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What Can Johnny Appleseed Teach Us?
The Parable of the Soils from a Worldview Perspective: Part 1
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For several years after my retirement from the North American Mission Board, along with my work with MarketFaith Ministries, I pastored a small church in Ellijay, Georgia. That area of northwest Georgia is well known for growing delicious apples. Before that time I did not know there are so many varieties of apples. I learned more than 100 different types are grown in the United States, including "Alice," "Golden Delicious," "Granny Smith," "McIntosh" (you know, like my laptop computer), and many more breeds. During this education in "apple-ology," I also studied the story of "Johnny Appleseed." The popular children's legend of Johnny Appleseed, as spread widely by Walt Disney, is that in the early 19th century he went all around the country spreading apple seeds randomly and talking to the animals as went gleefully along.

The truth about Johnny Appleseed is that he actually was a person named John Chapman. He was born in Leominster, Massachusetts, in 1774 (he died in 1845). Indeed, in the early 1800s, Chapman introduced apple orchards into Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. Factually, he started a number of apple nurseries, tended them carefully, and built fences to protect them from wild animals. Two aspects of Johnny Appleseed's story not in Disney's animation, or rarely mentioned in kid's books, are that Chapman's apples were used mostly to make hard apple cider, and that he was a devout follower of the Swedish cult leader Emanuel Swedenborg (see: Swedenborgianism: The Visionary Cult of a Genius -

<http://www.marketfaith.org/2018/07/swedenborgianism-the-visionary-cult-of-a-genius>).

In any case, it is clear that John Chapman, ahead of his time, understood that farming is a science. Today most modern farmers go to colleges like Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College (ABAC) in Tifton, Georgia, or Florida A&M University in Tallahassee. There they study the complex sciences of biology, botany, geology, meteorology, etc. One of the most important fields of study in this regard is the science of agronomy. Agronomy is the research of the chemical makeup of soils to determine what is needed to best raise certain crops. Agronomists test the soils' mineral content, acidity, hardness, etc. In the old days, farmers used to taste it. Now, chemists put soil samples through batteries of extensive tests to analyze their chemical components.

Now Jesus was neither a farmer nor an agronomist. Nonetheless, He often used vivid illustrations from agriculture, particularly in his parables. In one such parable, He used the symbol of farm soils to explain how people respond to the seeds of the Word of God that have been sown throughout the world. In Matthew 13:3-13 is recorded what is usually called Jesus' "Parable of the Sower." It should be better titled the "Parable of the Soils." The soils are the variable elements in the story, not the sower.

A parable, of course, is a story from the everyday world that Jesus told to illustrate a spiritual truth. This one is unusual in that He tells the story of four different kinds of soils to symbolize different ways people may

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respond to the gospel. In this two part article, we will look at this teaching of our Lord and interpret it using a worldview perspective. I believe this will make the story even more relevant to the current spiritual environment we face as believers, and help us to be better witnesses for Christ in it. Like Johnny Appleseed, we want to plant our seeds in the richest and most productive soil to produce fruit – in our case, of a spiritual nature.

This Parable of the Soils is somewhat unique among Jesus' repertoire in that He not only told the story, but also provided an explanation of its symbols and meaning. In most cases He just told the story and let His listeners figure it out. We will do our analysis by first looking at the plain story as Jesus related it. In the second installment we will look at His interpretations of the meanings and apply them from a worldview perspective.

We Start with Matthew's Account of Jesus Telling the Parable

3 And He told them many things in parables, saying, "Behold, the sower went out to sow; 4 and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up. 5 Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and they sprang up immediately, because they had no depth of soil. 6 But after the sun rose, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. 7 Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out. 8 But others fell on the good soil and yielded a crop, some a hundred, some sixty, and some thirty times as much. 9 The one who has ears, let him hear." (Matthew 13:3-9 NASB)

We first notice that this parable tells of a farmer (sower) going out into

his field to plant his seeds. Perhaps as He spoke, Jesus pointed to farmer working in a nearby field. In those days, a farmer would till the soil then go about tossing seeds on it hoping they would germinate, start growing, and ultimately produce fruit. That was the primary goal. If he planted the seeds, or even if the trees sprouted, but no fruit or vegetables appeared, he would have failed to accomplish his purpose. In Jesus' story, the farmer spreads the seeds about, but apparently was not careful where he tossed them as they landed on four very different kinds of ground. As we said, in this parable everything is equal except the soils. It is the same sower and the same seeds, only the ground is the variable component. Let's examine how Jesus described each of them in the story.

