

Series: *STUCK! Faith Without Traction* - February 13, 2011

STUCK IN CHURCH

Luke 15, Acts 2

Speaker: Ken Davis

1. Bring up the word **church** in just about any context outside of it—and the response you'll get is a mixed bag—anywhere from vague praise to venom. **Really!** The phrase **stuck** in church would get anything from “That’s tough” to “That’s **horrible**—like being stuck in an elevator with **Church Lady**—worse than purgatory!”

-I googled the phrase **stuck in church**—and actually found a blog with the same title. It's by this guy in New Zealand named Mark—who was attracted to a girl he thought was gorgeous [pic]. Then he says:

But there's a catch – there's *always* a catch! She's one of them there Christians. [Gasp!] Not a burning witches at the stake Christian; or a picketing dead soldier's funeral Christian – she hasn't set any abortion clinics on fire... yet. She's just a regular Seventh Day Adventist Christian, with Christian beliefs. Her father's a pastor, she believes in God, she reads the bible, she believes that Jesus loves her and died for her sins. Problem is – I don't believe in any of these things. Except for the 'dad being a pastor' part. That's a cold, hard scientific fact – I'll let that one pass. Now for the point, and the reason for the existence of this blog. Before I got married, myself, and the missus to be, got together and had a wee chat about our obvious differences and how they could be managed (cordially, without the need for head sever age). Eventually a compromise was struck – she accepted the probability that I would never, ever... ever get baptized as a Christian. In return I agreed to accompany her to church – not every week, but most weeks – not to keep up appearances, but to keep her company, and maybe learn something about her beliefs in the process.

- a. In Mark's case—he's **stuck** in church because of the girl he married. My Dad was a pastor—and I sometimes felt stuck in church. Especially when it was time to go home—and they talked and talked and **talked!** Sometimes I felt stuck when something cool was going on at school or with my friends—and I had to go to **church!**
- b. What does it mean to be **stuck in church?** Well, it can mean that something in you—a **lot** in you doesn't want to be there, right? It's going against the grain. I don't think the problem is so much being stuck in church as it is being stuck in religion. We are part of it—because we feel better about ourselves when we're religious. And, frankly, we're scared **not** to be religious. After all, God—the One with the big stick might be watching!
- c. One of Jesus' best-known—and most profound stories—was about two sons who were **stuck**—in this case, in the family business—a farm. The younger son took the most obvious way out; he rebelled. He asked for his share of the

estate—unthinkable in that culture—and then took it, and blew the whole wad in the Las Vegas of that day.

-But when his money ran out—so did his friends. And so here's this good Jewish boy—and the only way for him to make a living is by swilling hogs. When he got hungry—he started thinking about home—and his Dad. So, he had this speech all prepared—you know, that he'd screwed up—and would his Dad be willing to hire him. Well, His Dad saw him coming—and didn't even give him a chance to make his speech. He threw his arms around him and cried—and welcomed him back into the family with a huge party for the entire town.

-Now, has anyone here ever met someone who, in their childhood or teens, felt **stuck in church**—and just blew the whole thing off—God, following Jesus, what the Bible says about life. They left, and never came back? I have a **lot** of friends who did that. And I get it!

-But this story isn't just about the son who rebelled, left—and then found grace. It's also about the son who stayed. The **good** son. I mean, he seems very respectable. He's the one who's working so hard that by the time he gets home—the party is in full swing! And he finds out that it's for his younger brother—who's returned. Listen to how Jesus describes him:

“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’
(Luke 15:28-30 TNIV)

-Now, how many of you think this older brother sounds like a son who loves and respects his Dad—and would do **anything** for him? Not so much. What you realize is that the other brother wants what his Dad has, too, only he plans to get it by being the **good** son. Do you see how rude he is with his Dad? How much he hates his brother? This sense of entitlement: ***I deserve better than this!***

2. There were two groups of people standing around Jesus that day as he told that story. Both of them were stuck. The tax collectors and **sinners**, as they were called—the younger brother types—felt trapped in a religiously oppressive culture. And they had pretty much flipped off God, their families, and any moral values to be free—and make money.

