find that it is easier to understand what is being said if the captions are turned on when viewing the show.

Episode 4: “Clean, Part 1”

Our episode begins by picking up from the second episode (“Two by Two”); we see scenes of the disciples doing what Jesus sent them out to do: preaching and teaching, healing the sick, including miraculous healings of people who are blind, deaf, or crippled, and casting out demons. Pay attention to the portrayal of the disciples as they carry out this assignment.

Note also that the disciples encounter some Jews who are consulting sorcerers who practice divination. Divination was the attempt to discern the will of the gods or learn about the future through reading of omens—messages from the gods or other indicators of one’s fate. One common source for such omens involved examination of the internal organs of an animal which had been sacrificed (often a dove or pigeon). This practice was very common throughout the ancient world, and a reminder that not every Jew in the first century was an observant worshiper of Yahweh or faithful to the Law, which strictly prohibited Israelites from engaging in any sort of magical or occultic practices. (See Leviticus 19:26, 31; Deuteronomy 18:9-12 for prohibitions against sorcery and divination in the Law; for evidence of its widespread practice, see Exodus 7:11; 1 Samuel 6:2; Isaiah 44:25.)

The thread that ties much of this episode together is the distinction between clean and unclean; we have many examples sprinkled throughout the episode. The distinction between clean and unclean is a matter spelled out in great detail in the Levitical laws and emphatically championed by the Pharisees. Leviticus 11 separates animals which may be eaten or used in sacrifices (clean) from those which may not (unclean). The instructions for ritual washings comprise much of the contents of Leviticus 12-15. And the various actions or conditions which rendered someone (or some item) ritually unclean were numerous, each one having its own set of procedures for restoring a person to a state of ritual cleanliness.

The emphasis on the state of being ritually clean is related to holiness. Since God is holy, those who approach him must likewise be holy, symbolized by being ritually clean. What is unclean must be kept out of God’s presence.

This notion of being clean or unclean extends to people, groups, relationships, associations or agreements with others, even to proximity—one must avoid contact or being near those who are unclean, lest their touch or presence render you unclean.

We meet another new minor character, who is unnamed in the gospel accounts, but is introduced to us as Veronica. She suffers from a rare disease that causes her to continually hemorrhage (thus rendering her continually unclean). Her story intersects with the story of the daughter of Jairus, but our screenwriters have left us with a cliffhanger to be finished in episode five. You can read the biblical accounts in Matthew 9:18-26; Mark 5:21-43; and Luke 8:41-56.

We also learn more about Tamar, who reveals that she is from Ethiopia. Although she is not a Jewess, she has been living among Jews for some time. A large group of Ethiopian Jews who claim to be descendants of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba exists to this day.

Some things to look for:

1. Consider the conversations between Rabbi Yusuf and Jairus, and contrast them with the actions and positions of R. Shmuel and R. Shammai. Those portrayals help us see how the Pharisees were divided concerning Jesus. Many of the Pharisees were strongly opposed to Jesus, even hostile. But others were sympathetic and some became his followers. One key point of conflict concerns the distinction between the Scripture and their traditions (the “oral law”).

2. Those conversations also demonstrate the care with which those in positions of authority within the Pharisees spoke. Those who live according to a strict code, where scrupulous observance of the most minute of details is not only expected, but monitored, must be cautious at all times. A hasty answer could trip you up, and be held against you for a long time. One must learn how to make carefully calculated but vague responses which can be understood to mean one thing while actually saying another thing.

3. Although the series has usually avoided being “preachy,” don’t miss the contemporary pop psychology marital/relationship advice! (It’s actually fairly helpful.)

Some questions to consider:

1. We find the disciples in this episode struggling with personal issues, relational problems, and questions about what ministry and following Jesus ought to be like. What do you think about the problems they seem to be struggling with? Do you struggle with similar issues or have similar questions? Why is that?

2. One of the issues Simon faces concerns the cost of following Jesus. Can you relate to his discomfort? What do you think Jesus will say to him as an answer?

3. How does thinking about the distinction between “clean” and “unclean” help you to understand God’s nature and ways? Do you find yourself thinking that you are “unclean” at times? Or that you feel “unclean”? What is the remedy for those feelings and thoughts?