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Presentation Transcript
Reclaiming Lost Children 01
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October 6, 2005

Well good afternoon everyone. Nice to see you all again. We're starting a new series today. For the next four presentations, we're going to be thinking and talking about those children who have left the faith – how we ought to think about that when it happens, out of the Bible, what causes them to leave, and the part we can play in helping them find their way back.

I believe that, as members of the Church of God, we have not understood very well what God thinks about our children, their place in His plan and in the church. I think that we're victims of muddy thinking. The results of this muddy thinking have been disastrous for them, for us and for the church. And as a result, so many of them have left.

So, to begin with, we want to lay a solid biblical foundation for a spiritually healthy way to think about our children. Go with me first to Acts 2 and verse 38. This is Peter's watershed sermon, after which three thousand people were baptized.

Acts 2:38 – *And in the midst of it, Peter said to them, Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins. You shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you, and to your children, and to all who are a far off, as many as the Lord our God will call.* So here's Peter. He's pouring spiritual concrete around Jesus Christ, the chief cornerstone of the church – cementing Him into it – and he's explaining to these people that those whom God calls, if they repent, they will be granted the Holy Spirit by promise. And that promise is to *every* child born of members of the Church of God. That's a *promise*. If they're born into a family where one or both parents are converted, there should never be any doubt in our mind that God *wants* them, that He is calling them, that He is promising to open their minds to understand the truth, which is a calling. And when they repent and turn to Him, then He *promises* to give them the down payment of eternal life, which is the Holy Spirit.

Now I've heard people argue against this position. But I believe they argue against it because they've never understood what a calling is. They look at some of those young people who have left, and they see how turned off some of them are – how far away some of them are

from thinking about God and the truth. They see how resistant some of them are to the truth and they conclude that they're not called. A calling from God has nothing to do with what we do, or what our attitude is, or what we think. A calling is something that *God* does. It's like an invitation. What is an invitation? An invitation provides information. "I'm having a party. It's at my house. It's going to start at 6:00. Casual dress." That's what an invitation is. It's information, isn't it? Once you've received my invitation, then you get to *decide* whether you're going to come to my party or not, and whether you'll show up on time or not. Well, a calling from God is the very same thing. He opens a person's mind so they can understand the truth. The truth is the information that's passed to us, isn't it? So then it's up to *us* to decide if we're going to respond to it and when. And sadly, many of our children have chosen not to come to the party – at least for now. But that says nothing about how God feels about them. It only talks about their response to something He did, which was to open their minds and to live in a home where people are converted, where they see the example and are taught God's ways, and their minds are open to it. God calls them that way.

How does God deliver His invitation – His information about the *party* that He's going to have – which we call church? Well, He does it through us, doesn't He? He does it through parents. And He does it through the people in the congregation. Sometimes we're very weak instruments and the message gets garbled. And I believe that has a lot to do with why so many of them leave. So we're going to talk a lot about that as this series progresses as well – what we should be doing.

Before we leave this point – about the fact that God calls people – I want to talk some more about how God thinks about our kids. When a young Sabbatarian Christian man and a young Sabbatarian Christian woman in the Ukraine get married, they believe that one of the fruits of their marriage – and one of their greatest responsibilities before Jesus Christ – is to produce children who will populate the church, and enlarge it and strengthen it. That's kind of a weird idea to our ears, isn't it? – because we never think about that as Western people. That's foreign to the way we think about things. That's sort of a far cry from the way we think about it. That kind of thinking never enters our mind when we think of children. We think about having kids because we *want* to. And we think about them as *ours*, not God's. And we don't think about them as connected to the church. We think about them as connected to us. We don't feel any impending sense of responsibility to strengthen the church – by having godly offspring.