-The leaders of this culture—the Pharisees and professors of religion were good. **Really** good. They stayed home and worked the farm for Dad. They knew the Bible—and they practiced goodness—praying, spending time discussing and applying the Bible—and doing good deeds for the poor. To their surprise, Jesus identifies them as **loved** by the Father, but **stuck!** Trying to **earn** the Father's favour through their stellar

performance. In their minds, they had worked **hard** for God's favour and blessing. They **deserved** it!

-Here's what Jesus is addressing. When someone has chosen life in the fast lane and had a high speed encounter with reality—do you think they know they have a problem? Eventually—when there's enough pain—people tend to think, "Maybe this isn't going so well!" And when someone, like Jesus, offers grace, forgiveness, a fresh start—they sometimes jump at the chance.

-Now, imagine someone who's well-respected in religious circles, prays, studies their Bible every day, gives to the poor, and has people coming to them asking for spiritual advice. What is the likelihood of them saying, "Man, **I** need grace! I need a do-over!"

-These religious professionals Jesus was dealing with weren't just **stuck** in religion—they were super-glued into it. And Jesus' words seem harsh and tough—because it would take verbal dynamite to help them see their arrogance and understand how much God hated it. What do you say about grace and forgiveness and mercy to someone who is **absolutely convinced** that they don't need it? And Jesus' story leaves things up in the air. The **good** son is still furious and alienated when the story ends.

-The point Jesus makes is **profound**. You can love religion, the holy writings, the rituals, the prayers, the smoke, the candles—think you're God's favourite son or daughter and be proud of it—when you're **actually** just stuck; stuck in church; stuck in religion; stuck on the performance treadmill.

3. One of the huge problems throughout the years has been confusing religion with loving and following God. In Jesus world, religion was the most important thing going. The super-religious were the heroes. How many of you think things have maybe changed in 21st century GTA. That may **still** be true in small town Georgia—but not here!

-We live in a culture that, for the most part, **despises** religion. When I'm doing a funeral, I will usually say, "I don't think God cares a whole lot about religion." When I say that people will generally nod their heads and even smile. Why?

-Well, just a little history. In the early 1900s, religion was very important to people—and held a privileged position in almost every culture. In North America, believing in God and going to church was something that most decent people did.

-About mid-century, there was a huge change. The leaders of cultural institutions confidently predicted a religionless future. And religion began to be seen and written about—not as neutral, but as bad for social progress and development. Remember John Lennon's song, **Imagine?** In essence, what he said was, "Let's just get rid of the notion that there's anything more than just this life—and that will get rid of the war and the chaos. Religion is what divides us—so if we can just get rid of it, we'll **all** be happier!"

-Without getting into the philosophical details, this critique of religion finds its basis in the writings of Freud, Marx and Nietzsche. They said that religion is a form of self-justification; a way to grab power—and anesthetise the masses by telling them that

there will be pain-relief in heaven. And, of course, Nietzsche capped it off by saying that **any** truth claim—especially if it's religious--is ultimately a power trip.

- Here's what I think: We can't ignore these critiques of religion—and we shouldn't. Christianity as a **religion**...let me say it again—**Christianity as a religion** has done more to slur the name of Jesus than anything else. Know why? Jesus **never** came to create another religion!

*If you read history, you find that religion **has** been used as a power play on people and governments.

*Religion **has** been used as an excuse to oppress and enslave people

*Religion **has** excused people from accountability who **should've** been exposed

*Religion **has** been extremely divisive in our world. When you look at the past 20 years in our world, religion has caused more bloodshed than political ideology.

a. Now, maybe you're thinking, "Ken—you're a **religious** person! How can you say that?" I can say it because I'm convinced that Jesus came to **replace** religion with Himself. If you read what Jesus said, it becomes **very** clear why it was religious people who wanted him executed! For three straight years, Jesus repeatedly, savagely, and relentlessly deconstructed religion.

