

Series: STUCK: Faith Without Traction

January 2, 2011 ▪ Speaker: Ken Davis

STUCK IN THE PAST

Matthew 6:9-14; 18:21-35

1. Well, we're into a **brand spanking New Year**—2011 is just a little over one day old! How's it going? I always think of the first days of a new year as walking outside right after it's snowed. It's fresh, the sound is muffled—and there are no footprints yet—just this brilliant white coating on **everything!** So, today it's **fresh footprint time!**

-But snow isn't just this cool beautiful covering over everything; it can be deadly. You can get stuck in snow! One winter evening, years ago, I was out on some dirt road—attempting to visit someone from the church I was leading—and I got stuck in this snow drift. This car wasn't budging! The problem is—there was no traffic. Everyone else was smart enough to stay **off** the back roads. I was on my own—with no boots, and this thin leather jacket. I could see lights down over the hill below me—so I walked through the snow—halfway to my knees—and found someone who could help me!

-One guy caught in the recent storm that hit the London area wasn't quite as fortunate. I don't know if you read about him—but his car was stuck in a snow drift and they found him frozen to death about 50 feet from his car. Getting stuck isn't just inconvenient—it can be lethal!

2. As I thought about this series of messages, **STUCK!**—I thought about how we get stuck in life—sometimes in nasty situations. So, I thought I'd do a quiz to see how well prepared you are:

*What do you do if you're stuck in a snow drift? Call CAA

*What if there's a piece of food stuck in your throat? **Heimlich** manoeuvre; or a tracheotomy with a butter knife

*What if a ring is stuck on your finger? Soap...or saw!

*What if a bag of chips is stuck in a vending machine? Shake the machine, kick it, stick your hand inside it.

*What if you're stuck in traffic? Well, you honk your horn—which, again, solves **everything!**

-What do you do if you've got something **stuck in your craw?** You know what I mean by that, don't you? It's barnyard, chicken imagery—and basically means that someone has done something wrong to you—and you can't let it go. The more you think of it—and you think of it quite often—the angrier, more hurt, more frustrated, or more depressed you get. **It's** stuck—and **you're** stuck. As I thought about the places where faith loses its traction in our lives--unforgiveness has to be at or near the top.

- a. Jesus talked about the danger of getting stuck in unforgiveness—more than sexual sin, more than greed, more than hatred, more than stealing, and more than lying. I wonder if he knew we'd struggle with it?

-So, first, let's just be clear: Unforgiveness is **sin**. When someone says, "I will **never** forgive them for what they did to me"—what they're saying is, "I am quite willing to risk defying God to hold onto my grudge. It costs to forgive; but I'd say that unforgiveness is **totally** out of our price range!

- b. Now, if you're wanting to challenge me on this—let's define sin: Sin is rebellion against God—against the **shalom** that He is bringing to people's lives, to your life, and to this planet. Sin is when things are **not the way they are supposed to be**.

-When someone hurts you, devalues you, snubs you, humiliates you, steals from you, uses you, treats you as if you don't exist—that is **not** the way things are supposed to be. Here's our temptation; to **justify** our unwillingness to forgive because of someone else's actions toward us.

- c. And Jesus doesn't just dance around on this issue. In the Sermon on the Mount—Jesus' defining message about the Kingdom He was inaugurating—He taught people how to pray. You're probably familiar with that prayer. Let's say it together:

'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.'
(Matthew 6:9-13 TNIV)

-Anyone notice that we're asking God to treat our debts, our sins—precisely how we treat others and their sins against us. That's pretty tough, isn't it? Think about the people who have hurt you. What do you **wish** for them? How many of you would say, "May the Lord bless you and keep you; may the Lord make His Face shine upon you and be gracious to you...?"

-How many of you can relate a little better to this blessing: **May the bird of Paradise fly up your nose! May an elephant caress you with its toes! May the fleas from a thousand camels infest your clothes!** To wish them well just doesn't seem **fair**—does it?

- d. And Jesus doesn't just leave it there; he tightens the noose on grudge-holders:

For if you forgive others when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (Matthew 6:14-15 TNIV)

-Here's the deal. Grace isn't just something you receive and indulge in; we **receive** grace—and pass it on. Grace changes our heart toward God and others. To call yourself a follower of Jesus—the ultimate Forgiver—who made forgiveness possible—and then **refuse** to forgive says something about your credibility.

-And in case we don't get it, Jesus told a story to burn it into our minds. It's a story about a man who owes a debt so massive, to repay it isn't just unlikely; it's impossible. When he realizes that everything he has—including his family—will be sold to repay the debt, he begs for mercy—promising to repay when he **knows** he can't. And something amazing happens; the creditor **forgives** the debt. Wipes it clean.

