

Series: *STUCK! Faith Without Traction* - January 16, 2011

**STUCK IN PARK
Romans 12**

Speaker: Ken Davis

1. Sandra (Ministry Coordinator for The Olive Branch) got a call from her daughter a couple of weeks ago saying that her car would start—but it was ***stuck in 'Park'!*** Well, that piqued my interest—because I had never heard of such a thing! So, we went to investigate and help. Apparently with this brand of car, there is a “safety” feature—where the gearshift will not move out of park. The manual lists a whole procedure for getting it moving again—which involves putting the ignition key in a little plugged slot on the console!
 - a. As we went through this—I thought of how people sometimes get stuck in ***PARK!*** Everything works fine—but they’re not ***going anywhere!*** The more I thought about it, I realized that this happens in a lot of places. It happens in jobs. People get stuck in ***PARK*** emotionally. And sometimes it happens in romantic relationships. The best thing about it—and the worst thing about it is that it’s ***predictable.*** There’s absolutely ***no*** forward movement!
 - b. But it’s ***also*** possible to get stuck in ***Park spiritually.*** You’re going through the motions, the engine’s running—but there’s no forward movement at all. And the word that describes your walk with God is...***Stuck!***

-Wouldn’t it be cool if there was like a secret slot in your head or chest—where you stick a key, a spoon, an electrode—or ***something*** so you can get unstuck!? But there ***are*** no special keys.

-I do, however, want to talk this morning about some important dynamics for moving forward spiritually. What I’m going to say is not some cure—all. My simple prayer is that our time together will help in some way.

-And what I’m going to say does not come from a deep exegesis of a biblical passage on spiritual growth. It’s not a 6 step procedural approach to Bible study, prayer and the practice of spiritual disciplines. It will be a kind of messy, running discourse about a relational God pursuing a relationship with people He made in His image as relational beings. Ultimately, moving forward in this relationship is more about cooperation than it is about effort.
2. So, let me just say at the very top that choosing grace, choosing life, choosing hope, choosing to follow Jesus, choosing to honour God with your life is, at the core, ***relational.*** The first chapters of the Bible reveal that at creation, our relationship with God was close and personal. The picture created is that God daily walked with them every evening in the garden where He had originally placed them. Their rebellion resulted in relational distrust, unfaithfulness, secrecy and fear—the same thing that breaks down relationships in our world.

-In fact, their sin didn't just affect our relationship with God; it has affected the entire relational world of human beings ever since—with devastating results.

- a. The **core** of the Good News is that through Jesus, God has reached out to every single person—inviting them into a new **relationship** with Him through forgiveness. One again, because of Jesus, He is **Abba**, Father. We walk with Him in the tenderness of this new relationship!

-Think of the broken relationships in your life. Anyone have any? Broken relationships happen when we sin against or disappoint each other. We have seemingly irresolvable differences, we stop communicating, stop trusting, and stop wanting to be with each other. At first there's pain and misunderstanding. Sometimes it goes deeper—into resentment, bitterness and hatred.

-For the relationship to be brought back to wholeness again, **someone** has to blink. **Someone** has to humble themselves--be big enough to set aside the hurt feelings and say, **"I really, really want things to be right between us—and I will do anything I have to make that happen.** God was big enough to do that.

In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:5-8 TNIV)

-Now, you do understand that when Jesus humbled Himself to die in our place—He forever took our relationship with God out of the **something we earn** category—and placed it in the **grace** category.

If you want to earn forgiveness, eternal life and intimacy with God—you're out of luck. Because of Jesus, we **receive** everything we could ever want; we **earn** nothing. Is everyone clear on that?

-Now, can you understand **why** He would do that? First, because you can't ever earn love and forgiveness. Second—because if we had to earn God's approval—every good thing we do for God and others would become a form of selfishness—aimed at getting something we desperately want and need. Since we **have** God's forgiveness and approval and assurance of eternal life—we are now free to love and serve because it's **right and good**—not to earn something.

- b. This whole relational dynamic between us, God and others gets crystal clear in Jesus. Remember what Jesus said all the teaching of the Bible boiled down to? Love God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind—and love your neighbour as yourself. And Jesus said that others would **know** we belong to Him by...how much of the Bible we have memorized? No! By who we **love one another**.

- c. And Jesus' ministry was **relational**. He spent time with common, broken people—some of whom were scandalous. His way of developing leaders was living with a traveling group of disciples who watched him heal, teach, eat, sleep—live!

-He spent his last hours on earth talking about love—and that the Spirit would make sure that His followers weren't orphaned. Even when he goes to the cross—he's asking forgiveness for the soldiers driving the nails into him. Then He loves and offers life to his neighbour—who happens to be hanging on the cross next to him.

