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Transcript
One at a Time
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The title of today's presentation is *One at a Time*. What does that mean, one at a time? It doesn't really tell us much about the topic, does it? But it does tell us about the one most important part of the presentation. The *one* thing we need to change in our thinking to accomplish one of the most critical tasks God has given us. And that is, how we help our congregation's children develop a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Even that idea – that we're responsible to play a role in the conversion of other people's children – is a new idea to many of us. We've never thought about it. We always assumed it was just parental responsibility there. And there are parents that want it to be only their responsibility. Some of us disagree with the idea. And what that means is, we're way off from what Jesus had in mind when He said this: let's read it in Matthew 18:2:

Matthew 18:2-4 – *And calling to him a child, He put him in the midst of them and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."*

So, we've all heard that, right? Well, that's not the part that I want to focus on with you today. I just wanted to provide that context. This next verse is the main part of it. There are three words in this next part that we're going to focus on. Let's read it. It starts in verse 5.

V-5 – *"Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me....* So, the first word is *one*. Whoever receives *one* such child in my name.... He didn't say all the children. No. He said, "Whoever receives *one* of these children." So, hence the title, *One at a Time*. Now, I'm not saying that trying to work with lots of kids at the same time in programs, or as a youth worker, are bad things. They're essential, because young people need things in addition to adult needs. So, that's how we would meet some of those needs. But, what Jesus is talking about here is something that we can't delegate to somebody else. He's talking to each one of us about each one of the young ones in our congregation – people that we know, but don't know. Only *we* – each one of us – can fulfill this responsibility. So, that's one of the three words we want to look at

today.

Here comes the next one:

V-5 – “*Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me....* So what does that word mean? What did it mean in context when Jesus said it? And what might it mean today? Well, specifically, in this context, it’s about how to treat someone who is younger or new. That’s what He’s talking about. People who are new in the faith are considered younger, and children, of course, are younger. He’s got a child in front of Him to use as an example. So, we can’t say it’s just about new people. It’s about children. So, why we read from the *Louw & Nida Domain Oriented Lexicon* about what *receiving* means is this: “To accept the presence of a person with friendliness; to welcome; to receive; to accept; to have as a guest.” And they quote Romans 14:1 – “you must welcome among you the person who is weak in the faith.” So, to receive, to accept, to receive a person with friendliness, to make them feel welcome, to have as a guest – this is generally how we treat friends, isn’t it? But it goes deeper than that.

Now, my friend, Jim O’Brien explained this to me a few days ago. And I’m going to pass it on to you now. I give credit, so it’s not plagiarism, right? He’s just passing on a good idea for me to use however I see fit. So let’s look at it in Ephesians 5:31.

Ephesians 5:31 – *Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.* Now, we know what that’s about, don’t we? People get married, and they have kids. Right?

So, it’s talking about family – one flesh joined together. Then he says, though: *This mystery is profound, and I am saying it refers to Christ and the church.* So, the first big thing we need to know is that we are to treat children with respect and care, because we are part of a *family*. This is the second big thing: The marriage state is a shadow of things to come. It’s about the relationship of the church to Christ. And we’re in the church. We’re a part of God’s family. He’s our *Father* and we are His *children*. Those are biblical terms used to describe the nature of the church and the relationship that people have to Him in the church. Jesus is our Brother. Jesus Christ is our Brother and we are His brothers or His sisters. And that mystery of Christ and the church is about being a family. And, if that’s true, what does it mean that a human marriage pictures it all? Well, it means that our congregation is our family in spiritual terms.

And yet, do you know what most of us do in our congregation – in the family that God has given us – with the little ones who are our spiritual younger siblings? What do we do? Well, every week we walk by them as though they weren’t there. We don’t bother to learn their names. We never consider social connection with them. We don’t even know how to do that. And that’s what we’re going to look at today and what we’re going to talk about.

Why is it that most of us do this without thinking? Is it because we’re selfish evil people? Here’s a clue: Did you know that adults in some other cultures don’t do this? In fact, some of the

cultures we tend to look down on are much better at this than we are – in a way, more godly in this area than we are – because God wouldn't do that. Jesus didn't walk by kids. He talked to them – so much so, it frustrated the disciples sometimes.