-But the story doesn't end there. This guy goes out, his eyes still red and puffy from crying—and throws someone in jail who owes **him** some piddling sum. The other servants are **outraged!** So, they talk to the king—the one who cancelled the massive debt. And the **king** is outraged too—and the debt is reinstated. And this guy gets **life in prison without the possibility of parole!** After telling this story, Jesus says:

“That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart.” (Matthew 18:35 NLT)

-Question: How many of you think God is **very** interested in the issue of whether or not we forgive?

3. What sometimes makes forgiveness seem so impossible for us is that we don't fully understand it.

-Let me tell you what it **isn't**. Forgiveness is **not** the same as reconciliation. God has forgiven the sins of the world because of Jesus. But most of the people in the world are not **reconciled** with God—even though he's God—and a **professional** forgiver! It takes **one** to forgive; it takes **two** to reconcile.

-Forgiveness is **not** restoration. Restoration—as a friend, as a lover, as a marriage partner or business partner—or as a minister—takes **trust**. And trust is not restored by someone saying, “I'm sorry—**trust me!**” Trust is regained slowly—and takes time.

-Forgiveness is not in **any** way overlooking what someone has done. Forgiveness is **powerful** stuff—and is intended for **big** issues. Sometimes we **need** to just overlook things. Like when we're jealous of someone because they're doing better than we are. Like someone doesn't notice us, or someone has a different relating style than us—or can't read our minds. **That** stuff, friends, doesn't take forgiveness; we just need to grow up and get over it.

-And you can't forgive organizations—like churches, or businesses, or nations. Forgiveness is reserved for things that are personal—and intentional. Forgiving someone doesn't mean you become best friends with them—it means that you cancel the debt; you drop the charges.

- a. If you want to know what forgiveness **is**—look at Jesus—how He forgave my sin and yours. He paid for our sin on a cross. Anyone know the current location of that sin right now? It's

...as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12 NIV) and hurled into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:19 NIV)

- which would be about 11 kilometres down. And there's a "no fishing" sign over it.

-Before the eyes of the world, Jesus enacted the single most powerful, effective act of forgiveness that has ever or **will** ever be accomplished. His forgiveness extends to slave traders, mass murderers, child molesters, and rapists—**none** of whom deserve it. And it extends to people, like you and me—people who struggle with pride, lying, greed, selfishness and lust.

- b. People in our world are tempted to think, "I'm not **really** all that bad of a person." But Jesus makes it clear that we are **all** the guy in the story he told. We owe a debt we can't **possibly** repay—even if we were to give up everything and became carbon copies of Mother Theresa for the rest of our lives. To want grace and compassion and mercy and forgiveness from God and others—and refuse to **give** it—is the worst kind of hypocrisy.

-Let me put it like this: **The opportunity and power to forgive is God's gift to a world where people deeply, deeply hurt each other—and need to be free.**

4. In a previous life as a youth pastor, I took a group of about 35 teens on an camp-out retreat. It was way back this trail—down in a ravine by a river. Beautiful—but remote. Some of my youth sponsors had found it when they were "four-wheeling"—that is, where you couldn't get there by means of natural transportation. Everything was going great until one of the teens started having chest pains and couldn't catch her breath. As we carried her up and out on a stretcher, one of the guys (this was before cell phones) hiked out to call a 4WD ambulance.

-Unfortunately, the four wheel drive ambulance got stuck up to it's axels on the access road—and needed a four wheel drive wrecker to help him—so he could help us! We finally got her to the ambulance—and she was okay.

-Here's my point—and there **is** a point. Lot's of times as followers of Jesus, we're trying to help others—and **we** get stuck in these mudholes of unforgiveness that seem impossible to get out of.

- a. For some of you, that mudhole is the pain of rejection by one or both of your parents. There was this unwritten agreement that they made by bringing you into this world to love and accept you as you are—to care for you—and take the time and effort to help you. But they didn't. And disappointment and a sense of rejection has stalked you your entire life.

- b. It could be that you **trusted** someone—a friend, or a business partner—or spouse—and they betrayed out. Sold you out. They deliberately went behind your back, told your secrets, and sold you to the highest bidder. And the hurt and anger you feel has **devastated** you.
- c. Maybe someone used you. They found a way to get close to you—and told you lies until they got what they wanted—your influence, your money, or your body—And then they threw you away. And you feel stupid. Worthless.
- d. It could be that someone humiliated you—or ruined your reputation. They said things that weren't true, or made fun of you publicly—or, worse yet, humiliated and trashed one of your children. And when you think of them, see their face—you are **instantly** flushed with shame and anger. To be honest—it's hard not to hate them and wish them dead.
- e. Or, it could be that someone judged you. Maybe it happened in a church—or in your family—or in your school. People took what little misinformation they had about you, mixed it with their own bias or contempt—and then judged you as unspiritual, uncool, un-hirable, unworthy or their love and attention---or **something** and you **never even got to speak!**
- f. Even if I didn't identify with your particular injury, I'm guessing that just about everyone here **someone's** face on the interior screen that only you can see. My guess is that you've suffered enough pain over what they've done, haven't you? So. Will you **choose** to let it go?