-Even his resurrection is personal and relational. He reveals himself first to the women who followed him—then waits on shore and cooks breakfast for a bunch of tired, discouraged disciples.

- d. And when the Spirit of Jesus fills people on Pentecost—the results are relational. Thousands believe—and guess what happens? Outrageous love, togetherness and generosity.

-But that's not surprising; the fruit of the Spirit—the primary evidence of His work in our lives is **relational**--love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Even the 10 Commandments are relational; they're about loving and respecting God, loving and respecting your parents, and loving and respecting others.

- e. And Jesus promised that the relationship of love and intimacy He had with the Father would spill over into our lives—if we will simply cooperate.

“Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching.” (John 14:23 TNIV)

-What does the word **home** mean to you? Well, it depends on what your home was like—but, for the most part--family, closeness cooperation, love (most of the time!).

The **home** is intended to be at the core of our relational health. Home is where people **have** to accept you.

Even when your hair is greasy, you're wearing PJ bottoms, and eating a bologna sandwich. And the Holy Spirit makes **all** of this happen—**He** makes us spiritually relationally intelligent.

3. Now, how many of you **get** the drift of the conversation so far; that, ultimately, spirituality is about a **relationship**—not about performance. That **love** is at the core of who God is—and at the core of those who know and follow Him best. Now, if a person you knew was spiritually stuck in **PARK**, what would you tell them to do to get **out** of **PARK**? The **standard** response is, “Well, read your Bible, pray, come to gatherings

of believers—and try showing compassion to people in need!” And that’s not necessarily bad advice—but it **may** be focusing on the wrong thing.

-Think—what is reading and studying the Bible all about? The Bible gives us history of people in a relationship with God—and how He acts; what his thoughts are on the big issues of life—and what He’s up to in the world. Does the Bible reflect the way **most people think**? Not really. The Bible teaches us the way things **ought** to be—and will be someday. But it is countercultural. What God has to say cuts right through our excuses, our opinions, our lies and all the noise from our culture. It’s **powerful!**

- a. But, truth is, reading the Bible is not **magic!** It only knocks you out of **PARK** and moves you forward when it’s **more** than information. Let me illustrate. There’s someone in our family—I won’t give you their name—who thinks Justin Bieber is **really** cute. So. Our house has been **Bieber-ized**.

-We know a **lot—too** much, really, about Justin Bieber; when he started singing, how many instruments he plays, who he’s hanging out with (and we **hate** her!)—I mean, **anything you want to know about Justin Bieber...and MORE than you want to know...** you can find in one room of the house. I told Lori that **Justin Bieber** written in lipstick on our bedroom mirror was a **little** over the top...

-But do we **know** Justin? Paparazzi, spies, investigative reporters, history buffs—**lots** of people collect intimate information on people. Do they **love** them? Have a relationship with them? No. You can be **saturated** with information about the Bible—and Jesus; own and read all the commentaries, study the Greek—be a Bible junkie—and have it do you **absolutely no good!** Jesus was talking to a group of people whose **lives** had been dedicated to memorizing and obsessing over the Bible and said:

And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you possess eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life. (John 5:37-40 TNIV)

- b. Down through the years, Bible knowledge has been used for a **lot** of different reasons; to win arguments, to win approval from parents—or leaders; to gain power in churches or seminaries; to put friends in their place; to put down people who know less. Our culture **loves** knowledge. But knowledge, alone, makes you arrogant—not loving.
- c. Now, think about the **difference** knowledge makes when you’re in love. Anyone here ever been in love...in your life? It’s like this quest to find out as much as you possibly can about this amazing person; what they like, what they don’t like, who they are, what they do...I mean, there is **no such thing** as

saying, “Okay—enough info!”—unless, of course, you find out that they secretly eat laundry detergent. When you **love** someone—you want to know them!

-If reading and understanding the Bible ever becomes about scoring points with God or getting more knowledge, or winning Bible trivia—then you’ve lost the plot—and reading the Bible won’t help you get out of **PARK**.

4. People sometimes tell you that if you’re stuck in PARK, you should pray more. I would say...that depends. Think for a minute about prayer. At the core, prayer is simply talking **with** God. At the beginning of His teaching on prayer, Jesus reminded us that we need to remember who we’re talking to. It’s not your MP—or some impersonal CEO of a place where you’re hoping to get a job. Jesus said, “Our **Father in Heaven**.

- a. And He warned us about treating this communication like magic—that you **earn** what you want by how long, loud or eloquently you pray. He said, “Make sure you’re praying to God—not to everyone else standing around.” I mean, think of how **weird** it would be to talk real loudly to your Dad in public—like you have to publicly nag Him before He’ll do anything for you?

Jesus said, “This is your **Father** you’re talking to!” Prayer is a **conversation—part of a loving relationship**—not a lecture.

