

OpenTheo

Matthew 18:18



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this talk, Steve Gregg discusses the concept of binding and loosing in Matthew 18:18, in the context of restoring lost individuals. He explains how some people interpret this verse to mean binding Satan and loosing angels on God's behalf, but argues that this is not the intended meaning. According to Gregg, the promise of binding and loosing is meant for the church to enforce standards of behavior and hold apostolic authority, which is available through the writings of the original apostles.

Transcript

In Matthew 18, Jesus is speaking to his disciples, and in the context he's talking about restoring those who have been lost. In verses 10-14, he has said that God's attitude toward the lost sinner is like that of a shepherd who has lost a sheep, and he goes diligently out to find that sheep because he cares about its well-being, and he does not rest until he has found it, and then he rejoices greatly upon finding it. Jesus says even so, there's joy in heaven among the Father and his angels when one sinner turns to Christ.

And then in verses 15-17 of the same chapter, Jesus talks about how we are to become involved in the restoration of such wandering sheep. He speaks specifically of a case where a brother sins against you, or somebody sins against you, and how you are to go about restoring him. He says you're supposed to first approach him privately, and if that does not gain him back, if he does not repent in that case, you'd go with a couple of other witnesses, and if that doesn't work, it has to become a matter for the whole church's attention, and if he won't hear the church's rebuke, then he is to be regarded not a Christian at all.

He is to be regarded, as Jesus put it, as a heathen, and as a tax collector. Now, in chapter 18, verse 18, following immediately upon this material, Jesus said, 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. Again, I say to you that if any two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.

For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. Now, there's some interesting verses here, some difficulty in understanding at least verse 18, where Jesus said, I say to you assuredly that whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. This verse is identical with something Jesus said two chapters earlier, just back in chapter 16, and he says the very same thing to Peter privately in verse 19.

This is Matthew 16, 19. It says, I give you the keys to 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. Now, these passages, the one in chapter 16 and this one in chapter 18, have given rise to a lot of speculation as to what is really being promised here, binding and loosing.

There is today in the church a popular notion that it is a part of spiritual warfare that we learn to bind the evil spirits. There are some who believe that we need to identify the territorial spirits over individual regions or towns, and once identifying them, we have to bind them so as to inhibit their activity. Certainly, the idea of binding spirits, when it is so discussed, is based partly at least on these verses, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven.

However, it should be pointed out that this verse is not in the context of any discussion about spiritual warfare. There is no mention of demons, there is no mention of territorial spirits, and there is certainly reason to question, and I would say even to doubt, that these verses have anything to do with the practice I just described. If it does, and we are indeed to bind evil spirits, then what does it mean to loose them? Do we bind them for a while, then set them free again? Or do we loose other spirits? Some people do, or at least they think they do.

In prayer I have heard people say, I bind you Satan, and I loose the angels of God to do such and such a thing. And no doubt when they are doing that, they feel that they are doing that which this verse is recommending. However, I think that is very misguided and represents a very mistaken view of what is being said in this passage.

When Jesus says, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven, there are a few things we ought to observe. First of all, in the Greek it does not read the way it does as I just read it. I am reading the New King James Version, and it follows pretty closely the wording of the older King James Version.

But some modern translations have translated more correctly from the Greek, and I do not say this as any criticism of the King James or the New King James. It is just anyone can prove this to himself by looking at the Greek New Testament. In the Greek New Testament, it does not say, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven.

It says, whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven. Now do you notice the difference in meaning there? If I say, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, it sounds as if that you are initiating something on earth, and heaven responds and honors it. For instance, if I bind something here on earth, then because I did that, God will then do something corresponding to that in the heavenlies.

But that is not what it says. In the Greek it says, whatever you bind on earth will have been bound. That is, in other words, heaven has already accomplished it.

You now are doing it on earth. You are accomplishing on earth what has already been done in heaven. And that would suggest that whatever it is that Jesus is specifically referring to, it involves an enforcing of a reality on earth that is already an established reality in heaven.

Whatever you bind on earth will be what has been bound in heaven. Now what you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven is how it actually reads in the Greek. So that being so, it certainly indicates that rather than the apostles initiating something in heaven or God responding and honoring it, it is talking about the apostles and the church doing that which brings into reality on earth, that which is already a reality in heaven.

