

Finding Fourth-Soil People: Jesus' Modus Operandi for Establishing a Movement

Bible scholars and missionaries often speak different languages. While missionaries might refer to Jesus' Parable of the Sower as representing His approach to fieldwork, His strategy for discovering a movement catalyst, or His modus operandi, biblical scholars use different words to describe Jesus' Parable of the Sower. Consider the following comments by scholars:

A. T. Cadoux suggests the parable represents Jesus' "apologia (defense) for His practice of preaching to all and sundry."¹ Malcolm Tolbert claims that Luke "connects the parable to the itinerant preaching mission conducted by Jesus in cities and villages."² N. T. Wright notes, "The paradoxical prophetic 'sowings' of the 'Word' were being recapitulated in Jesus' own ministry."³ Morna Hooker (easiest to understand) views Jesus' use of the parable as an "explanation of His whole ministry."⁴ Additional scholars

state the same, but in vaguer terms. Robert Stein says the Parable of the Sower "serves as an example of the preaching mentioned in Luke 8:1."⁵ Within Klyne Snodgrass's eight traditional options for interpreting the parable, he says, "The parable reflects the experience of Jesus in His own proclamation."⁶

Importance of the Parable of the Sower

The Synoptic Gospel writers do all they can to demonstrate the importance of the parable, mainly through placement within their narratives. The parable appears in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matt 13:1–23; Mark 4:1–20; Luke 8:4–15). Klyne Snodgrass says the Parable of the Sower represents the first substantive parable in the Synoptic Gospels.⁷ Only the Parable of the Sower and the Parable of the Mustard Seed appear in all

1 A. T. Cadoux, *The Parables of Jesus* (Chicago: Clarke, 1977), 155.

2 Malcolm Tolbert, *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1970), 9:72.

3 N. T. Wright, "Kingdom Redefined: The Announcement," in *The Historical Jesus in Recent Research*, ed. James Dunn and Scot McKnight (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 218–19.

4 Morna Hooker, *Gospel According to St Mark* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 122.

5 Robert Stein, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 24:242.

6 Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 156.

7 *Ibid.*, 145.

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three Synoptic Gospels. Many Bible scholars view the Parable of the Sower with high regard; R. C. H. Lenski claims that the predominant theme of the New Testament flows through Jesus' Parable of the Sower.⁸

Elevating the importance of the Parable of the Sower, Snodgrass describes the parable as “the parable about parables” because of Jesus’ statement to the disciples in Mark 4:13, “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any of the parables?”⁹ With the use of *παραβολὴν ταύτην* (this parable), Kenneth Wuest states that Mark clarifies his reference to the Parable of the Sower and claims the phrase *how is it possible* declares “the impossibility of knowing all the parables, if one does not know the one about the Sower.”¹⁰ Matthew Gumpert adds, “To understand what *the Parable of the Sower* means is thus to possess the key to understanding *all parables*.”¹¹ Quintin Quesnell states the same in the negative indicative; “If you do not understand the sower parable, you will not and cannot understand all the parables.”¹²

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The parable comes with an announcement by Jesus that a seven-hundred-year-old prophecy by Isaiah is officially fulfilled. The announcement appears between Jesus’ delivery of the parable and the explanation of the parable in which He quotes Isaiah 6:9, “Looking they may not see, and hearing they may not understand” (Luke 8:10). This quotation may appear insignificant or even confusing; only by reading the Isaiah passage does its significance become clear.

After Isaiah replied, “Here I am. Send me” (Isa.6:8), God delivers the bad news that even though Isaiah will proclaim, people will not hear or listen to him. Isaiah asks, “Until when, Lord?” (Isa. 6:11). God answers Isaiah in 11:1 by informing him that the period of time will

cease when a shoot grows out of the stump of Jesse. Only Matthew completes Jesus’ reference to the Isaiah prophecy passage with a positive and encouraging announcement:

But your eyes are blessed because they do see, and your ears because they do hear! For I assure you: Many prophets and righteous people longed to see things you see yet didn’t see them; to hear the things you hear yet didn’t hear them. (Matt. 13:16–17)

Matthew describes the disciples as living in an era when many will hear and respond to the preaching of the good news. Jesus uses the parable as a platform to make the announcement that the seven-hundred-year-old prophecy of Isaiah has ended.