-Religion is about human attempts to earn Heaven or find a good life. Read about them. There are steps, pillars, prayers, readings, rules to keep, rituals to perform. **Do** is the operative word. Religions tell you what to believe and **do** to earn Heaven or attain a good and peaceful life.

b. The strange place that many people find themselves in today is that they mistrust--even hate religion—but there's this deep sense inside that there's something **beyond** this life. They're stuck. One well-known journalist from NYC wrote, "We hate religion, but we're haunted by faith and by the spiritual...I've tried love, achievement, stuff, therapy and wrote two books on science—but these didn't answer the question."

-And **that's** what Jesus came to heal and resolve. To help younger sons—who hate religion--come home. Only the grace of Jesus—purchased when Jesus **died**—can welcome people home **without** religion.

c. Now—here's the problem for us—and for people who feel **stuck in church**. Somehow, over time, the faith, the life, the goodness, the grace, the love, the hope, the peace Jesus taught hardened, crystallized—and became a religion. Things that people can do without their heart **ever** being transformed.

4. In our world, the word **church** has gotten permanently intertwined with buildings, what goes on **inside** those buildings—and **religion**. The confusion is understandable; the church is made up of people—just like religion. The church has structure, holy writings, uses buildings to meet—and observes special days and ceremonies—like religion.

-The church, though, is something way different—at least it was intended to be. The true church is people who belong to Jesus—not a building or an organization. Jesus laid the foundation for the church through his ministry—characterized by the restoration of people’s bodies, minds, souls and relationships. Initially, it was the group of forgiven people who followed Him—and believed in Him. He **called** them to be his followers—and 12 to be his **disciples**.

-After he was crucified and rose from the dead—Jesus gave this group of followers an **impossible** mission—He **sent** this group out to transform the world with the Good News that God’s Kingdom had come—and that through Jesus everyone is offered forgiveness.

When the Holy Spirit came upon this group of 120 people, that jump started the Church—and within 300 years it literally spread around the world of that day. In fact, the world has never been the same. The **Church** didn’t create the mission; God, through Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit, created the church to continue **His** Mission—to restore **everyone** and **everything** to Himself.

- a. Here’s the point I’m trying to make. The true **Church** was not, **is** not, and never **will** be a religion. At the core, the church has nothing to do with buildings, rituals and robes and symbols. The church is **not** a religious organization—run by religious professionals. The **church** is **PEOPLE!** The word **church** actually comes from the Greek root word *kaleo*—or **call**. And the church is **still** formed by the Spirit of God **calling** people to faith in Jesus—like **you!** Many of you know exactly what I’m talking about. For those who will follow Him, Jesus chose the word **ecclesia**—which means a gathering of the **called out ones**.
- b. This mission of the church—the **called out ones--will** be successful. Jesus said, “All power has been entrusted to me—and I’ll be with you!” Jesus said, “Even the gates of hell and death won’t be able to stop my Church!” The defining characteristic for his people was **not** power—it was—and **is—love!**

-When **believing** the right things—and being **right** has been the defining mark of Jesus’ followers, it’s resulted in self-righteousness, judgmentalism and smugness. But when Spirit-empowered **love** has been the driving force—it’s been breathtaking!

And, through the years, people have risked their lives and given away their money to serve the poor and the uneducated and free the slaves—and spread the Good News. Followers of **The Way** have unhesitatingly laid everything on the line—including their lives—for Jesus, the One they have been forgiven by and belong to.

-**That**, friends, is the **Church**. People who are part of this movement struggle with sin like everyone else—and they will, with humility, admit that. But under everything in their lives is this deep reality that without the grace of God, they are **nothing**. This movement, unlike the tragic splintering of denominations—is unified in Jesus. It’s called the **family of God**—where God is their Father.

They are called ***the Body of Christ***—because they are Jesus’ eyes, ears, feet, hands—bringing healing and grace wherever they are.