So, what can we do to become more godly people and more godly congregations, regarding this issue? Well, to explain how to do this in a congregation, I'm going to tell you a story about how I learned something important. Interestingly enough, it comes from an eighteen-year-old who was giving a speech in Spokemen's Club back in the mid-70s. We used to hold Spokemen's Club in my garage, actually. Now, we think Spokemen's Club is where people learn how to speak, but I recall learning a lot from the men in the Spokemen's Club. They weren't the only ones learning things. I was pretty young myself back then.

So, this young guy was giving a speech about his recollections of going to the Feast at Big Sandy, Texas, and how much it was. Now, this speech was very funny. He had us all rolling in the aisles, laughing about it. He mentioned that he was with other people his own age, which was few and far between in our little congregation. He was in a safe place – the Piney Woods Campground in Big Sandy, Texas, where 15,000 people – all members of the church – camped out together. They had barbeques. They had their own little talent shows in the evenings – all kinds of great things – and lots of freedom and good food. He mentioned that he could go with his friends and they were safe wherever they went. And he mentioned that all the kids were excited about it, except for one thing. They all knew that at some time during the Feast, there was one sermon that would be given on that dreaded subject – childrearing! He said the operative word there was *rear*. And he said, “After that sermon, we would all get our butts beat off for about a week, and then everything would go back to normal.” Now, I noticed that he still had a back side, so he was exaggerating for effect. But this was a good lesson to me about how to make a change in our behavior and have it mean something. It has to last longer than a week! It has to become an intentional ongoing effort – an approach – that we're collaborating on until it becomes a habit.

So, what do we do in this intentional ongoing way? Well, here are a few thoughts...now I don't know all of them, so this year, at the Winter Family Weekend, they're going to have a workshop on this, and it's going to be mainly a brainstorming session, so that people start sharing what they know about how to do this, because there are as many ways to do this as there are people to do it.

In one congregation I was in, a woman who played the flute, somehow, convinced ten, maybe – maybe more – number of teen girls to join the church ensemble and play flute. And they loved her. She was interested in them and she was involved with them. And they felt more a part of our congregation because she valued them and knew their importance. They would go to her house weekly and practice and learn more about playing the flute and practice the music – all that. That's one example. Did she know all of those kids by name and have a good relationship with them? Yes, she did. And did that make them feel more of a part of the congregation and more included and more valuable and have a part in it? It did.

Another lady I knew, in a very small congregation, who was elderly would ask parents of small children for a school picture – or just a picture, if they were too young for school. She would lay them all out on her bed every day and pray for each one of these children. I don't think that they really knew that she was doing this. But this caused her to be interested in them. So, she was inclined to speak to them, and smile, and call them by name when she saw them at church. I can remember, after services, seeing crowds of small children around her wheel chair.

Another way I saw was the young sports coach, who understood it wasn't really about basketball, but also his relationship with the boys on the team. See, we think programs are what is important, and we don't realize the programs primary purpose is to put young people in connection with each other and in connection with adults. You can't learn how to be a converted person hanging around other unconverted people. You only learn it by interacting. Same thing with being mature. You don't learn that from kids your own age. You learn it from adults – being around them. So, one of these boys, who was on this coach's team, was telling about something funny that happened at a teen sleepover at the coach's house. See, he understood it was more than just being a coach.

Every congregation, it seems, has a person who makes coffee. This is another example. In one congregation that I was in, that person was very territorial. It was never said, but the idea was, "I'm the one who makes the coffee around here." In another, the coffee person would recruit teens to help her. She was grooming them to take her place, she told them. But she was also providing a way to make getting coffee more than just getting coffee. It was a way to help people get to know the teens who served the coffee to them. Now, I don't know if the people that came there for coffee knew that, but *she* certainly did. And it was working. So, she set it up so that if you wanted coffee, it was going to be served to you by a teen. There was somebody there distributing stuff.

Another example: Years ago I moved to a large congregation where adults were oblivious to the children there, and I determined – so that means it was intentional, right? – not going to forget it in a week – I determined to never let a teen walk by me without acknowledging their presence in some way – call their name, if I knew it, or brief eye contact and a smile, or maybe a pat on the arm or a fist bump. But while I'm talking about that, that brings up another issue of social grace and appropriateness.

