SERMON · MT. CALVARY LUTHERAN CHURCH, SANTA CRUZ AREA

The Topo Map of Faith: Outcomes, Systems, and Grace

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost · July 12, 2026
Readings: Isaiah 55:10–13 · Psalm 65:[1–8] 9–13 · Romans 8:1–11 · Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23

Preached by Dr. Thomas Lucking, PhD, LMFT thomaslucking.com

1. The Hook: Nightfall in Nisene Marks

Last weekend, some friends and I decided to take advantage of the beautiful summer weather and head down to The Forest of Nisene Marks State Park for a mountain bike ride. If you've ever been down there, you know how spectacular it is—towering second-growth redwoods, deep canyons, and miles of winding trails. But there is a reality to the redwoods: the canopy is so thick that it acts like a dimmer switch on the sun.

As afternoon bled into evening, twilight didn't just fade; it vanished. Night fell fast, and under that dense ceiling of branches, it became pitch black. And in the dark, the trails began to look identical. Before we knew it, we had missed a critical marker. We made a wrong turn. And then, trying to correct that turn, we made another.

When you realize you are lost in the wilderness at night, a very natural, very predictable human friction starts to creep into the group. There is physical exhaustion, there is a spike of anxiety, and there are suddenly differing opinions about which direction to head and whose intuition we should trust. It's the kind of moment where panic can easily take the wheel.

But collectively, as a group, we realized that obsessing over the overwhelming macro-problem—*"Are we stuck out here all night? Is this the end?"*—was completely useless. It wasn't going to track down a trail. We had to pivot our minds. We had to focus strictly and hyper-locally on the immediate micro-reality before us. We looked at each other and agreed: *Forget the big picture for a second. What is the very next right decision we need to make to move forward ten feet?*

We pulled up a basic map application on a cell phone. Looking at the screen, we spotted a line that appeared to be the shortest, most direct route out of the park boundaries and back toward safety. We had our target. We had a clear, defined goal.

There was just one massive, structural problem with our plan: we were looking at a flat digital map, and we did not have a **topographical map**.

We could see the two-dimensional line on the screen, but we couldn't see the vertical reality of the terrain. We had no idea that the "shortest route" on paper actually required us to abandon our mountain bikes entirely, drop them in the dark brush of a steep canyon, and attempt to scale a near-vertical mountain wall. By midnight, we found ourselves on all fours in the dirt, crawling through fallen logs, scratching through briars, and literally grabbing onto exposed redwood roots just to hoist our bodies up to the next fragile foothold.

2. The Psychology: Outcome Goals vs. Implementation Systems

In my day-to-day work in psychology, I encounter this exact human dilemma all the time. In behavioral science, we make a sharp distinction between what we call **Outcome Goals** and what we call **Implementation Intentions**.

An *Outcome Goal* is that flat line on the digital map. It's the desired destination. It's incredibly easy to name, and it sounds beautiful when we say it out loud. We do it every January, and we do it throughout our lives: *"I want to have a peaceful, communicative marriage." "I want to be a less anxious, more present parent." "I want to develop a deep, resilient relationship with God."* Those are outcomes.

But as the author James Clear famously notes in his study of behavioral habits, we do not actually rise to the level of our goals; we fall to the level of our *systems*. The real friction in human life—and the reason so many of our best intentions fall apart—is that we are great at picking destinations, but we are terrible at building the systems to get there.

Implementation is the topographical map. It's the steep ridge. It's the daily, gritty, unglamorous system of "if-then" choices that actually translates a concept into reality. It is a lot easier to claim the outcome goal of *"I want to be a patient, Christ-like person"* than it is to establish a functional, daily implementation system of breathing, pausing, and shutting your mouth when someone is pushing your absolute last button at ten o'clock at night. When the terrain of life gets brutal, your outcome goal won't carry you up the ridge—only your immediate, next-step implementation system will.