So who's right? That young Sabbatarian man and woman think a lot differently than the way we Westerners think about things. Are they right? Or are we right? Which way do you think is right? Let's see what God has to say about it. I'm going to read a section in Malachi 2, starting in verse 13, where God is really reading these people the riot act. And He's talking to people that have come out of captivity and gone back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and the temple wall, and He's sent Malachi to tell them their faults. And He said in verse 13:

Mal. 2:13 – *And this is the second thing you do. You cover the altar of the LORD with tears, with weeping and crying, so He does not regard the offering any more. You know, you're crying all these great big crocodile tears – so much so that God doesn't even honor what you give. And you say, "Well, why doesn't God care?" It says, "For what reason? – verse 14. Because the LORD has been witness between you and the wife of your youth, with whom you*

have dealt treacherously. So He starts talking about the state of marriage in Israel after the captivity. And He said that a lot of those people were not faithful to each other. He says, *Yet she is your companion and your wife by covenant!* When people get married, they make an agreement with *God* about how they're going to treat the other person. I mentioned that to a man once. He left his wife. He came over to my house unannounced, and said that he just didn't feel right about leaving without telling me what he had done. And he told me how he was unhappy and how his wife was unhappy, and so he left. And I said, "Well, what does *unhappy* have to do with it?" You know, "We don't love each other any more." Of course, that was right about the time Tina Turner's song was out. So I said, "What's love got to do with it?" And he said, "Huh! I never thought of that." Here's a man in the church, and he doesn't understand that when he got married, he agreed *before God* to be faithful to his wife! That's hard to believe, but that's where it was. I think I went a little bit slack-jawed when he said that, but there you go.... He said, in verse 15, *Did He not make them one, having a remnant of the spirit?* Does He not, in marriage, cause people to become one flesh? Yes, He does. And why one? Why does God cause people to be married and to become one in flesh, and if they have the Holy Spirit, to have that together, too? *He seeks godly offspring.* He seeks godly offspring. There it is! The people in the Ukraine are right! And we're not! One of the main reasons God wants people to get married in the church, and to have children, is so that godly offspring can be produced! *Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth. For the LORD God of Israel says that He hates divorce, for it covers one's garment with violence.* Now, that's an interesting statement, isn't it? It covers one's garment with violence. So why is God upset with these people in the days of Malachi? They were divorcing each other. And why did He get that upset with them so much? One, because they were breaking the covenant. And two, because God says He's seeking godly offspring from them, and when they deal treacherously and violently with each other, that makes it hard for the children.

So when we have children, He calls them. He expects them to become godly offspring. He provides us everything we need to do that job. And in His mind they are cherished and they are set apart for His purpose. He fully expects that they will accept Jesus Christ into their heart and lovingly want to serve Him at some point down the road. And when a man or a woman throws off the covenant they made with God regarding their mate, He considers it treachery. In the example in Malachi, he talks mainly to the men. But women can do that do. In my experience in counseling people a lot, there's usually one more responsible than the other. I guess that's why it's called treachery.

So, let's summarize what we just read there. He says that marriage is a covenant with Him. We promised *God* how we're going to treat the other person – certain rules that we've agreed to. There's a contract and so it is a relationship by covenant. And He says that divorce is a form of violence perpetrated against mates and children. It traumatizes them – especially children. I want you to notice how insidious this is. I want to take a minute to show you how family discord can traumatize children, and what happens to children when they are traumatized.

One of the things that happens to kids when they're traumatized – and I've seen much of this at school and in private practice – is they start stuffing their feelings so they don't feel their

feelings any longer. You ask them how they feel and they honestly don't know. They're not in touch with it any longer. It hurts too much to face the abandonment, the shattered expectations, the disrespect, the loss of relationship. It's easier not to feel. Or sometimes they can just feel one or two feelings. It's a lot easier to be angry or frustrated than it is to feel pain. So that's why we have a lot of angry kids that have been traumatized. They feel anger, but not the pain – when the pain is the real problem.

Another thing that happens to kids that are traumatized is they don't talk. They keep everything under wraps. They're very well defended. They let out as little as possible. They hold everything in. It's so much safer that way. If you start talking about things, you might have to feel something. And if I did that, I might go out of control – I'm so upset. You see, the problem there is that if they won't talk, then there's no way to grieve the losses and heal their hearts from the trauma they have experienced.

Children who are hurt by divorce learn to be distrustful of others. They're not open or trusting. They're self-protective and defensive. They often wear a mask, while inside they're filled with all kinds of doubts and fears. And they won't let other people help them.

The last thing that's been noted by a lot of different people that work with traumatized children is that they're manipulative. Children – especially children of divorce – are often manipulated by one or more parents. And they learn to manipulate, too. They have to survive because they're caught in the middle and they learn never to communicate directly their wants and desires, but to try to slide around and get what they need.

