

Binding and Loosing

“Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Matthew 18:18

This passage reiterates Jesus’ earlier statement following Peter’s recognition that He was the Son of God: “And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:19). Very clearly, it is a description of the authority and power He intended to grant His disciples and to His church.

The actual empowerment probably took place following the resurrection. In the last few verses of Matthew, Jesus proclaims: “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and earth. Go therefore, and make disciples ...” (Matthew 28:18,19). A similar commissioning is found in John 20:21-23:

So Jesus said to them again, “Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

While it is evident that the matter of binding and loosing is of great significance to us, somehow related to the actual “keys of the kingdom of heaven,” it is also (like so many of Jesus’ statements) innately veiled. There are two implicit questions: what is to be bound and loosed, and how is the binding and loosing to happen? A further question stands behind these: what is the relationship between the dual activity, “on earth” and “in heaven”?

It would be easier to understand if Jesus had stated that the empowerment happened first in heaven, or at least by divine beings, then on earth by human agents. Because Jesus died, we can be free from sin’s dominion. Because He rose, we have access to eternal life. By His Spirit, we can avail ourselves of His healing and sanctifying grace. While these things are true, this is not the nature of the message given here.

Rather, what is described seems to be some sort of contract. We are given jurisdiction over something. In response to some sort of action on our part, the very forces of heaven will act or refrain from acting. God, for reasons He alone understands, has apparently decided to limit heavenly powers in some fashion until His church provides the release to move.

There are two places we can look for clues that may reveal this mystery. The first is in the immediate context of Jesus’ statements. The second is the larger revelation of the Bible as a whole. In the Matthew 16 passage, the context is simply the revelation of the divinity of Christ. It may be the disciples’ first official introduction to Jesus as being more than simply a divine being, or a divinely inspired prophet, but in fact the Messiah, the eternal Son of God.

We see in the verses immediately following that Jesus then felt at liberty to also reveal His pending role in the salvation of mankind, through suffering, death and resurrection (verse 21). Peter’s instinctive recoiling from this concept, for which he was sternly rebuked, indicates that he had

really only a minimal idea of the nature of the Messiah's task (verse 23). Nonetheless, Jesus clearly states that it is His right and power to establish and redeem a church for Himself, against which the gates of hell would not prevail.

More significant for the answer to our questions is the context in Matthew 18. Beginning with verse 15, Jesus outlines in detail the procedure that should be followed when one brother sins against another. The brother who is offended should confront the offender privately, with the desire for reconciliation. Although it is not stated, other scriptures would make it clear that prior to the confrontation the man who has been wronged should determine in his heart to forgive the brother for the offense. If instead he harbors bitterness or a desire for revenge, reconciliation would be precluded from the outset.

The second step, should repentance not occur, involves the bringing in of other witnesses to persuade the man of his erring way. The confrontation then is expanded to involve the entire church. Should this also fail, Jesus directs them to use a final means of persuasion, through social rejection, or ostracizing, by the Christian community at large. The church should enact in a visible way the utter repulsion God feels toward all evil.

Immediately following this instruction, Jesus says "Assuredly, I say to you" (NKJV) or "Verily, I say..." in the traditional translation. This is important, for nearly every time Jesus uses this phrase He is either responding to a direct question (see for example verses 1-3 of chapter 18), or He is linking His next comment to the one made previously. Moreover, that which He "assures" us of is usually a divine truth, demonstrating or otherwise the consequence of the preceding discourse. Examples in Matthew would include 5:17,18; 10:14,15; 11:10,11; 16:27,28, and so forth.

Thus, it is not only justified but advisable to expect a direct link between the process of dealing with sin in verses 15-17, and the passage about binding and loosing. Before examining this link, however, let us move further back to the beginning of the chapter, where Jesus has begun a spontaneous sermon in response to the question, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" The overall content of His sermon (which spans verses 3 through 20) concerns entry into and continued participation in the kingdom of God.

Because this is His consistent topic, it is very appropriate to surmise that the concept of binding and loosing is directly related to the matter of involvement in God's kingdom. We should recall that the kingdom of heaven is also the theme in chapter 16, where the power to bind and loose is the immediate consequence of receiving the "keys." Other interpretations, such as binding Satan, seems inconsistent with the general flow of thought. In fact, there is no biblical instance of Satan or demons being bound by anyone, with the exception in Revelation 20 where an angel will bind Satan for a thousand years.