3. The Scripture: The Crowd, The Messiah, and The Four Soils

This brings us directly into the heart of our Gospel text from Matthew 13. To truly understand what Jesus is doing with this famous Parable of the Sower, we have to look at the deep biblical background and the context of the crowd standing on the beach.

Jesus is preaching at the Sea of Galilee, and the text says the crowd is so massive, so suffocating, that he actually has to step into a fishing boat and push out into the water just so they don't crush him. Why is this crowd so desperate? Why are they straining to hear him? Because they have a massive, collective *Outcome Goal*. They are living under the brutal, crushing boot of the Roman Empire. They want a political Messiah. They want a military king who is going to ride into Jerusalem, raise an army, and overthrow their oppressors overnight. That is their map.

But Jesus stands up in the boat, looks at this crowd hungry for a revolution, and he tells a story about… *farming*.

He completely upends their expectations. He is telling them: *The Kingdom of God does not operate like a sudden military coup. It operates like a seed sinking into dirt. It is a slow, microscopic, daily process of implementation.* And then he breaks down the four soils, which are essentially four distinct psychological and spiritual profiles of how human beings handle the friction of implementation.

- **The Path** represents the profile of zero implementation. This is the person who hears a beautiful spiritual truth or a great idea on Sunday morning, but has absolutely no daily system or structural habit to dig it into the soil of their life. Because the soil of their routine is packed hard by cynicism and busyness, the environment—the birds of the air—snatches the seed away before the first step is ever taken. It's a great intention with a non-existent system.
- **The Rocky Ground** is the profile of the "flash in the pan." These are the people who are driven entirely by emotional motivation. They love the *Outcome Goal* of faith. They are joyful and enthusiastic when the music is playing and the sun is shining. But because they didn't look at the topo map of what it actually costs to follow Jesus, the moment the sun comes up—the moment the heat of life hits, the moment they face a medical crisis, a grief, or the social friction of standing up for justice—their roots are shallow, and they wither away because they didn't build the underlying daily habits to sustain them.

- **The Thorny Ground** is the classic profile of the overwhelmed system. These are people who genuinely want the harvest of a faithful life. They have good soil. But their daily schedule is a dense, unmanaged thicket of competing priorities. Jesus calls them the "cares of the world and the lure of wealth." The sheer volume of environmental noise, anxiety, and the endless pursuit of comfort acts like choking briars. The implementation gets smothered simply because there are too many things competing for the same square inch of dirt.
- **The Good Soil** is the alignment of outcome and implementation. It describes the one who hears the word, *understands it*, and systematically integrates it into the rhythm of their life. They are the ones willing to do the crawl-and-grip work of spiritual formation. They practice forgiveness when it hurts; they show up for their neighbor when it's inconvenient; they dedicate time to prayer and scripture when they are tired. And the resulting thirty, sixty, or hundredfold harvest? It isn't a magical, overnight miracle. It is the compound interest of small, faithful daily systems lived out over a lifetime.

4. The Deep Theology: Isaiah and the Unstoppable Rain

Now, if the sermon stops right here, I have failed you as a Christian preacher. Because if the message of the church is simply, *"Go home, work harder, clean up your thorns, and be better dirt so you can be a stronger climber,"* then this isn't the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It's just a self-help seminar wrapped in a religious robe.

The cold, hard truth of the human condition is that every single one of us—no matter how many books we've read or how mature we think we are—will experience moments where our systems completely collapse. We will find ourselves in situations where we have made three wrong turns, dropped our bikes in the canyon out of sheer exhaustion, and found ourselves lost in a pitch-black midnight.

And this is where our first reading from **Isaiah 55** changes everything.

To understand the beauty of this text, you have to realize that this passage was spoken to the Hebrew people at the very nadir, the lowest absolute point, of their history. They were exiled in Babylon. They had been there for seventy years. The Babylonians had marched into Jerusalem, leveled the walls, burned the temple to ash, and dragged them away in chains. The people's "systems"—their priesthood, their monarchy, their liturgy—were completely gone. They were a people living in a historical midnight, clawing at the dirt, wondering if God had forgotten them entirely.