- b. And talking with God is an act of relational intelligence. Remember Jesus words? **Your** Kingdom come—**Your** will be done! When you’re in a true loving relationship, you’re interested in what that person is up to—and how your plans can fit with theirs. Jesus said, “Then ask for your **daily** bread”—which would imply that the conversation should happen...**daily**, right? Has anyone here ever had a friend—or a grown child—and the **only** time they talk to you is if they need money or a favour—or they’re in a mess? It makes you feel used, doesn’t it?
- c. Communication is a very important key to growing any relationship. But communication always goes two ways; it involves listening to, thinking about and responding to what the other person is saying.

-Something else. Has anyone here tried to have a wonderful chat with someone you’ve ripped off or offended? You can’t wallpaper over that stuff. You make it right first—**then** the communication flows.

5. Now, there are other spiritual practices that can help us move out of **PARK** in our relationship with God. Let me mention a few. Meditating is cultivating the practice of thinking deeply about truth. Fasting is intended to train help you be more attentive to what God is up to or saying. Journaling is taking time to think through and write down the activity of a loving Father in your life. Serving the poor expresses love for God. They hold a tender place in His heart—and your love and compassion brings that tenderness to you. But it’s all **relational**—not **transactional**!

-And none of this makes any difference without what I believe is **the** most important component in our life with God—**and** the place where many people get **stuck**. It’s in

our willingness to **cooperate**. Let me get real clear in what I mean here. This involves some concepts we're not real crazy about. **Submission. Surrender. Obedience.**

a. In a world system like ours, to **submit** means to wimp out. It means, someone else is the boss—and I am—well, meek, weak. Small. To submit means to be **used!** And the word **surrender** is even worse. In wars, it's the **loser** who surrenders—and the **winner** is on top. The only thing we like to **lose** is weight! And **obedience?** What am I—a little kid? That I'm small and dumb and don't know what to do? And yet—Jesus said that He and the Father can only make their **home** in the life of someone who **obeys**.

b. In the Early Church—the group who took on the world and transformed it—there was a phrase that they used continually—and meant with all their hearts. Know what it was? **Jesus is LORD!** It's not like Jesus has some great advice; or Jesus is a wonderful teacher—and kind, compassionate man. No. Jesus is **Lord! He's right about EVERYTHING!** They submitted to His leadership—because **He** was the Leader, they were followers. They **surrendered** to Him—because He was humble—but **All-Powerful!** He knew what He was doing—and **they were smart enough to see that.**

-Let me give a couple of illustrations that may help you see this—and it's importance—more clearly. How many of you have ever had a problem and needed surgery? When I was 20, I had a ruptured appendix—and ended up in the ER in **intense** pain. The most comforting feeling in the world was when a competent surgeon—with **gray hair**, I might add, put his hand on my abdomen and said, "You've got a ruptured appendix. But, it's okay, I'm going to operate!" Within a half hour, I went under the knife—and **he saved my life.** But I had to surrender. Submit.

c. We follow—submit—a lot more than we realize. And that's what **astounds** me about us humans. Personal trainers tell us to do stomach crunches till we can't move; investment counsellors tell us to lay \$10,000 in cold hard cash on stock we didn't know existed; a mechanic tells us that our transmission needs fixed—to the tune of \$1500—and we say, **OKAY!**

-But sometimes when Jesus, who gave His life for us says, "If you'll submit to My leadership--give yourself fully to Me—I will **fill** your soul with life and meaning!" We say, "Uhhh, I don't know. Not today, I don't think." And under our breath? **You've got to be kidding!**

-Know why? Because **we're rebellious to the core!** That's the part we inherited from our ancestors. We still believe the lie they we're told, "God's holding out on you!"

d. God will not rest until He has a loving, restored relationship with every single human being on this planet!

But every close relationship needs at least three things to work. God loves us—and we **want** to love Him. But God also tells us the truth—and sent the Truth to live among us and show us His ways. Remember, Jesus said, **I am**

the way, the TRUTH, and the life. The final piece in this is *trust*. Can He be trusted? Is He *trustworthy*?

- e. See, friends, here's the deal; the *truth* is--God is God—and I'm not. A relationship with Him that makes a difference in me, in others and in this world involves *living* the *reality* of that truth. Jesus said this;

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.”
(Luke 9:23-24 TNIV)

-Now, does anyone see any loopholes in this—room, you know, for me to do life *my* way—with God as my little personal servant to make my life a little easier? You know, where I pay Him off by throwing a little money His way—and agree not to hurt others *too* badly? I don't see any loopholes.

-Paul, an early leader in the Church, described the process like this:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is true worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.
(Romans 12:1-2 TNIV)

-I'm convinced that there comes this moment in growing your relationship with Jesus where God asks you if you will lay it *all* on the line—like a sacrifice on a pile of rocks.