-The only way to stop the pain is to **choose** to forgive them. Even if they've never asked for it—and don't deserve it. If you haven't made the choice to forgive—you're stuck in the muck, just like that four wheel drive ambulance was. Forgiveness is the only winch that can pull you to freedom. To choose freedom and healing means **choosing to forgive.**

- 5. Would you allow me to bring something else up—under this issue of forgiveness? I need your permission—cause it could be messy. Where do **you** need to be forgiven? The reason I ask is because a lot of times we're angry and bitter at what others have done to us—when we have a trail of blood behind **us**. It's **really** hard to admit, isn't it?

-Jesus said that the cardinal rule of relationships is this:

“Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you. This is the essence of all that is taught in the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 7:12 NLT)

- a. My guess is that in a crowd this size, a number of you had parents who never told you that they loved you—and never humbled their pride to admit when they were wrong. How many of you like being around people like that—and think that's a wonderful character trait? If you didn't like it—are you doing that to **your** children—because, see, we then to just pass that stuff along instead of correcting it.

- b. The same principle applies to judging and criticizing others—other leaders, other churches, other believers, other neighbours. Anyone here who **likes** being judged and criticized? Well, then don't do it to others. In fact, Jesus said that judging and criticizing others has a way of boomeranging. That if you do — you will likely end up with a lapful of it yourself. Remember his words in his most famous message?

“Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. (Matthew 7:1-2 TNIV)

-Now, is what Jesus says here too complicated for anyone to understand? It's pretty clear, isn't it? People think, “But I'm **right!** Jesus and I agree!” **Really!?** Well, Jesus is the judge, not you—and I think if Jesus said not to judge—that's probably what he means.

- c. One more messy question: Is there someone's inner hurt screen where **your** face appears this morning? If you were to humble your pride and set aside your need to be right, would you have to admit that you've **hurt** people—you've used them, rejected them, judged them, hurt their reputation, or betrayed them—and you've **never** asked for forgiveness? If so, why don't you do for them—what you would like people to do for you; **own** what you've done and make it right. You'd be **surprised** how the burden would lift from your shoulders.

6. Sometimes the biggest question that comes up in our minds when it comes to forgiveness is, **HOW?** Ironically, the first thing you have to do is **own** the pain someone has caused you. See, because forgiveness is hard, messy and counter-intuitive, we would **like** to say, “You know, actually, **I'm good! Really!**” But it's not—know how you can tell? If you feel the need to keep bringing up and rehearsing it—then you haven't. In some cases, the person you're holding a grudge against has asked you to forgive them—and you **say** you have. But that's not the truth—because you use it like a club to beat them when it serves your purposes. You're like Santa—you're making a list of grudges and checking it twice, or 3X or 20X—and you keep hurting yourself over and over and over again. You have to **choose** to let it go!

-See, we'd like to think of ourselves as big-hearted, magnanimous, forgiving, generous people. But the stuff we store in the basements of our hearts sometimes tells a **way** different story—that we're petty, grudge-holding, self-pitying—sometimes bitter people who drag bags—**tons**--of garbage behind us through life. We don't just **remember** the garbage of what others have done, we store it in the basement, bring it out regularly as it rots and festers; we play with it, taste it, feed it to others who are close to us so **they** can enjoy the experience!

-Here's the deal, friends. Others hurt us—and we become angry and sad—and that's normal. But **we're** the ones who chose to store it inside—and then we act as if the person who hurt us is responsible for the garbage—and stench, maggots, flies and rats. But it's **not** their garbage! **It's yours!** You have to **see** it, **own** it—say, “That's **my** garbage!” Then **bag** it, and get **rid** of it.

- a. Forgiveness is not fooling yourself into thinking, “Oh, it wasn’t *that* bad.” You have to ask yourself, “Was what that person did to me **personal and intentional**? See, to forgive someone, you have to **blame** the person and accurately assess the damage—just like the king in Jesus’ story settling the accounts. It’s what he did **next** that gets us. Think about it. If this man who owed this monstrous amount of money to the king didn’t pay his debt, **who did**? The king did—and for us to be forgiven, **Jesus** chose to pay the debt we couldn’t pay.

-I know what you’re thinking; “That’s not **fair!** **They** should pay for what they did to me!” Think about it this way. Let’s say you get run down by a drunk driver—and you’re busted up pretty bad. What if you waited for them to come back, gently pick you up, take you to a hospital, and help you through rehab? If you wait for that, you’ll either die—or be crippled for life. To **not** forgive puts you in the position of being a helpless victim for the rest of your life.

