

6th Sunday after Trinity. Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23
St James' Church, Shirley. Eucharist 12 July 2026

Sermon: Staying Focused

The team talk

I wonder whether Jesus first told the parable of the sower at a moment when things simply weren't going very well. Perhaps it was one of those stories he returned to at key points — times when the criticism, the rejection, and the plain opposition were beginning to wear down those who followed him, and maybe even Jesus himself. Perhaps even his closest disciples were starting to feel discouraged and doubtful. Or that things were going so well, they were becoming smug.

In that sense, the parable of the sower is something like a half-time team talk. The kind a manager gives when the team is being battered, or when the boss gathers everyone together with a tray of cakes and a few hopeful words because morale is low and the company isn't doing well. Or where they need to refocus and see the job through because complacency is setting in

It's both an honest acknowledgement that things don't always go smoothly, the dangers of when things go too well, and an encouragement to stay on target and not get blown off course.

Jesus and Matthew

The gospels tell us plainly that from beginning to end Jesus struggled to get his message across. We read them with the lens of hindsight — knowing what happened next, knowing that two thousand years later we're still gathered around his words. But in those early years it was touch and go. Jesus faced constant misunderstanding, resistance, and outright hostility. It must have been exhausting and upsetting — the kind of thing that would be soul-destroying for many leaders.

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Matthew knew all this. He wrote his gospel in the early 70s, at a time when people were debating the future of the Jewish faith and the identity of Jesus. His community was facing similar struggles — trying to convince people that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, risen and reigning.

So the parable of the sower becomes a moment of realism and reassurance. Matthew knows — and Jesus knew — that this message will meet all kinds of responses. Some simply can't comprehend it. Some enter into it half-heartedly. Some think they don't need it. Those are the soils.

The soils

First, the seed that falls on the path — the message that never sinks in. Jesus says this is the person who hears but does not “understand”. And the word he uses means far more than intellectual grasp. It means to perceive, to connect, to let something touch the whole self — body, mind, and spirit. Sometimes we simply don't let the message get close.

We keep it at arm's length, defying our own instincts and curiosity. We hear the words, but we don't allow them to land emotionally or spiritually. And Jesus is honest: there is a spiritual conflict in every human heart. There are forces, pressures, habits, and fears that snatch away the word before it has any chance to take root.

Second, the seed on rocky ground — the message that springs up but cannot endure. This is the person who hears and embraces the message with joy, but then gives up. And Jesus says this happens when suffering comes. This is the natural questioning that emerges from pain. When life becomes difficult, faith can feel thin. Enthusiasm evaporates and we feel let down and maybe even foolish because what once felt clear and hopeful suddenly

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feels messy and impossible. This isn't failure — it's human nature. Jesus is naming the reality that suffering tests faith more deeply than anything else. He asks for trust at the very moment when trust feels furthest away.

Third, the seed among thorns — the message choked not by suffering, but by success. This is the person whose faith is not destroyed by pain, but by comfort. Life goes well. We feel secure, capable, and in control. The pressures and joys of wealth, achievement, and busyness crowd out the need for God. Faith becomes optional. And many people — Jesus says this plainly — only want a useful God: someone to call on when life goes wrong, but someone we don't have to think about when life goes right.

Encouragement

These soils don't necessarily represent different people. They represent different conditions of the human heart — the whole of our being: body, mind, and spirit. And these conditions shift throughout our lives. Sometimes we are the path, sometimes the rocky ground, sometimes the thorny soil.

And we can see these soils on a grand scale too — in the life of the whole human race today.

Jesus names all this not to condemn us, but to encourage us. Because the sower keeps sowing. God keeps speaking. And even when much seems lost, the promise is that the harvest will come — thirty, sixty, a hundredfold. Because sometimes — by grace — we are good soil, and the word takes root and bears fruit.

Us

So, I wonder where we are today. Do we need a rallying half-time team talk — to alert us to carry on paying attention to our lives of

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faith; perhaps to help us keep going when it's tough; or maybe to help us stay focused if everything is going too well.

Wherever we are, know that God is still speaking to you and to me. God meets us in whatever condition our hearts are in, and wants us to understand — deeply, fully — so that we can bear good fruit, and yield that good fruit in a world that so desperately needs it. Amen.

Rev'd Richard Haynes 6th Sunday after Trinity