SOIL 1 - Useless Soil

...and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up. (Matthew 13:4 NASB)

Jesus states that the farmer threw some of the seeds on the hard ground beside a road. In that environment they were fully exposed, so the birds devoured them. In Luke's account, Jesus says the seeds were trampled under foot, then eaten by "the birds of the sky" (Luke 8:5). It is clear that this soil was useless for growing anything. The seeds were destroyed by people tramping over them, and consumed by the fowls before they could even begin to germinate.

The wooded property where we used to live was populated by a number of deer. You could easily see the many trails they regularly followed through the forest. Whereas the woods were full of trees and wild plants, nothing ever grew in the deer trails because it was all trampled over. This is the picture painted by Jesus with this type of soil. Nothing could grow there. It was totally useless.

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SOIL 2 - Rocky and Dry Soil

Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and they sprang up immediately, because they had no depth of soil. But after the sun rose, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. (Matthew 13:5-6 NASB)

Next, Jesus describes how some of the seeds fell on "rocky places, where they did not have much soil." Despite the dry and hard surface there was just enough ground for the seeds to sprout. Nonetheless, the plants did not survive for lack of depth for the roots. The hot sun scorched them, so they quickly died away. As Luke says, the seed "withered away because it had no moisture." (Luke 8:6)

A farmer's worse nightmare is drought. I remember hearing my wife's late mother describe the terrible times her childhood farm family endured in Oklahoma during the great drought they called "the dust bowl." They struggled to grow anything, and suffered in poverty until it finally ended.

So this soil, though it did allow for germination, was really no better than that on the road. The ground was too dry and the sun too hot. Nothing was going to grow enough to produce fruit.

SOIL 3 - Thorny Soil

Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out. (Matthew 13:7 NASB)

Have you ever heard of "The THING that ate Atlanta?" It came from Japan about 100 years ago. No, it was not Godzilla, he never made it this far. Rather, it was a weed we now know as KUDZU! All over the south you can see stalks of wild kudzu vines covering and, in some cases, killing bushes and trees.

In this part of His parable, Jesus says that some of the seeds fell on the ground, began to sprout, and maybe even took root and started to grow. Yet, He says, like kuzu on a magnolia tree, thorns and weeds grew up around it "and choked them out."

Any farmer knows that to successfully grow a crop, you must plow up the weeds and thorns or they will use up the nourishment in the soil and stifle the good crops before they can produce good fruit.

SOIL 4 - Rich and Fertile Soil

But others fell on the good soil and yielded a crop, some a hundred, some sixty, and some thirty times as much. (Matthew 13:8 NASB)

Finally, Jesus describes the kind ground that produces a good harvest. He says the seeds fell on the rich fertile soil and, as Luke records, they "grew up, and produced a crop a hundred times as much." (Luke 8:8 NASB). Jesus' point was that only this soil, in contrast to the other three, could produce a crop that yields a rich harvest. He says it was a hundred-fold (which was probably an exaggeration on Jesus' part to emphasize His point). And why was this so? Because this soil was adequately fertilized, plowed, tilled, irrigated, and was in the right climate. Any good farmer, like Johnny Appleseed, would know this principle.

So that was Jesus' simple parable of the soils. Apparently, however, His listeners did not get the point. They even quizzed Him as to why He told such stories. What did they mean?

10 And the disciples came up and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?" (Matthew 13:10 NASB)

His answer probably caused them to have even more questions.

11 And Jesus answered them, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. 12 For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. 13 Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. (Matthew 13:11-13 NASB)

It seems Jesus did not, in most cases, intend for all His listeners to comprehend the deeper meanings of His stories. He told His disciples, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted." Only those disciples whose minds were illuminated by the Holy Spirit could comprehend the full meanings of the parables. This principle still remains. Unsaved people who do not have the indwelling Holy Spirit to help them understand Jesus', and the Bible's, teachings cannot really grasp their deeper spiritual meanings and applications. As Paul stated:

14 But a natural (unsaved) person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. 15 But the one who is spiritual (a saved person) discerns all things, yet he himself is discerned by no one. 16 For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, THAT HE WILL INSTRUCT HIM? But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Corinthians 2:14-16 NASB)

So, given this perspective by the Lord, we cannot expect unsaved people to adequately interpret and apply the Scriptures or Jesus' teachings, especially the parables. However, as we indicated at the beginning of this article, this particular parable of the soils is unusual. Unlike most others, Jesus actually explains the meanings of the points of the story for His listeners and for us the readers. In the next installment, we will look carefully at Jesus' explanation of the parable, analyze its meaning, and make application from a worldview perspective. I think we will see that Jesus well understood the worldview principles we now discuss in our MarketFaith articles. In that way, we will see what we can learn from the Bible's Johnny Appleseed.

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