The problem with all this is, little kids, they do these things because it's the only thing they know to do to protect themselves from what's happened to them. But the problem here is that all of these strategies are mentally unhealthy. And when you put them all together, they produce a set of very poor relationship skills. If we can never really know how a person feels, then we can't connect to them. And if they're always trying to manipulate us, instead of being straight with us, then our trust in them is eroded and it disturbs the relationship. And if they won't trust us to do right by them, then there's no way to be connected at a very deep level.

So the ways kids defend themselves from trauma leaves them isolated from others, and it causes them trouble at work, and in friendship, and at church and in marriage. And often, because their feelings are turned off, they crave stimulation. You see this all the time. You know, that's when that young girl or young boy falls head over heels way too young for the first one that comes along, and they run off with them to get away from a bad situation at home – a sad, frequently told tale. It's also the way people go into addictions, because they stuff their feelings so much that the only way they can get enough stimulation is through some sort of addiction.

So it kind of goes back to one of the principles we've been pounding away at. One of the big components of *spiritual* health is *mental* health. I believe that that is why the devil has been on such a rampage and attacking marriage so badly, because he knows that the children that grow up in very unhealthy families have a very hard time connecting. It's all a matter of degree, and everybody reacts differently. But as a general principle, if you grow up in a very

unhappy, traumatic home, it makes it hard for you to connect. See, from God's point of view, all this is *terrible*, because He gives our children to us for the purpose of connection to the body and to be a part of the church. And when we traumatize them this way, it makes being a healthy, loving connected member of the body so much more difficult for them. Often, when they're adults, they feel like the people in the church don't care about them – not realizing that their own inability to open and to connect to people is what's preventing the others from knowing and caring about them. So it's very insidious, very destructive, very subtle. But we don't think about that, do we? We think that we all deserve happiness, so we take care of ourselves first and put our children way down the priority list a lot of times. God says that that's a treachery that's perpetrated on our kids – that it's a form of violence.

I know *so* many children in the church who suffered this kind of violence. And the reason I'm talking about this is to point out the fact of where that all came from. God is angry with these people because they were traumatizing children that He has high hopes for – that He *wants* and that He pursues zealously to be in His church. Every time we come to church and we look into the face of a child or a young person, there should never be any doubt in our mind what God wants for them.

If they've ever come to church, and if they've grown up in a church home and no longer attend church, and we meet them on the street, there should never be any doubt in our mind what God's expectation and hope is for that person. And *we*, as members of the church – both as parents and as congregational members – we are *responsible* to do what we can to teach and include them. And even when they turn away from us, we still have some things at our disposal to help them.

Turn with me to Matthew 18, verses 5 through 7.

Mt. 18:5-7 – *Whoever receives one little child like this in My name, receives Me. But whoever causes one of these little ones, who believe in Me – now, you know, you can't really believe in Jesus Christ the way He's talking about here without having an open mind, can you? So that's kind of evidence of a calling, isn't it? Whoever causes one of these little ones, who believe in Me, to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to this world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!* This is one of the strongest warnings in all the Bible. It's one of the most condemning statements that Jesus ever made. And again, it goes back to how God feels about our kids. It makes sense now, doesn't it, once we see how strongly God feels about them, why Jesus says this. God cares about our children. And our priorities are *so* out of sync with the priorities of God and the will of God in relationship to our kids. How do we keep from offending them and earning a millstone? Well, that's what we're going to be talking about in this series – at least one of the things.

So, okay, we have children. They grow up. They leave the church. What position should we take? What do we do? What's our stance? In spite of God's desires, and in spite of our efforts, many of them have left. What do we do then? What is God's approach – His attitude, His posture, His position? What position should *we* take?

God is also crystal clear on this one, too. He is! God tells us exactly how He feels and what we should do when anyone leaves the church. And it defines a relationship to them. And it tells how God feels about them all at once. Let's go to Luke 15, verse 11:

Lk. 15:11 – *And then He said, "A certain man had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.'"* That's some hard talk, isn't it? "I want my inheritance *now*. You're not dead, but I want my half *now*." And this boy didn't come from an abusive home. He didn't come from a treacherous home. His family loved him. And this request that he makes is the same as saying, "Well, you're as good as dead to me, Dad. I never want to see you again. I want my money and I want it *now*!" What caused him – what could possibly cause him – to think this way? Did he and his brother not get along? Was he pampered and spoiled? Was he rebellious and craving freedom, considering that his family's boundaries were too restrictive? This boy obviously thought that freedom meant being able to do whatever he wanted. He wanted what he wanted and he wanted it now. He wanted his share of the inheritance before it was due him. But, amazingly, it says, *So he divided then his livelihood*. This probably meant a huge upheaval and blow to the family's income and security, because we don't know what this man did for a living, but he probably owned property. So all that stuff had to be liquidated and cashed out in order to come up with enough money to give half of his assets. For me to be able to come up with half my assets in cash, I would have to sell my home. So we're talking a huge upheaval, and yet, this man did that. He converted his assets to cash and gave half of everything it was worth to this son.

