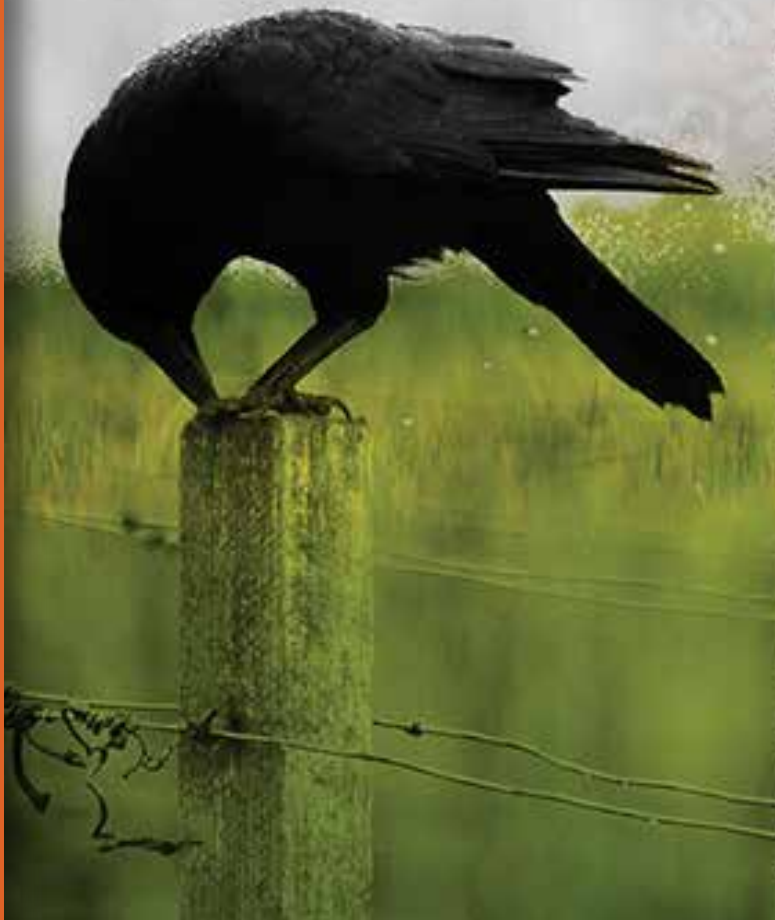


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# Finding Fourth-Soil People: **Pursuing Movements as Jesus Did**



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## Overview

Mathematician Steven Pither describes the difference between addition and multiplication through the use of personification. Addition's attempt to solve problems can be described as passive, lacking a drive to a goal, ill-prepared to overcome obstacles, and lacking enthusiasm to attain a highly valued purpose. Pither describes multiplication as having a desire to overcome obstacles, solve dilemmas, and achieve goals.<sup>1</sup>

Missionaries searching for ministry approaches in new mission fields have an assortment of strategies from which to choose. Some fit within the growth pattern of addition. Others position the missionary to experience multiplicative results. Some strategies have a basis from within Scripture; others appear to be structured more as a business model. This series of articles, titled *Finding "Fourth-Soil" People*, introduces Jesus' modus operandi for fieldwork used in Galilee, resulting in a large-scale movement occurring before Pentecost. Jesus' field strategy appears in the Parable of the Sower and contains a multiplicative ingredient: the hundredfold, Fourth-Soil Person (see Luke 8:8).

The *Finding Fourth-Soil People* series recognizes Jesus as the greatest missionary of all times and presents his successful movement in pre-Pentecost Galilee as a case study for missionaries entering into new fields of service. The articles demonstrate the importance of the Parable of the Sower and explain why the parable has not been used as a field strategy approach throughout the centuries—because of improper hermeneutics and understanding. The series also includes an explanation of the difference between a Person of Peace (see Luke 10:6) and a Fourth-Soil Person and the results of a field application using the Parable of the Sower as a field strategy.

I recently listened online to more than thirty sermons on the Parable of the Sower. The majority of the sermons showed concern for the lost by encouraging listeners to live "fourth-soil" lives (they define the fruit of a Fourth-Soil Person as spiritual maturity) that will attract lost people and motivate them to become believers. None of the sermons encouraged listeners to sow the gospel broadly in order to find fourth-soil individuals living in their mission fields. A few preachers acknowledged the parable's context of proclamation, but none used the parable to persuade listeners to adopt the parable as a plan to discover the joy of working as Jesus did, find Fourth-Soil People, and ignite movements as Fourth-Soil People win lost people a hundredfold.