What would happen if I were to do that at the Feast, for example, outside of my congregation, walking down the aisle and grabbing everyone's attention whether I knew them or not.? Well, it would be awkward, wouldn't it? I would be engaging strangers as though I already knew them. But, if I was teaching their youth class, for example, that would be different, wouldn't it? I would know who they are, and so it would be good to say, "Hi," to someone I know and rude if I don't. Right?

So there are many ways relationship can begin. Now, this relationship doesn't have to mean that you're going to adopt somebody. It just means that you know them and are socially engaged.

At the Feast this past year, I was walking down the steps off the stage after giving the sermon, and I encountered the teens who were grouped back behind the stage, getting ready to go up the stairs to back up the song leader for the last song. One of the girls who was standing there said, "I liked your sermon," and I saw a lot of heads behind her nodding in agreement. And I like her comment. It was really nice of her to say that. In my speak, I try to be accessible at every level. And that meant that I had, at least in part, succeeded. So, it meant a lot to me. So, she liked my sermon and I liked her comment. But I didn't have time to tell her that, because she had to go up on stage right away. But had I been able to do that, it would have been a small social connection between us – not a new grandfather, but somebody she would know in the congregation. Then, if I passed her, I could say, "Hi," to her and that would become sort of thing that we had. In fact, I can still do that, because she opened the door to a connection. Right? She might even be here. And you might say, "Well, I already know how to do that." So, why don't we – with the young people in our congregation? Why don't we?

Here's another thought about how to do that – verse 5 (Matthew 18);

Matthew 18:5 – *Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me....* Received Me!

For years I thought He meant, it's important – really important – that we do this. It's like accepting Christ. We wouldn't want to ignore Him, would we? Or, make Him feel unwanted or out of place, would we? Of course, He wouldn't feel those things, but we wouldn't want to ignore Him, for sure. But I think there's something else that we can learn about this. Reading the verse again, we can see that Jesus is saying also, that the children in our midst and the new people that come should be just as important to us as He is. "If you receive them, you receive Me." It's an equality thing there, isn't it?

When we don't take the time to get to know them a bit, we're being respecters of persons, as it says in the *King James* Bible. Think about it. If you were giving a sermon up here, and you suddenly saw Jesus Himself sitting out in the audience – don't think of Jonathan Roumie now – but Jesus in person – the real Jesus...there He is. He's got His notepad and his pen on His lap. He's wearing a tie, and He's looking up at you, just like everybody else, hoping for something helpful from the sermon. Would you not go to some length to engage Him – make eye contact maybe, check to see if He was with you as you spoke? If you knew that He was coming to church that day, wouldn't you be inclined to tailor your message to be sure He could understand what you meant by what you said? Maybe more appropriately, wouldn't you try to talk about something that was helpful to Him?

But actually, every time a minister speaks, He needs to think about all these things related to the youthful part of the audience. At the Feast, sometimes a third, and sometimes a quarter of the

people sitting in that audience are under eighteen years of age – or, eighteen or under, I think, was the number. So, if we receive those people, we receive Christ. So, wouldn't that apply if you were coaching a team, or making coffee, or just walking down the aisle to your seat?

Okay, so backing up, what is all that have to do with this speech the young guy gave? Well, the point I took from it was, that nothing we know to do will last unless we go about it in an intentional way. Anything we do – anything change in our own behavior – needs to be preceded by the phrase *from now on*. And that's because, when we do things like this, we're bucking social norms and our own behavioral habits, and even the expectations of those who are younger. Most of them are so used to being ignored, they think it's normal. And that's what they're learning about how to treat the kids when they get older.

So, why did Jesus tell us to engage the children around us in a social way? I think there are two main reasons. One, becoming converted is about a relationship, rather than a program. It's about a relationship with God. That's what we say, isn't it? In our congregation, God uses those people with whom He has a relationship – one of whom is *you* – to introduce our children to Him, because we are a family. We're to be reflectors of God to others. We need to remember that is what they are, and that's what they're for at church. That's why they're there. They're there to be engaged. And it's how our children *know* they are God's family, and that they, too, are one of God's children.