And how does God speak to them? God doesn't give them a checklist of rules to get out of exile. God uses the imagery of the weather.

Think about the weather. Weather is a universal reality. Everyone is affected by it, and absolutely no one can control it or stop it. Rain and snow do not ask the soil for permission to fall. Rain doesn't check to see if the ground has a perfect implementation strategy before it hits. It falls universally—on the beautifully manicured lawn, the hard-packed walking path, the rocky cliff, and the thorny briar patch alike.

God says: *"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven… watering the earth and making it bring forth and sprout… so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose."*

This is the core of our theology: **God's grace is an active, unstoppable force that alters the very landscape of our reality.** God's ultimate *Outcome Goal*—your salvation, your healing, your redemption, and the restoration of this broken world—is guaranteed by *God's* faithfulness, not your climbing skills.

When you are stranded in the thorns, when your roots are dry and your heart is hardened by the world, God's grace keeps raining down on you anyway. The Word itself has the power to break up the hard ground. The Word itself penetrates the rocks. God doesn't wait for you to become perfect soil before He decides to love you; God throws the seed of grace right into the middle of your mess, providing the next right decision, the next root to grab onto, one step at a time.

5. The Conclusion: The Signpost and the Rescue

Bring your minds back with me to midnight on that ridge in Nisene Marks last weekend. We crawled over the final, grueling lip of that steep canyon wall—scratched up, covered in sweat and dirt, having left our expensive bikes behind in the dark. And right there, sitting on the edge of the clearing in the pitch black, a bizarre sight emerged: a large Buddha statue draped in colorful prayer flags.

Now, it wasn't a traditional Christian symbol, but in that moment, it functioned as a profound signpost of grace. It was a visible marker that meant we had finally crossed the boundary line out of the trackless, chaotic wilderness and back into a space that had been touched and shaped by human community. It meant we had found a trail.

That dirt road led to pavement, which eventually wound its way down to Trout Gulch Road. And because a loving spouse back home had realized we were overdue, kept her head, and called for help, we didn't have to walk all the way back to civilization. A park ranger truck was already driving up that paved road to scoop us up, throw us in the cab, and bring us safely home.

And the beautiful thing about the economy of grace is that the story didn't actually end last Sunday at midnight. We still had a problem: our bikes were sitting out there in the elements, abandoned next to a waterfall in the depths of a canyon. We needed a better system to get them back.

And that is when our own church community stepped in. This week, Steve heard about our ordeal. He didn't judge us for getting lost. Instead, he offered community support and recommended a specialized GPS tracking app for our phones—a better tool, a highly precise system.

Just yesterday, armed with that collective wisdom and better data, we hiked back down into those woods. And because we had the right system alignment this time, we walked straight to the spot. There they were, sitting quietly by the waterfall: our bikes, completely recovered, pulled out of the wilderness, and redeemed.

Brothers and sisters, as we navigate the dark, dense woods of this life, you are going to encounter steep ridges and sudden cliffs that you did not see coming on your flat map. There will be seasons where your daily implementation systems completely fail you, where you feel choked by anxieties, or where your faith feels as shallow as rocky ground.

But hear this good news today: you do not navigate the darkness alone. You are surrounded by a community of faith—this church—called to carry you, to equip you, and to hand you the tools to grow. And above all, you are held by a Sower who is wildly, recklessly in love with you.

Christ does not demand a flawless, mistake-free performance before He rescues you. He meets you right where you are on all fours, flashes a light in the dark, points to the next right decision, and promises by the power of His unstoppable Word to bring you all the way home.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Dr. Thomas Lucking, PhD, LMFT is a psychotherapist and coach who preaches at Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church in the Santa Cruz area. More sermons and information about Christian counseling: **thomaslucking.com/sermons**

© 2026 Dr. Thomas Lucking. You are welcome to share this sermon for non-commercial use with attribution.