The goal of this *Finding Fourth-Soil People* series is to discover the intent Jesus had in mind when he delivered the Parable of the Sower. Using the parable as a devotional piece or as a motivational device to inspire an increase in spiritual maturity misses the point of the parable. Within a church or within the mind of a missionary about to launch a ministry in a new mission field, the parable should function as a guide or strategy plan.

## Jesus' Team

All three Synoptic Gospel writers place the Parable of the Sower next to the story of Jesus' encounter with His mother and brothers (see Matt. 12:46–50; Mark 3:31–35; Luke 8:19–21). Matthew places the encounter earlier in the day of Jesus' delivery of the parable. Several Bible scholars take note of this and push for a connection between the family encounter and the parable. Jesus likely used the encounter as a springboard to deliver the parable. Luke's narrative makes the clearest connection by referring to the seed in the parable as "the Word of God." With this, Luke has done everything he can to connect the parable to the family encounter by citing Jesus as saying, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear and do the Word of God" (8:21).

"Doing the Word of God" functions as Luke's code language for spreading the gospel. Jesus' true family (team) members are those who spread (sow) the gospel. Luke continues his use of the code in Acts, when he says that the Word of God went out and big results followed ("the Word of God continued to increase and the number of disciples multiplied" Acts 6:7; see also 12:24; 19:20). When missionaries apply the Parable of the Sower and "do the Word of God," they essentially join Jesus' family team.

## Jesus Used the Parable to Describe His Field Strategy

*I cannot stress this point enough: the parable represents Jesus' own modus operandi for working Galilee.* John Nolland points to the parable as a reflection of Jesus' own ministry and his intention that the disciples would do the same: "There can be little doubt that the sowing of the seed represents the ministry of Jesus (and ultimately its continuation through the disciples)."<sup>2</sup>

The parable contains no imperatives. The grammatical structure of the parable comes in passive voice (e.g., "A sower went out to sow his seed") and does not ask the

1 Steven Pither, *The Complete Book of Numbers: The Power of Number Symbols to Shape Reality* (St. Paul, MN: Llewelyn, 2002), 214.

2 John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 530.

disciples to do anything. The nearest imperative to the parable appears when Jesus says, “Anyone who has ears to hear should listen!” (Luke 8:8).<sup>3</sup> Jesus uses the parable to describe how He worked. Yet rarely, if ever, do missionary training programs promote and encourage missionaries to adopt Jesus’ field strategy as presented in this parable. Other programs, methods, and approaches replace or bury the parable. Be careful when adopting a field strategy that does not reflect the Parable of the Sower; this may reveal a missionary attempting to improve on Jesus’ field approach. Simple obedience is all Jesus asks of His disciples.

Why do preachers or missionary trainers not present the parable as a field strategy? Has there ever been a time in the past two thousand years where the Parable of the Sower was used as an approach to field ministry? This article addresses these questions and examines four core issues that traditionally have suppressed the parable from being used as a ministry plan.

### Parable of the Sower? Soils? Or Seeds?

Ever wonder why some Bible translators label the Parable of the Sower the “Parable of the Soils” or the “Parable of the Seeds”? The titles for the parable represent an ongoing debate. These two titles ascribe greater importance to the soils and the seeds and shift focus away from the overarching theme of proclamation. A reason for Bible translators and scholars suggesting either of these two titles comes from the structure of the parable. Although the sower appears in the initial verse of the parable, the remainder of the parable focuses on the soils and the seeds. Nevertheless, the argument for assigning these alternative titles appears in opposition to the obvious; Jesus told us the parable’s title: “You, then, listen to the Parable of the Sower” (Matt 13:18).

The parable’s title, ascribed by Jesus, positions the parable as a lesson for sowers. Don’t lose sight of this or get distracted. The context of the parable in Luke’s narrative shows that Jesus uses the parable to describe how He worked and then uses the parable to train His harvest force of sowers how they are to work. Luke organizes his narrative intentionally to show us the function of the parable: chapters 1–3 represent the birth narrative; chapters 4–7 show Jesus alone working while the disciples watch; in chapter 8, Jesus trains

the disciples along with a large crowd of followers using the Parable of the Sower; and in Luke 9–10:24, Jesus deploys the Twelve and the seventy-two to sow.