Now, it's all true about parental responsibility. Only parents can be parents. Siblings can't be parents. So, I'm not saying that you need to parent somebody else's child. But it helps parents that they don't have to explain why the deacon, or the person who makes the coffee is so grouchy, or so dismissive, or why Mr. So and So has a group off in the corner telling them to come to Passover at his house on the 15th this year. The congregation needs to be a welcoming, unified, safe place.

I have talked, literally now, to hundreds of young adults who stopped coming to church or know people who have. And the things that they say are, "I couldn't find a way to fit in," or "Nobody seemed to care about me." So, there it is.

It needs to be a welcoming, unified, safe place. When people are talking heresy in the backside of the hall, that disturbs kids. So, anyone thinking about creating discord in the congregation needs to think about how that will affect the children they know, if they know any. Most of those people don't. They're more interested in doctrine than they are in loving the children present.

So, that's one of two reasons why Jesus said what He said. We are a family and we need to treat each other as a family, because that's how we know that we're all connected to God. That's one of two reasons.

Here's the other one: When we connect with children in our congregation, it helps us, too.

Children are spiritually strengthening to adults. When that girl told me she liked my sermon, how do you think it made me feel? And I might add, more than when an adult tells me that, because I'm expecting all the adults to pay attention. But I try to be accessible at every level, like I mentioned, so, when one of them manages to listen and get something out of it, that's something special to me. I know that I have succeeded. It strengthens me. So, how do you think that lady, who was wheelchair bound, as she was surrounded by children every Sabbath, felt? Do you think it might have lightened up her load on a lonely life a little bit? She set out to help others, and she winds up being helped.

That's how God works. When we start doing good things for people, He lifts us up. And when we engage children to help them feel a part of the family of God, it helps *us* feel more a part, too – more responsible for our own behavior and how we present to them. We're less likely to be off in the corner talking about things contrary to group beliefs. We're less likely to skip church. We're more likely to smile and enjoy our time with brothers and sisters. We're more likely to feel a part of God's family. And that's how God is increasing His family – the same way we do. We meet the friends of our friends, and our circle of friends increases. That helps us understand that we are all valuable and belong.

Now, I said there were three words in this passage. We've talked about two of them – the word *one* – engage them one at a time. It doesn't take a program – not responsible to save them all. And then, when we studied the second word, *receive* – like we would a friend – that was the word. So what's the third one? The third was is also in Matthew 6.

Matthew 18:6 – *Whoever causes one of these little ones to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.*

There are some people who only want to be encouraged by the sermons they hear. A *millstone* is not too encouraging, especially if it's fastened around your neck and it's dropped in the sea. You go with it. Now, it wasn't my idea to use that word, nor my idea to end with it. Jesus did that! But, if you read the entire chapter, it seems to me that Jesus was a bit past frustrated with the group He was talking to. He may have been exasperated to use such strong language. So, what do you suppose He was exasperated about? Well, the people ignored the spiritual needs of the children – and perhaps new people, who were just trying to learn how to fit in. So, He goes to the trouble of asking a child to come with Him – probably a child He knew – and then He tells the adults that, if they offend this child, or any other, it would be better if they were drowned in the sea! Now that's some potent talk! It was Jesus' talk about the very things we've talked about today. To understate it, they're extremely important to Him. He wants us to change, even if it goes contrary to our Western culture. And He underscored that with a millstone!

So, now for the encouraging part. There is nothing in that command that we can't do, somehow, in our own way, even if we're not that spiritually strong. It doesn't take God's wisdom to do it. Tons of unconverted people know how to do that. It is not a command to start a program to save all the children of the world. It's not about transforming yourself into some kind of pied piper.

It's about doing something we're all capable of doing to help them one at a time. We only have to play a role, and only with the children that we are presented with. We don't need to be the all-powerful savior. We already have that in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the Savior. He's responsible for everyone, but He's letting us help Him with His task. What He tells us to do doesn't take any time and it doesn't cost any money. You don't even have to be mobile. People in wheelchairs can do it. We just have to know what to do and then *do it* – with the young people that God puts before us *one at a time*.

This is Bill Jacobs for LifeResource Ministries, serving children, families and the Church of God.