- c. And at this very moment, this movement is going on in the most unusual of places—all over the world. They’ll meet wherever they can—from cathedrals and living rooms to rough bamboo structures with thatched roofs. These ***called out*** people are found in every economic strata, in every government—conservative or liberal—in every educational system, every business, every city, every neighborhood—***everywhere!***

-See, Jesus plan—through the Holy Spirit—was to infiltrate ***everything*** with goodness, forgiveness, love and peace. Jesus once said, “It’s like a little bit of yeast in a huge blob of dough. Give it time—and it will change ***everything!*** Know why?

Because God is ***Amazing--***and He wants ***everyone*** to taste the life and freedom He gives—and come ***home!***

5. Two thousand years of history has proved that when the church is at it’s best, it’s absolutely amazing. World-changing. When the church truly is a ***gathering of people***—empowered and ***sent*** by the Holy Spirit to love in supernatural ways, serve selflessly, give extravagantly—and fully engage in God’s mission to make everything right—it is unstoppable! Listen to this description of the first church:

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47 TNIV)

-How many of you, if you were in a community like that, would feel ***stuck?*** Like, “Man, someone –***please*** help me to get away from these people! They’re too—joyful and generous and accepting—and, well, the ***humility*** is killing me!”

-Now. Imagine that you’re Satan, and you ***know*** your sunk anyway—but you have to stop grace, hope and love—and the phenomenal freeing power of Jesus from infiltrating the world and calling ***more*** people to God to join his Mission—what would be your strategy? Well, at least in ***my*** opinion, if Satan can’t stop what God is doing, he will ***divide*** it.

And produce ***counterfeits***—which would be...? **Religion!**

-By the way, Jesus said this would happen. He told a story about how an enemy came at night and planted weeds in a farmer’s wheat field. When it became clear what had happened—the farm hands wanted to go out and rip out the weeds. But the farmer was wise. He said, “If you do that—you’ll rip out the wheat with it. When we harvest, we’ll separate the weeds from the wheat!”

-Someday, God will sort out the counterfeit—religion—from true, life-transforming faith. By the way, that's apparently **His** business—not ours. But it does, friends, call us to take a close look at our hearts. See, we have to figure out whether we're people who've hung around the church long enough to know how to do well—live morally upright, religious lives—or whether we're people who have **turned** from our efforts to earn what God gives—and find and give grace. Let me try, once again, to define **stuck**.

*We are **stuck** when we lose the plot; when our faith becomes mental assent to a set of facts about Jesus to keep us out of hell—instead of grace that saves us, both from the destructive things we do—**and** from our attempts to save ourselves.

*We are **stuck** when **gathering** and **getting** becomes the point—instead of nourishment and encouragement for life on the front edges of our world where the need is greatest.

*We are **stuck in church** when, like the older brother in Jesus' story, we find ourselves critical and judgmental of others and what **they** do. When we see ourselves as deserving of the Father's blessings because of our works.

*We are **stuck** when being **right** is more important to us than mercy, kindness, love and grace. We are **stuck**—we've completely **lost the plot**—when our faith is about keeping us out of hell—instead of seeing God's Kingdom come here. We're stuck when, instead of seeing grace and love and hope in our lives, the people around us mainly see smugness and self-righteousness.

*We are **stuck** when what God is up to in this world is about **us**—and not about all the others around us. When we feel angry—or sorry for ourselves for being persecuted or misunderstood—as Jesus said we would be.

*We are stuck when we mistake **doing** Church—for **being** the Church—His representatives, **on mission for Him** wherever we find ourselves.

6. Know what the best antidote for being religious is? **Grace**. We need to understand what grace is, experience it—and live it! The point of Jesus' story about the two sons is that **both** were loved, **both** were wrong, and **both** needed grace; the son who wasted his life and wound up feeling pigs **and** the older son who didn't think he needed it—because he'd been responsible, worked hard and kept all the rules.