### Parable of the Sower as Allegory

Merriam-Webster defines allegory as “the expression by means of symbolic fictional figures and actions of truths or generalizations about human experience.” The allegorization of Jesus’ parables coats them with mystery and has caused many scholars to join Theodore Weeden’s view of the Parable of the Sower as being impossible to understand in its original meaning. Referring to this parable, Weeden states, “apprehension of the full depth and scope of that message has not been possible with current hermeneutical methodologies . . . the limitations of these hermeneutics leave the message still under partial eclipse.”<sup>4</sup> Thankfully, other scholars express the opposite. Peter Rhea Jones expresses optimism, stating that Jesus’ parables “are better understood today . . . than they have been known for many centuries, possibly back to the first century.”<sup>5</sup>

Robert Stein tributes the early church (to AD 540) along with Origen (third century) as the first to bury the Parable of the Sower with the shroud of allegory.<sup>6</sup> Stein goes on to deliver good news that in the modern era, beginning with Adolf Jülicher’s two-volume work on parables (1888), “the Babylonian captivity of the parables to the allegorical method of interpretation came to an end.”<sup>7</sup>

Besides using hermeneutical methodologies to discover Jesus’ original intent of the Parable of the Sower, another method is to test the parable through application.

The last article in the *Finding Fourth-Soil People* series reports on a field application using the parable among the Ro (pseudonym) Muslim people group. The case study discusses a volunteer team that selected a people group in a district close in size to Jesus’ Galilee, mobilized seventy-two sowers trained only with the Parable of the Sower (and healing), sowed the gospel for three days, and analyzed germinated seeds (new believers) using the parable’s profile of each soil. For the next ten months, we closely monitored seven potential Fourth-Soil People discovered from the sowing campaign. The field exercise washed away the parable’s allegorical cloud and demonstrated to me the

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Theodore J. Weeden, “Recovering the Parabolic Intent in the Parable of the Sower,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 48, no 1 (1979): 97. Weeden goes on to give a glimpse of hope that today we can more fully understand the meaning of the Parable of the Sower using insights of ontology, epistemology, and the phenomenology of language.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Rhea Jones, “The Modern Study of Parables,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 22 (1980): 7.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Stein, “The Parables of Jesus in Recent Study,” *Word & World* 5, no. 3 (1985): 248.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 249. Stein states, “a parable is essentially a single metaphor with one basic point of reference,” 250.

simple and practical side of the parable.

## Salvific Status of the second-Soil Person

All three Synoptic Gospel writers record Jesus as saying the second-Soil Person believes or receives (the gospel) with joy. Luke's version states that the second-soil individuals later "fall away" (8:13 KJV), while Matthew and Mark prefer the word *stumble* (Matt 13:21; Mark 4:17). The degree of the parable's usefulness for field missionaries hinges on the understanding of whether the second-soil (and third-soil) person represents a genuine believer or an unbeliever. Core to the argument stands the doctrine of eternal security (which I affirm).

The problem arises when placing all truly saved believers within the category of the fourth soil. This means all saved people have produced thirtyfold, sixtyfold, or one hundredfold fruit. If fruit means "souls won" (this is addressed in the next section), then all fourth-soil true believers produced (past tense) a minimum of thirtyfold fruit to achieve this designation.

Brad McCoy states, "A large number of expositors misinterpret it [the Parable of the Sower], by insisting that only the fourth (and final) soil represents the response of born again believers."<sup>8</sup> The most popular approach for resolving the dilemma of the salvific condition of the second-Soil Person is to invoke the doctrine of eternal security and declare the belief of the second-Soil Person was never true belief but rather a superficial belief.

This approach overlooks the belief related to the first soil. The belief associated with the first soil is a belief unto salvation. Jesus stated, "so that they may not believe and be saved" (Luke 8:12). The same Greek work for "believe" is used in relation to the second-Soil Person. The focus of investigation falls on two Greek words, translated as "believe" (*pisteuo*) and "fall away" (*aphistantai*). Lloyd Olsen states, "fallen doesn't mean 'damned . . .' the word (*aphistantai*) means only depart, or go away in a very wide sense."<sup>9</sup> The Greek construct of "fall away" allows for the interpretation as "stumbles" as used by Matthew and Mark. Difficulty arises when making the claim that the second-soil category represents unregenerate people, when Luke clearly reports Jesus as saying that they believed.

Mary Ann Tolbert points out that in Mark's narrative

<sup>8</sup> Brad McCoy, "The Parable of the Sower," *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 5, no. 3 (July–September 1999): 2. McCoy views "the key to interpreting the parable is to recognize that only the first soil refers to unregenerate individuals."