Do you remember when Jesus said, when you pray, among other things, say this, Thy kingdom come, and then what is the next line? Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Now do you see? There is a reality already in heaven. And through our prayers we are to seek to bring about on earth the reality that already exists in heaven.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Now this suggests to me that the binding could take the form of praying. Or the loosing could take the form of praying.

Because it is through prayer that we invite God to establish on earth the things that he has already established in heaven. But what specifically is the meaning of binding and of loosing? Well, there are many who believe, and I would have to count myself among them, that Jesus is using a language or a vocabulary that was familiar to the apostles, and not only to them but to the Jews in general. Because in the Jewish religion there were Jewish teachers called rabbis.

And the rabbis had their own manner and their own vocabulary and so forth. And in the common speech of the Jews, a rabbi would sometimes bind something or loose it. And what that meant was, in his teaching, he would either permit or not permit a certain activity.

Let us say, for example, a Jew was wondering whether it was all right, since the Bible says not to bear a burden on the Sabbath. Well, suppose a Jew didn't know what a

burden was. I mean, what if I'm wearing a wooden leg? Is that bearing a burden on the Sabbath? Well, one rabbi might say, no, it's okay to wear a wooden leg on the Sabbath.

Another might say, no, that is indeed bearing a burden on the Sabbath. You cannot wear a wooden leg on the Sabbath. Well, the first rabbi would be said to have loosed that activity because he permitted it.

The other rabbi is said to have bound it because he has not permitted it. That is the language of the rabbis, that to loose an activity was to permit it. To bind it was to restrict it or to disallow it.

Now, that was the way the rabbis talked, and that was the language of the rabbis, talking about binding and loosing. If Jesus was adopting that vocabulary, which was, of course, known to all Jews, including the disciples, and if he was saying to the disciples, whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven, would it not suggest that the essential point he's making is that you will permit on earth the things that heaven permits already, and you will forbid on earth or disallow activity on earth that heaven itself disallows. The point being that the disciples, when they would give moral or ethical instruction to the church, would simply echo that which God himself has already determined in heaven, and as such they would be the enforcers in the church of those standards that God had in heaven already determined.

The apostles, by the way, are the ones to whom this was spoken. We don't ever read of this same promise or this same statement being made to a larger company than just the apostles. In fact, the first time Jesus made the statement, he made it to Peter, apparently alone, in chapter 16 of Matthew, when he said to Peter, I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven.

Peter seems to be the only one to whom Jesus is speaking of there, but in Matthew 18, the statement applies to all his listeners, and in that case happened to be all the apostles. Now, that raises questions as to whether this is a general promise that goes to all Christians, or whether Jesus was speaking of a special authority that the apostles would have within the church, that is, in their teaching function, when the apostles would begin to teach and form and organize the church and set standards and norms for the church, they were in the position to establish in the church on earth those norms and those standards that already were God's standards in heaven. And this would suggest, this statement would suggest that the church would be obligated to recognize the apostolic teaching as having a heavenly authority.

Now, we know that in Acts chapter 2, when 3,000 people were converted on a single day, we read that these people who were converted sat daily under the apostles' teaching, and they sat daily to learn from the apostles what it meant to be a Christian

and to live like a Christian. And that is probably because the apostles were recognized as having this special commission from Christ, that they were the ones who would enforce the standards of heaven in the church on earth, and their teaching was the way they seemed to have done so. The immediate context of this particular statement is where Jesus talked about disciplining a member of the church who was sinning and who would not repent, although confronted a number of times.

In the previous verse to the one we're considering, Jesus said, if that person refuses to hear them, tell the church, but if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. In other words, we're talking about a situation where a drastic and important step is being taken. A member of the church who has been a member in good standing, but has now been sinning and will not repent when confronted about the sin, that person is being declared to be not a member of the church, not a member of the body of Christ, being recognized to be a heathen and a tax collector.

Now, you might say, well, who has the right to judge somebody like that? Well, perhaps we could say the apostles. That could be why Jesus says to them in this exact context, whatever you bind, whatever you loose on earth will be bound or what has been loosed in heaven, indicating that the apostles would be authoritatively in a position to make these declarations about somebody's being accepted or not accepted, permitted or not permitted to be in the church, based on these criteria, and that whatever they declare is to be recognized as that which heaven, or God himself has declared. That is to say, the apostles could make these decisions with a divine mandate, and that when they did make these decisions, the church should accept the fact that this is the decision of God himself, expressed through the apostles on earth.