When we assume the object of the binding to be satanic powers, or sin, or something else undesirable, we may be missing the real point Jesus is making. The idea of binding is simply the constraining of action, with cords or otherwise, such as the binding of the strong man in Matthew 12:29. Suppose, given our context, that the action under consideration is actually participation in the kingdom of heaven itself? In other words, might there be something we do on earth that in fact either restrains or releases others (or even ourselves) to function in the heavenly kingdom?

Consider again the sermon as a whole. Christ begins with three pictures. The first (verses 3 and 4) describes the basic process of entry into the kingdom. A sinner is converted and humbles himself, entering as a child. The second scene depicts the hindering power of offenses. In verse 6 it is someone else's offense; in verses 7-9, the offenders are members of the person's own body. We see the absolute priority God places on citizenship in His kingdom, regardless of the cost. The third picture reveals God's great compassion for each individual, compelling Him to seek after straying sheep, desiring that none should perish.

The fourth portion of the sermon, regarding our responsibility to a wayward brother, is not a parable, nor does it contain imagery. Rather, Christ here details an unambiguous procedure for evoking our brother's repentance. He then makes the statement that we, by our own choice, bind and loose something on earth that is correspondingly bound and loosed in heaven.

Might He be saying that *our behavior towards the one who has sinned against us is in fact the key determinant in his restoration*? In other words, our obedience to God in the sinner's behalf may be exactly what God uses to free him from the captivity of his sin; correspondingly, our disobedience may be its hindrance, or its "binding." A key, after all, is what opens or locks a door—in this case a door to, or within, the kingdom of God itself.

Before examining the ramifications of this proposed interpretation, let us note that in these verses we are apparently dealing with a sinner who has already entered the kingdom. The "little child" (who is the initial subject of the sermon) is either eligible for the kingdom by virtue of his youth, or he is an adult who has, in repentance and humility, become as a child and entered thereby. The sheep of the parable are all in the fold to begin with, prior to the one straying. The sinner in verse 15 is explicitly described as a brother. Thus, to extend the interpretation of binding and loosing to those who have never entered the fold may be possible, but it is not supported by these particular scriptures.

It can also be viably argued that the straying sheep, or the erring brother, or even the child whose sin is contemplated in verse 6, has the potential of not being restored to the kingdom. The severity of the millstone image suggests that the little one's sin could be eternally damning, if presumably it continues after he reaches the age at which he becomes accountable. We need not make a determination concerning eternal security in this discussion, other than to note that if one accepts the possibility of lost salvation, then the issue of binding and loosing would have even greater consequence.

Let us consider closely some of the components of our behavior which (if this interpretation is correct) would constitute the actual phenomenon of binding or loosing. The first element, mentioned above, is forgiveness. While it isn't explicitly stated here, it is implied, and it is also the expressed subject of the passage quoted above from John 20. Underlying our forgiveness, of course, is God's love, which would be the impetus for confronting our brother in the first place. Thus, the first choice whereby we bind or loose is the choice to love and forgive. It is done by an individual, specifically the individual who has been wronged.

A second stage in binding and loosing requires a cohesive community. When a sinner remains unrepentant, brothers working in unity of spirit can petition him to reconsider. There are two levels of community—first a small group and then the whole church—demonstrating if nothing else God’s desire for as few people as possible to be damaged by the sin. But now, in addition to forgiveness and love, unity is also required. The loosing is more challenging, and requires a greater measure of God’s grace.

We should note here Jesus’ words following His statement on binding and loosing: “Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven” (vs. 19). This too contains mystery. But it encourages us to approach questions concerning the functioning of the church with an expectation that results will occur only in the intimate interconnection of the spirits of believers. “Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” (vs. 20).

The final step, the disfellowshipping of the brother, is in many ways the hardest step to take. To begin, the previous investment of love and forgiveness towards this individual may have produced a deep involvement with him emotionally. It is not easy to turn our backs on people who matter to us. Secondly, not only does the separation process expose the sinner, but also bears negatively on the reputation of the church. We may be judged not only by the unregenerate world, but even more by Christians who do not understand our motive.

The only way this final step of loosing can be accomplished is for us, as a body, to perceive the nature of God and His ways. We need to understand His righteousness, which abhors sin. We also need to understand His requirement of repentance. His mercy is abundant, but only to the humble and unrebelling. It could be said, perhaps, that our rejection of the sinner is our judgment not so much on his sin as on his stubbornness. We all sin; the difference lies in whether we confess the sin or coddle it.

To summarize, this interpretation of binding and loosing claims that God has granted us, His church, the ability and the responsibility for dealing with sin in our midst. We determine how quickly and effectively His kingdom advances in the purposes which it is destined to accomplish. When we refuse to lovingly forgive, when we settle for less than unity of spirit, when we compromise the righteousness of God in our midst, we thereby bind the powers of heaven from their work in the lives of our members. On the other hand, when at least two or three of us stand in agreement with God, there can be loosed mighty supernatural forces of redemption and cleansing.