-Know how you know if you've truly received grace? It's when you have this amazing sense of the **undeserved** kindness you've received—and it makes you want to love and give back to Jesus who made it possible through His blood. And, over time, in the power of the Spirit—you learn to be loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful and gentle—you learn to **live graciously**. And Jesus' church becomes a place where you encourage—and are encouraged; where you support—and are supported.

Where you **belong** to others and are part of something way bigger than yourself. -And it's from that context where you become a person of influence wherever you are. Jesus compared influence to salt and light:

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:13-16 TNIV)

- a. When you **think** about this, salt and light isn't passive—at **all**. Salt influences whatever it touches. When it's in food, you can't see it—but man can you taste the difference! When it's on a highway, you can't usually see it—but it melts the snow (and rusts your car!). I once got a deep gouge on my finger—and it got infected. I soaked it in epsom salts—and it cleared up the infection. Salt keeps meat from rotting. Salt is largely unseen—but **man** does it have influence.

-But salt has to get **out** of the highway barn, **out** of the box, **out** of the salt shaker—out of whatever container it's in—no matter how beautiful that container is—if it's going to **live out its purpose!** And if you get too much salt in one place—it ruins stuff!

- b. Jesus also uses the analogy of **light**. The point of **light** is to get rid of darkness; to make places safer.

To bring color; to help us see where we're going; to help us find things that get lost. Jesus is saying that the good that comes from our lives in acts of compassion and kindness and generosity—is lights up the world in a way that glorifies the source of it all—our Father in Heaven.

- c. How many of you think that our world is beautiful in many ways? It is, isn't it? The scenery, the animal world, the **people**—in all the array of colors, textures, tastes, and languages. Beautiful! But it's like the whole thing has been in a bad accident. When I was traveling with a band called **Sound Alliance**, we were in a bad accident near Schenectady, NY. **[pic]** Not only were band members injured—all of our equipment and clothes the bus were a **mess!** And there's blood and wreckage and broken stuff. That day, the music stopped! It took months to put it all back together again.

-Everyone wants to see our world and the people in it healed and put back into place as they should be. We just disagree on how that will happen. Jesus said, “I want to rescue you—and restore you. But that's just the beginning! I want make **all** things new, restore things to the way they **should** be—and I want to use **your** life, your gifts, your heart. Will you join me?”

-And that's why God has created a **Church** for his mission. See, it's one thing to know about the darkness, lostness and decay of the world system; it's quite another to throw ourselves on the problem—and in the power of the Spirit—**be the Church, be who we are!** Not a group of perfect people who are amazed by how wonderful they really are.

No. But, by God's grace, the **salt of the earth** and the **light of the world**.

-And that's **us**. We gather here to encourage each other, support each other and heal each other—but we are **made**, friends, to **be** Good News—wherever we find ourselves! To get **stuck in church**—stuck in religion, stuck in a building—is unthinkable! Not when we can make a difference and live our calling as the eyes, ears, hands and feet of Jesus out on the front lines!

Q & A

7. I've been thinking a **lot** about my own life these days. I'm convinced that what happens through our lives out on the frontiers of grace every day is way, **way** more powerful than anything I say—and anything that happens in these gatherings. What we're thinking about at **every** level these days is this; with the allergic reaction people in our world have to religion—they're probably not going to come here. So—how can we help **every single person** who's a part of these gatherings be **on mission**—Good News—wherever they are?

-I've thought a **lot** about being on mission. I think about it when I'm driving—for the most part, anyway. I think about it with my neighbours—when I'm at the store—in all my dealings. The question I ask is, "How is the Good News of Jesus being communicated through my actions and words.

-What I've realized, with the help of others, is that, in wanting to lead a movement that scatters every week to be **on mission**—inflict maximum influence—I have to figure out how to do a better job of that myself. Some pastors lead churches and speak on the fly. I apologize to those of you who **are** on the front lines and need a leader who's a great example that. I'm not—but I want to get better at it.

So, I have a deal. You hold me accountable—and I'll hold you accountable. Let's grow—and let's not get **stuck in church!**