Context of the Parable of the Sower

D. W. Cleverley Ford points out that Luke 8 is “about preaching.”¹³ An examination of the context of Luke’s presentation of the Parable of the Sower (Luke 8:4–15) demonstrates that proclamation of the Word of God represents the central theme surrounding the parable as well as the parable’s internal primary theme. The proclamation theme directly affects the meaning of the fruit of the Fourth-Soil Person. The theme appears within the parable with the first-soil person’s decision not to believe and with the decisions of the second-, third-, and Fourth-Soil Persons after hearing the proclaimed Word of God. After Jesus explains the parable, He delivers the parable of the lamp (Luke 8:16), which also carries the theme of proclamation. Finally, Luke places within proximity of the Parable of the Sower the two preaching campaigns of Jesus’ disciples (Luke 9:1–6; 10:1–24).

Applying the Parable: Attitude, Proclamation, and Analysis

One clear action and two implicit actions emerge from the parable. The first implicit action involves maintaining a positive attitude of a coming harvest (not a distant

8 R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg, 1943), 522.

9 Ibid. Scripture quotations are from the *Holman Christian Standard Bible*, 2009.

10 Kenneth Wuest, *Word Studies from the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 87.

11 Matthew Gumpert, *The End of the Meaning: Studies in Catastrophe* (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2012), 154.

12 Quintin Quesnell, *The Mind of Mark* (Rome: Pontifical Bible Institute, 1969), 214.

13 D. W. Cleverley Ford, *A Reading of Saint Luke’s Gospel* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1967), 116.

future harvest, but an immediate harvest). This attitude within Jesus appears when He sends out the seventy-two disciples, “The harvest is abundant” (Luke 10:2). The Parable of the Sower emits a positive outlook as it builds to an encouraging climactic ending. Disappointment of the three nonproducing soils dissipates with the appearance of a hundredfold-producing Fourth-Soil People, which we will see represents a movement catalyst.

The second action, and the most obvious, involves the action of sowing the Word of God, the gospel. Within the parable, the sowing occurs as a season, not as a continuous action. This period is followed by a season of evaluating germinated seeds, which enables the discovery of fourth-soil individuals. Looking at the ministry of Jesus in Galilee, His sowing season lasted roughly one to two years. With the sending of the seventy-two likely taking place in lower Galilee, Jesus appears on a mission to sow the gospel in all of Galilee’s 204 (according to Josephus) villages, towns and cities.

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The third action, analyzing germinated seeds, is often the most neglected of the three actions of the parable but should not receive a lower priority than the other two. The majority of the parable gives attention to the description of each soil and explains what a Fourth-Soil Person does and does not believe and do. The detailed descriptions serve as the key to finding fourth-soil movement catalysts. Missionaries are not community movement catalysts; their job is to find community movement catalysts.

Conclusion

Sowing abundantly likely leads to reaping abundant fourth-soil movement catalysts. Discovering multiple fourth-soil catalysts is good news for a people group and represents the best way of moving unreached people groups into the category of reached. Finding fourth-soil individuals creates for a missionary a new season of work that involves training, teaching, and forming churches within the *oikos* (family, household) of each Fourth-Soil Person. The Fourth-Soil People need the missionary as much as the missionary needs Fourth-Soil People.

A special joy and satisfaction awaits missionaries who adopt the Parable of the Sower as their field strategy in new areas of service. Their ministry will likely transform from a ministry of addition to multiplication. I doubt Jesus would be critical of a missionary attempting to replicate His ministry in pre-Pentecost Galilee. The Parable of the Sower provides missionaries with the opportunity to do ministry exactly the way Jesus did. But there are serious issues related to the understanding and translation of the Parable of the Sower that must be resolved before the parable becomes a useful tool for missionaries longing to see movements emerge in their fields of service. MF