What you do in that moment makes a *massive* difference in whether you experience the transformation and renewal God has in mind—or get *buried to the axels in yourself*. It's simple; God is asking for is simply your *full cooperation!* Have you ever given it?

6. But that one act of offering yourself, submitting to Jesus, doesn't solve all your relational issues forever. Anyone here who's gotten married—publicly submitted yourself to spending the rest of your life pursuing a relationship with another person? How many of you then lived happily ever after—experienced *years* of unending bliss without a hint of pain or disagreement? In marriage—you commit yourself to the process of developing intimacy through *daily cooperation*.

-Think about what this means. When you love someone, *how you treat the people they love is VERY* important. Anyone remember Archie Bunker's favourite name for his son-in-law in *All in the Family*? It's funny—but in the real world—it doesn't work.

- a. Notice how Jesus summarized all the law and the prophets: Love God unconditionally—love others as you *love yourself*. Any parents who would say, “If you love me, it doesn't matter *how* you treat my children.” Actually, it's more like—“I could never be close to someone who ever *ignores* my children!”

And that's why the Spirit massages relational power into our lives. Qualities like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. We call it—**relational intelligence**.

- b. Think about what it would mean to live with **relational intelligence** when it comes to Jesus. When you love someone, you make an effort to stay away from things that hurt and offend them, right? When you love someone—you don't **use** them to get what you want. When you love someone you take time to be with them. And you can't be close to someone when the relationship is **all about you!** Where serve you, heal you, feed you, put money in your account, clean up your messes—and make you the big, shiny star you've always wanted to be. Doesn't work with people—doesn't work with God, either.
- c. One of the key points in close relationships—explored by **E-Harmony.com** is connective tissue. Common interests. Question—can you have a close relationship with someone and be either ignore or treat with contempt what they are **passionate** about?

-We've been talking for almost a year about the **Mission of God**. In case you've missed it, God's mission is to heal everything and make everything right that sin and rebellion has screwed up. People. Systems. Sickness and disease. Need. Here's the deal: God's Mission is the **most important thing happening in the universe** at this moment—and He is **passionate** it!

-Followers of Jesus have been given life, meaning, purpose—and the Holy Spirit's power—to engage in God's Mission. You **can't** be close to God and choose **your** mission—over His. Won't happen. Love God? Love people...love **His Mission**.

- 7. Let me just close with some diagnostic questions.
 - a. **How's your physical and emotional health these days?**
I'm very serious about this. If you're not well—or if you're running on fumes emotionally—going through life, hair on fire—exhausted, it will **deeply** affect every single relationship in your life.
 - b. **Have you ever, ever walked the aisle with God?**
I'm not asking whether you've shed a few tears of regret over sin. Have you **ever** said, **I do! I will!** to a lifelong commitment to him—for better or for worse, rich or poor, in good times and bad.
 - c. **Have you ever presented yourself as a sacrifice to God?**
Given Him all of you, lock, stock and barrel. You've heard me say, 90% is 10% short. Following Jesus is not fire insurance, getting a little outside help, a great ingredient for the stew of your life—or Him riding shotgun while you do what you want. Following Jesus is an act of **trust**.

- d. A fourth diagnostic question.

Is there unfaithfulness in the relationship?

Spiritually speaking—are you sleeping around? I’ve never seen a marriage work when one person is making secret calls, buying secret presents, writing secret notes—and having secret sex with someone else. It creates resentment, hurt, distance—and, unless it stops, divorce. You can’t feel close to God when your money, success, work, relational world—or some other lover—is at the center.

- e. Another Q:

Are you involved in hurting, ignoring, using, cheating, lying to, envying, or rejecting someone that God loves?

Do you have a heart that is harbouring bitterness or anger or unforgiveness? God treasures you—**way** more than you can imagine—but He treasures others, too.

- f. Something else.

Is it possible that you and God need to go on a date?

Do something *new* together?

In a recent study of spiritual growth, one of the major components in people who grew was an act of compassion that demanded sacrifice—and took people out of their comfort zone and into the desperation of others.

- g. And finally,

Are you following Jesus *with* others?

See, our relationship with God was **never** intended to be done in your off time as a solo sport. Bowling alone. One of the reasons we encourage others to engage in a Roots group here or serve on a team with others—is that we are made to love and be loved, accept and be accepted, serve and be served, challenge and be challenged.

The **one anothers** are a **very** important part of growth. Living with and getting along with others is messy—but it’s way better than life on some spiritual desert island!

Q & A

8. So, where are you at this morning? How are you and God getting along these days? Jesus posture on the cross—arms nailed open, like He is ready to embrace anyone who comes—is **real**. Whether you’ve offended him, been unfaithful to Him, ignored him—or never come to him—the distance doesn’t need to continue. It’s **your move!**