- b. If something in your life is a borderline issue—like you’re not sure if it was personal or intentional—ask yourself this: **Is it developing a root system—embedding itself in your heart, personality and soul?** How long has it been growing? The Bible talks about this in a letter Hebrews:

Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many. (Hebrews 12:15 NLT)

- c. Another question regarding forgiveness is...why? **Why should I forgive?** Well, first—you are imitating what Jesus has done—and asks us to do. To refuse is to refuse to follow and obey Jesus. But you also do it for yourself. See, when you don’t forgive, what you’re doing is playing the part of an imaginary prison guard with all these inmates you have to keep track of.

-The problem is—**they’re not really there!** They’re free—**you’re** the prisoner, burning down through your energy and time reserves to manage them. Is there anyone here who has **tons** of extra energy and time just floating around? If not—**why waste it on pain that only you have the power to change?**

-See, the issue is not whether or not someone deserves to be forgiven; it’s the fact that **you** deserve to be free—to have joy and life. And the **only** way that will happen is if you forgive.

- d. There’s another reason to deal with unforgiveness. It gives Satan a **foothold** in your life. The Bible puts it like this:

And “don’t sin by letting anger control you.” Don’t let the sun go down while you are still angry, for anger gives a foothold to the devil. (Ephesians 4:26-27 NLT)

-Have you ever watched someone climbing a steep, solid rock cliff? They’re holding on to the edges while their told looks for a **foothold**. Then they push themselves up further. And that’s the way Satan takes ground in our lives.

Anger is intended as a short-term push to move us to action. Notice what Paul says, **if you hold onto anger more than a day, it will control you—and then it becomes Satan’s ground!** The only way to get rid of the footholds—is to do what you don’t naturally want to do: **forgive!**

7. It’s possible to be carrying baggage, holding people in prison, have poison going through your system from people who are long gone. Dead—or even totally removed from your life. You can do that if you want—but it’s quite pricey. It will cost you your peace and joy; it will exhaust you; and it will cost you friends—no one wants to come to pity parties, eat little hors d’oeuvres made of garbage. Ultimately, refusing to forgive will rob you of your usefulness in this world. Is that what you really want?

-So far, we’ve talked mostly about **why** to forgive—but not **how**. Forgiveness is not an instant thing; you can’t microwave it—or **name it and claim it** into your life.

Forgiveness is an **ongoing choice** you make about pain in your life. It’s recognizing that someone has deeply hurt you, but it has to go beyond that.

- a. Forgiveness is, in some ways, recognizing the humanity of the person who hurt you. It’s realizing that this person is **not** the incarnation of Satan. It’s seeing that they’re probably like you in some ways. A person made up of both good and bad.

-And forgiveness is recognizing that Christ gave his life for the sin they committed against you. That Jesus’ payment, his agony, his suffering is big enough to cover you both.

- b. Another thing—you can’t just do a mass forgiveness over everyone to save time and energy. You have to make it specific and personal—and it will take time. Hurt in us is like dirt in the bottom of a cup; stir it—and it gets mucky—and you have to dump it. This happens again and again—and then one day you find that the dirt is gone—and you’re free. Forgiveness is a choice you have to **keep** making.

8. I’ve told some of you about the 8 page letter that the Senior Pastor I started with, sent me after my first year of working with him. He accused me of being lazy, a poor leader—and that I should do something else besides being a pastor. It was personal, it was intentional, and it was like a bomb going off in my heart. I thought of it several times every day. And when I did, I tasted the devastation and the humiliation over and over again. The problem was that I had to work as a team with this guy every day—lead worship every time he spoke. I found myself on my knees in my office or at the altar begging God, “**Please** help me with the hurt and resentment that rages in my soul.”

-After at **least** a year of this—I realized that I had his letter stored right in the desk where I prepared devotionals, prayed, and counselled. One day I took it out—and instinctively knew I needed to throw it away—but it was like my hand didn’t want to let go of it! It was the key piece of evidence in the case I was preparing against him! I finally ripped it up—and threw it away. And **that** was a major step toward healing—toward leaving the past in the past—and toward forgiveness.

-This morning, I want to offer you a gift. It's not mine—I didn't create it; it belongs to Jesus—who died for it. It's the gift of a **today** that is uncontaminated by the bitterness of **yesterday**. As I've been talking, I'm certain that faces of people have flashed across the screen that is inside your heart. If you're tired of being **stuck in the past**, I want to ask to write down the names of people who've hurt you and what they did. Then put it where it belongs; the garbage can at the foot of the cross. Then celebrate your freedom with the bread and wine of **your** forgiveness.