

## *Dangerous Scripture*

<sup>NRS</sup> **Matthew 18:18-20** Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. <sup>19</sup> Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. <sup>20</sup> For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

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"Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. <sup>19</sup> Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven." That's pretty impressive sounding! Truly I tell you! Truly is the translation of the word *amen*. Amen, I say. So be it. This is true; this is the way it is. The "you" here is plural, so, "Whatever y'all bind on earth will be bound in heaven. Whatever y'all loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." As you might guess, this *binding* refers to what is forbidden, what is restricted, - and *loosing* refers to what is permitted, what is allowed by making the rules less strict. In the ancient rabbinic literature, binding and loosing are about legal interpretation. Where does the law apply (or bind) and where does it not apply - where is the law loosed?

We do this sort of binding and unbinding, this loosening up, all the time. Long, long ago, we loosened the law regarding the Sabbath. We moved the Lord's Day from Saturday to Sunday, feeling that it was important for us to worship on the day of resurrection. When pasteurization was invented, many congregations loosened centuries of celebrating the Lord's Supper with wine by deciding to use grape juice instead. Many churches see gambling as a sin, or a severe social problem, at the least. Some bind things even tighter, declaring, for instance, that **all** card games are evil. Binding takes all sorts of routes, often dealing with various moral issues or various worship styles. Proclamations have been made about the proper place for women in society, their place in marriage, and their place in church. Decisions have been issued regarding the morality of dancing, movies, and acting. It's been declared that worship should be solemn -- and it's been declared that worship should be jubilant. It's been decided that ministers should - and should not - wear clerical attire.

My sense is that many of us are more likely to do some binding than some loosing. We tend to make the rules stricter and more detailed for fear that we might start sliding down some moral slippery slope and land in a condition of damnation. Unconsciously perhaps, we don't really trust the rest of this verse. We don't really believe that our loosening the rules will **also** have heavenly approval.

Does God promise to ratify our decisions? Does this make the church infallible? Can **we** decide what to forbid and what to permit? It becomes even more confusing when we note how much of our binding and unbinding, our permitting and our forbidding is contradictory and it leaves us wondering what ends up getting bound and loosened in heaven. We can't imagine how it's both permitted **and** forbidden to use electric guitars in church, both permitted **and** forbidden for women to preach, both evil **and** okay to gamble.

The next verse raises similar issues. "If two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven." We might want to accept that statement as simple, solid, fact. But our experience is less simple. The scripture here speaks of two people praying. Consider, however, how during the Civil War, there were certainly far more than two devout Christians praying fervently for the South to prevail, and there were certainly more than two devout Christians praying fervently for the North to prevail. While this verse sounds like a promise, even a guarantee, our experience doesn't match that understanding.

One of the most basic rules regarding studying and understanding scripture is to look at the context of the passage. Rather than assuming that each verse was meant to be complete in and of itself, it's important to look at the conversation where that verse is embedded. The previous three verses

address what appears to be the issue of church discipline. If someone sins against you, go talk to them alone, then with two or three others with you, and finally, if necessary, bring the matter before the whole church. "If the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. (Matthew 18:17 NRS) This is followed by the verse about binding and loosing. Binding and loosing seem to refer especially to disciplinary action. It appears that the congregation has the power to punish or exclude.

The final step in the process is "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Sometime around 80 AD, the gospel of Matthew was written to Jewish Christians. For a Jew at this time, a non-Jew, a Gentile, was unclean, and associating with Gentiles made you ritually unclean. A tax collector was a traitor, someone who served the interests of the occupying Roman army, the very army that had destroyed the temple during the uprising in 70 AD. A Jew actively avoided any contact with Gentiles and tax collectors. But we have to ask ourselves, did Matthew intend for the offender in this passage to be ostracized? Had the writer forgotten that Jesus healed the daughter of the Canaanite woman, healed the child of the Roman centurion, and healed the two insane men of the Gadarenes? Had the writer forgotten that Jesus sought out the tax collector Zacchaeus – and that Jesus called a tax collector named Matthew to be one of the apostles? Or perhaps, the writer is saying that even when the one who has sinned against you persists in refusing to change, even then, treat them like Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors – with kindness, compassion, and love!