V-13 – It says, *And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and journeyed into a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living*. The sudden departure implies no good byes, no thank yous. It implies an angry and alienated departure. It says, "...he gathered all..." because he wasn't planning on coming back. He'd obviously thrown off the values of his parents and quickly wasted his inheritance, we're told, on false friends. And if it were today, it would be false friends, alcohol, drugs, prostitution and, maybe, gambling and get-rich-quick schemes. He just goes out and he does whatever he wants with the money. He's free of his parents and their values.

V-14 – *But when he'd spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want*. So, very soon, he went through his *entire* inheritance. He blew the whole amount. *Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his field to feed swine. And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything*. So he's, by his own choice, isolated and a long way from anybody who loves him and cares about him. Once his money ran out, his new "friends" were nowhere to be found.

V-17 – *But when he came to himself, he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough to spare while I'm starving?"* So he hits bottom. He is low. He has nowhere to go. He realizes that he has really made a serious mistake. So he says, in verse 18, *"I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.'"* So he's humbled and he realizes he's made a huge mistake. His inheritance is

gone – never to return. He knows that he has deeply wounded his family. He believes being reinstated as a son is impossible. He’s been so hurtful and foolish. And he only hopes to be treated like a servant. He wants to be forgiven – to say he’s sorry – but he is far away. He also knows that in the culture he came from, what he has done is going to bring banishment and estrangement from his community, because he’s taken the family resources and squandered it away to Gentiles. And that was a no-no to those people.

And so it says in verse 20:

V-20 – *He arose and came to his father. But while he was still a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion on him, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.* So the father is the first to see him, because he’s *watching* for him. He hasn’t forgotten his son. He was yearning for him. He missed him. He was thinking about him. And he placed himself where he could watch the road. And when he saw him, he *ran* to meet him. Picture in your mind a Middle Eastern patriarch – an aged man with a beard and long robe – running down the road. Very undignified to see that. Nevertheless, run he did. Have you ever had someone see you from afar and have them run to meet you? I had that happen to me just recently. It happened to me at the Belle Arco retreat in Arkansas. And it was nice, because it meant that the person who ran to meet me missed me and was glad to see me. And that’s how people feel when they miss one another, when they love each other. So this man *loved* his son and he was *watching* for him. He had *not* given up on him. He had not plastered over his heart so he wouldn’t feel the pain. And when he saw his son, his heart leaped and he raced to his son. He loved him so much. And the fact that he ran tells us he doesn’t care about anything – his son’s foolishness or his hurtfulness – nor does he care what other people think of him. He just knows that he loves his son. And that matters the most to him. And when they meet, he hugs his son and kisses him. You know, some fathers would probably say, “It’s about time you came back and got smart!” or, “You really made a mess of things,” and would have been guilt-tripped or shamed. But not this father. He’s ready forgive before an apology is even offered.

V-21 – *And the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.”* So his son blurts out the words that he’d practiced saying over and over again on his way home, even though they don’t fit what’s just happened. His father has hugged him and kissed him, and his son has been practicing saying, “I don’t know what I can do. I know I’m no longer fit to be your son.” And the father acts as though he doesn’t even hear that!

V-22 – *But the father says to his servants, “Bring out the best robe and put it on him. And put a ring on his hand, sandals on his feet, and bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry. For this, my son, was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.* The son that he loved came back and that’s all that mattered to him. *“And so they began to be merry,”* it says. And so the son was always loved. And now he knows he’s forgiven no matter what he’s done in the past. Of course, forgiveness doesn’t negate consequences, does it? His inheritance? That’s gone. The family only has half as much now as it had before. His brother’s been alienated. The community disrespects him.

V-25 – *Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants asked what these things meant. And he said to him, “Your brother has come back. And because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.” But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him.* You see, he loves *this* son, too, doesn’t he?