<sup>9</sup> Lloyd Olsen, *Eternal Security: Once Saved Always Saved* (Mustang, OK: Tate, 2007), 180.



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the only group presented as moving from acceptance to failure when persecution arrives is the disciples. Tolbert demonstrates that Jesus uses the same word in Mark 14:27 to describe His prophecy for the disciples—“You will all fall away (*skandalisthēsēthe*)”—as He used to describe the “stumble” action of the second-Soil Person.<sup>10</sup>

Arriving to the conclusion that only the first soil represents an unregenerate person, while soils 2, 3, and 4 represent regenerate individuals, positions the parable as a highly useful tool for finding fourth-soil movement catalysts. Fourth-soil people are easy to identify, because they win others (due to the *oikos* factor) on a scale of thirtyfold, sixtyfold, or hundredfold. Some people believe but do not reproduce by sharing the gospel with others. Through the parable, Jesus trains His disciples to sort through the many responses, be aware of those who sincerely believe but will not share with others and be mindful that some will believe and will produce movements through their reproduction (i.e., share the gospel with their *oikos*).

### Fruit as Souls Won

Numerous Bible scholars present the Parable of the Sower as Jesus’ attempt to prompt the faith-wavering, halfhearted crowd on the shore of Galilee to produce greater spiritual fruit than what they were espousing. The first problem with this conclusion is that the crowd gathered around Jesus is anything but halfhearted. Simply to be near Jesus, they spontaneously left their homes. Luke writes, “As a large crowd was gathering, and people were flocking to Him from every town, He said in a parable” (8:4). With unfriendly crowds, Jesus preached repentance; with this crowd, He treated them as equals to the disciples by including them in the sower training.

Herschel Hobbs promotes the idea of “fruit” (Luke 8:15) as “fruits of the Spirit” (Gal 5:22–23). He states, “It takes time and rugged endurance to produce the fruits of a Christian life.”<sup>11</sup> Hobbs’ hermeneutical practice involves applying verses written by Paul more than twenty years later to the delivery of the Parable of the Sower. Robert Plummer recommends that a pathway for understanding Jesus’ parables comes from examining the context of each parable.<sup>12</sup> When examining the context of the Parable of the

10 Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 128.

11 See Herschel Hobbs, *An Exposition of the Four Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1966), 138.


12 Robert Plummer, “Parables in the Gospels: History of Interpretation and Hermeneutical Guidelines,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 13, no. 3 (2009): 5.

Sower, one sees the theme of proclamation. Most scholars agree with this conclusion. Tom Johnston does not mince words when examining the nature of the fruit of the Fourth-Soil Person as related to the context of proclamation.

In the context it is most logical that the fruit in question is the Word of the gospel sown in the lives of others, in other words, multiplying believers; to see fruit in this context as anything else, such as merely the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23), the fruit of one’s words (James 3:12), or the fruit of one’s teaching (Mt. 7:15–20), seems quite shallow and/or avoiding the obvious.<sup>13</sup>

Remaining within the context of the parable, Earle Ellis recognizes the nature of the Fourth-Soil Person’s fruit, “Only the last [good soil] produces the fruit of witnessing and obedience.”<sup>14</sup> Clearly the result of witnessing involves either rejection or acceptance of the gospel (i.e., the winning of souls). “Obedience” in this context likely carries a narrow meaning of “doing the Word” (see Luke 8:21), which is to sow the Word of God (i.e. proclamation) rather than a broad meaning of obeying all of God’s commands.

## Conclusion

Over the centuries, the Parable of the Sower has been subjected to attempts of making the parable difficult to understand. Lurking in the shadows of many missionary training programs is the belief that aggressive proclamation as seen in the parable represents an outdated model. A relational, nonconfrontational, and “earn their trust before sharing” idea of evangelism represents the best approach for today. The problem with this ideology is that you will not find it in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus’ approach takes this ideology into account; the Fourth-Soil Person uses this approach to win all of his friends and family (the *oikos* factor). Missionaries and cultural outsiders are not Fourth-Soil People in new mission fields. Their job is to find Fourth-Soil People through large-scale seed sowing campaigns so that Fourth-Soil People will believe and then begin the process of launching a movement in their communities. 

<sup>13</sup> Tom Johnston, “The Parable of the Sower,” chap. 25, *Evangelizology* (2015 unpublished edition) 25:995, accessed July 21, 2015, [<http://www.evangelismunlimited.com/documents/evangelizology/evangelizology-2014-chapter-25.pdf>.]

<sup>14</sup> Earle Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), 126.