If we look at the whole eighteenth chapter of Matthew, this view makes even more sense. The chapter begins by asking the question, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Jesus set a child in their midst and said, "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (Matt 18:4 NRS) Jesus says that humility is crucial to being great in the kingdom. He goes on to warn us to be careful that we don't put obstacles in the way of the smallest and least among us. Support and nurture those who are weak in faith. Be careful that you don't despise the least among you. This is followed by a parable about how concerned God is for the sheep who get lost from the herd; about how God seeks after the ones who have gotten lost, even those we might think are insignificant. "Jesus says, It isn't the will of your Father in heaven that [even] one of these little ones should be lost." (Matt 18:14) Matthew 18 – the whole chapter – is about kindness, humility, graciousness, and reconciliation. The whole point of the procedure that begins when someone sins against you isn't how to throw them out of the congregation. It's how to work for reconciliation, how to keep community intact and healthy. It's about restoration of the offender, not revenge for the one offended. The process doesn't begin by the offender seeking forgiveness, but by the one offended seeking to reconcile and repair the relationship.

There has been terrible misuse of this passage. It begins with the words, "If someone sins against you." It doesn't say, "If someone disagrees with you." In my childhood, I saw this passage used as authority to exclude church members who didn't understand the Bible in exactly the same way as the preacher or the majority of the congregation. It was a weapon used to maintain power and to silence other thought. This passage has been used to undergird the Spanish Inquisition, to squelch questions, and to pound the church into lockstep uniformity all through history. In some ages there [were] wholesale excommunications."<sup>1</sup> The extreme of the Inquisition or more modern abuses of church power are terrible instances of power overthrowing humility. Judge not, that you be not judged, we are commanded.

The process here is one of repeated attempts to reconcile, but I have heard people say, "We can't banish this person until we go through the steps in scripture." The tone was "We'll give them a fair trial and then we'll hang them." Somewhere in the temptation to outlaw doubt and questioning, somewhere in the temptation of power, and somewhere in the addictive satisfaction of self-righteousness, the point of reconciliation gets lost.

With the context of the whole chapter in mind, let's return to the topic of binding and loosing. Again we ask, does God promise to ratify our decisions? Does this make the church infallible? Many Protestant scholars note that the grammar in the Greek text here is difficult. Early translations were used

to support the authority of the church and the church hierarchy. "What we bind is bound in heaven." But, Protestant scholars have taken a close look at the verbs here. Grammar is fast becoming a lost field of study. But scholars have noted that the first verb is second-person aorist subjunctive and the second verb is a future perfect participle. So, a more nuanced and accurate translation would read, "Whatever you have bound on earth will have been bound in heaven." If, as this whole chapter calls for, we seek reconciliation with humility and concern for other, then, "prayerful human decisions will, by the Spirit's guidance, faithfully *reflect* the decision already made by God; that is, the judgment of the church will correspond to God's already fully determined will."<sup>2</sup> God doesn't ratify our decisions. We strive to live by God's will. This passage isn't so much about how to discipline one who has sinned as it is about disciplining ourselves in how we deal with the sinner!

The same applies to the verse about prayer. We are told that, "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Gathered in Christ's name isn't just showing up at the same time in the building with the cross on the front wall. Gathering in Christ's name means dropping our agendas and seeking the will of God, seeking to have the mind of Christ. When we are dead to self and alive in Christ, then our prayers align with God's will. "The prayer that is answered is the prayer that, by grace, is in accord with God's will."<sup>3</sup> Prayer isn't so much about getting God to do as we want, but getting us into harmony with God's wishes.

Today's scripture isn't about removing irritating and contaminating people from the church, but rather about purifying ourselves with humility, patience, compassion, and love so that we ourselves fit the body of Christ more precisely. Amen.

To be Christian is to be bound together in community. We pray "Our Father"

Members of God's family are responsible to – and for – each other

On the other hand, we talk a lot about being lonely and isolated in today's culture, but are we really willing to be committing our time to be a community? Are we willing to be that exposed and vulnerable ourselves?

We pray for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus is saying that if we, the church, do not forgive and heal, who on earth is going to do it?

The church isn't given power because it is always right, but rather, the church is to be focused on confession, restoration, and reconciliation.

This passage assumes that the local church exists in a distinct, organized form – which it didn't at the time of Jesus' earthly ministry. There are only two places in all of the gospels where the word church is used (Matthew 16:17 and 18:17). Many scholars believe this may be the product of Matthew rather than exact words of Jesus.

A passage on church discipline doesn't make much sense when the congregation is self-sufficient individuals who gather for Sunday worship, then leave to do their own thing during the rest of the week. Paul describes the church as interdependent parts of the body of Christ, who share in suffering and in rejoicing. In a town with over 100 churches, if someone is disciplined and excommunicated in one church, they either go three blocks away to another church, or they start church number 101.

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<sup>1</sup> George A. Buttrick, *St. Matthew, Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1951) pg. 474

<sup>2</sup> Marguerite Shuster, *The Lectionary Commentary: The Third Readings* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2001) pg. 107

<sup>3</sup> Marguerite Shuster, *The Lectionary Commentary: The Third Readings* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2001) pg. 107