V-29 – *And so he answered and said to his father, “Lo, these many years I have been serving you. I never transgressed your commandment at any time, and yet, you never gave me a young goat that I make merry with my friends. But as soon as this son of yours came”* – see, he’s no longer “my brother” – “*who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.*” “It’s just not right. It’s not fair! He blew it and you still love him. You act as though he didn’t do anything. He wasted half our worth and now you’re spending some of what should be mine on him!” *And the father said, “Son, you are always with me and all that I have is yours.”* So there’s the evidence, isn’t it, that this one that left and spent his half isn’t going to get any more. They’re not going to take what’s left and divide it again later. He spent his inheritance and he is now broke. And that probably means that, after his parents die, he’s probably going to have to indenture himself to survive in the world, unless his brother has mercy on him.

V-32 – *“It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.”*

What can we learn from this? The greater picture of this parable – the reason Jesus told this parable – is to show us how God sees all of us as His children – that were lost and who are come back to Him – to be loved wildly by our God, even though we’ve done terrible and foolish and hurtful things. And the forgiveness that we have received is not according to what we have done. There’s nothing fair about it – nothing just about it. If we got justice and fairness, we would be dead! But instead, we are loved. That’s how God is with us. That’s how He treats us. He’s like the patriarch – that the primary thing in his mind is love for his son! That’s what God is telling us – that that’s how *He* is about us!

So how can we learn something from this parable about how to treat our own lost children? Well, we get two choices here. We can be like the brother, who focuses on hurt and foolishness – we can be that way – and who wants to punish or shame his brother. Or we can be like God, who forgives before we can even apologize. Those are the choices we have. Which way do you think would work the best? In a lot of cases, those who’ve left us – our children – have not done a lot of stupid things. Many of them hold down really good jobs. They have good families. They haven’t asked for their inheritance. They’re responsible members of society. They still come over for dinner on Sundays. But do we wait and watch for them? Do we have that longing and expectation? Do we understand that God hasn’t given up? And neither should we. Do we have a longing for their spiritual reclamation? Do we expect one day to see them back in relationship with God? Do we love them so much that we think about them and pray about them and seek to maintain contact with them – realizing that God used *us* to begin the relationship with them and that He can use us again? And may still

be using us to relate to them? And so *contact* would be the main primary spiritual conduit. Are we that way?

I'll have to say that I think, often those of us here, who are the age of the son, know more about this than some of us who are older. Many of us, who are old, have seen so many leave that we forget to keep loving them. We think they're gone for good because they haven't come back in twenty years. And we've kind of written them off. A status quo develops where we think, "Well, they're just not going to come back." I know lots of older people that think that way. They just kind of resign themselves to it.

Interesting that, just recently, I was talking to a young woman in her early twenties, and she told me that one of her friends, about her age, stopped attending and was doing something really dangerous. His life was fixing to get very complicated very quickly, because he was doing something very dangerous. She told me that she lived around this young man all of her life. Their families knew each other and she knew him very well. And she'd gone off – moved away – and when she was gone was when he stopped attending. And even though she wasn't living in the same town where he lived any longer and was hundreds of miles away, nevertheless, she never quit. She called him periodically. And when she came home to visit her family, she would make a point of trying to get together with him. And she told me – it was so unacceptable to her that he was leaving – that she took on the role of – and this was her term – a *prayer warrior* – on his behalf – wrestling with God for her friend, whom she had known all her life. And she told me, "I can't do that for everyone I know, because it's too hard. It takes too much energy." So she put her whole being into this effort – for this lost young man. She's not his father. She's not his mother. She's a friend. And yet she's willing to put out that kind of effort on his behalf. I wonder how many of us, as older people, are willing to hang in there with our kids and our friends' kids in that kind of a relationship with God and never give up? Sometimes, those of us who are older can be corrected and taught by those who are younger. But isn't that an inspiring story? By the way, he's back. He's back – turned his life around. He's out of danger. So she waited and watched and kept him in her heart and in her prayers. She was like the father of the lost son for her friend, wasn't she? I think that needs to be the foundation of all the discussions we're going to have in the next three sermons about what we can do.

Now, I'm convinced that the key to success with those who grew up in the faith, and who've left, is to adopt the same attitude toward them that God holds toward all of us. And in the next presentation in this series, I'm going to explain *why* I believe that's true.