The Bible actually offers us a glimpse of this process being applied. In 1 Corinthians 5:4-5, Paul gives instructions to the church pertaining to a man involved in sexual immorality.

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

Paul either knows or assumes here that stages one and two of the reconciliation process have been attempted; in any event, the offense is now public knowledge. So he directs the church to “deliver,” or loose, the offender to the heavenly powers. Note the carefully described context of unity (among

themselves, with Paul's spirit in his absence, and with the Spirit of God) as a prerequisite for loosing.

These brothers are not cursing the man. Their desire is his ultimate restoration. What they are doing is contracting between themselves to take their hands off the situation. They are covenanting to stand by, probably still in prayer but without other interference, willing to watch the very destruction of this man's flesh at the hand of Satan, by the permission of God, for the salvation of his spirit.

We are also told in 2 Corinthians 2:9-11 that the process was successful. Here Paul goes on to teach the church how to act following restoration.

Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him. For to this end I also wrote, that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things. Now whom you forgive anything, I also forgive. For if indeed I have forgiven anything, I have forgiven that one for your sakes in the presence of Christ, lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices.

We should note that the binding and loosing responsibilities of the church are to occur at three levels of dealing with sin: private, corporate, and supernatural. The drastic measure of turning an offender over to Satan will probably be rare and should be limited to very serious sins. The only other mention of this occurring in the New Testament church is in 1 Timothy 1:20, where two individuals are guilty of blasphemy.

However, the lesser levels at which we are admonished to loose our brothers occur much more often. In the 'question and answer' period following Jesus' sermon in Matthew 18, we find Peter's inquiry as to how often forgiveness will be required. Jesus considers the question so important that He not only gives Peter a number (490), but He also expands His answer with the parable of the unforgiving servant.

His final comment following this parable is important. "And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due him. So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses." Here, then, we see the full ramifications of the binding and loosing phenomenon. For in fact, not only does our disobedience or obedience to the Word of God bind or loose our brothers, it also binds or looses us.

We stated at the outset of this discussion that our interpretation of binding and loosing could be clarified both within the context of Jesus' statements, and also in relation to the scriptural message as a whole. Let us consider then the latter framework.

I believe the underlying consequence of God's choice to give His church this sort of power in one another's lives—if in fact that is what He has done—is to establish a vital and tangible means whereby we are responsible for, and accountable to, one another. Ephesians 4:16 speaks of a "whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, [causing] growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love."

The means whereby this knitting happens is “speaking the truth in love” (vs. 15). Thus, to ignore or excuse sin is the antithesis of love. Further, the impurity of another member of the body is in some way the defilement of us all. According to Matthew 18, we must deal with it, or we must excise it.

It is regrettable that the severity of disfellowship has been greatly diluted in our present society. In other times and cultures, excommunication was dramatic and devastating in its consequences. Today, if one congregation were to close its doors to an offender, he can simply walk into the church across the street. In our corrupt, self-indulgent, and relativistic age, sin evokes no universal horror.

Nonetheless, it should be possible for a community of believers to so unite that we would feel ourselves spiritually interconnected, truly needing each other (and making separation profoundly painful). The entire fourth chapter of Ephesians is probably the grandest statement of this idea, but we also find it to be an integral part of Jesus’ intimate revelation of Himself to His disciples at the last supper. “By this,” He told them, “all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). His subsequent prayer to His Father was that the unity of His followers would compel the world to believe He was sent from God (John 17:21). In verse 23, He states that the world would also be convinced by their perfection.

So again we arrive at the three evidences of divine Life that are to characterize the kingdom of God on earth: love, unity and perfection (or righteousness). While each of us enters the kingdom as an individual, voluntarily humbling ourselves before God as a child, we are thereafter joined to the body and should no longer expect to live independently of one another.

Thus it may be that God designed this interdependence to be not merely a matter of words, or even of emotion, but of profound spiritual consequence. Ultimately, we must confess and repent of our own sin. But because we are part of His community, our sin has damaged not only ourselves, but also those around us.

They can choose to “bind” that sin in heaven by ignoring it on earth, or they can “loose” it by their forgiveness, their confrontation, their exhortation for our repentance, and if need be, by separating us from the shelter of the fold, until the agony of our choice to rebel—including the satanic harassment sin always invites—brings us to our senses and drives us back to God.

*Diane Woerner
December 1994*