Now, the next question is, what about other church leaders who are not apostles? Do they have this authority? And what do we do in a church, perhaps, where the apostles are not here? We live now 20 centuries after the time of the apostles, and they are not here. And therefore, are we in a position today to be able to act on these instructions without the apostles here to bind and loose and so forth? Well, there's a couple of ways to look at this. Both ways allow that the church still has the apostolic authority available, but there are two very different ways of explaining that apostolic authority in the modern church.

One is the way that the Roman Catholics understand it. The Roman Catholics believe in a doctrine called apostolic succession, and they believe that when the apostles died, they left in their place successors to their office, in the persons of certain bishops, that the bishop of Rome was the successor to Peter, and the other bishops of the other churches were successors to the rest of the band of the apostles. And therefore, in the generation after the apostles, it is argued, there was still apostolic authority residing in the men that replaced the apostles as their successors.

And then in the next generation, and the one after that, and the one after that, there were other men who succeeded them, so that they have an unbroken chain of succession from Peter and the apostles in the first century down to the present pope and the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church today. And therefore, it is argued that the pope and the bishops today have this very apostolic authority that was given to Peter and the apostles, because they sit in the seat of Peter and the apostles, and they are therefore the ones who have this authority. Perhaps this helps you to understand why the Roman Catholic Church has felt itself to have the right to proclaim certain people as heretics and to excommunicate them and to discipline people, based on the fact that the pope and the bishops have found these people, you know, recalcitrant or unwilling to change or to comply with the church's teachings, and therefore they can declare them heretics and anathematize them and so forth, because these leaders of the Roman Church are believed to possess the very authority of Peter and the apostles.

And this apostolic authority that Jesus granted to Peter and the apostles is thought to reside in every generation in their successors. And so the pope today and the Roman Catholic bishops are thought to be those successors, and they have this apostolic authority. Now, Protestants don't generally accept this view of apostolic authority, and it's one of the things that sets Protestant Christianity apart from Roman Catholic Christianity, because Protestants do not believe that Peter and the apostles left successors in their offices.

We do not read in the scriptures of any apostolic succession. Now, sometimes in defense of the Catholic doctrine, it is pointed out that in Acts chapter 1, when Judas had hanged himself, one of the apostles had died, that the apostles felt it necessary to appoint a successor to Judas. And, of course, Matthias was chosen, according to Acts chapter 1, to replace Judas, and it restored the number of the apostles back up to the original number of 12, rather than keeping it at 11.

And they say, you see there, there's a picture of apostolic succession. One of the apostles died, and he had to be replaced. However, there were other apostles who later died, and they were not replaced.

James was beheaded in Acts chapter 12, but he was not replaced. There was no successor named to him. When the other apostles died, we have no record in scripture of them ever having appointed a successor to their position, or ever having the church appoint such a successor to their position.

The case of Judas seems to be unique, and I think what we must assume is that an apostle who died in his calling, faithful, holds office forever. Jesus said to the 12 apostles, you 12 shall sit on 12 thrones and judge the 12 tribes of Israel. There's only 12 positions, and it's not thousands of people who have lived throughout history that are going to occupy these thrones, but the original 12, with the exception of one apostle who

defected and gave up his position, in which case somebody else was positioned to replace him.

But that did not continue on with the death of the other apostles. It simply is that one apostle renounced his apostleship, and therefore his position was left open. But the death of other apostles did not leave a vacancy, because they continued to be the 12 apostles even after they died, and they are indeed the foundation stones of the holy city in Revelation chapter 21.

And so there is no teaching in scripture of apostolic succession. However, the authority of the apostles is still available to the church, but in another form. We find Paul explaining his understanding of how apostolic authority is passed along in 2 Timothy chapter 2. And at the very beginning of that chapter, or almost the beginning, he says in verse 2, the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

Now notice this. Paul was writing this epistle. This is the last epistle he wrote before his death.

He knew he was dying. He had taught things in the church that were very authoritative, and he wished for his authoritative teachings to continue with the church beyond his death. Did he appoint Timothy to be his successor? No.

Did he appoint anyone to be his successor? No. What did he say? He said, Timothy, you've heard what I have to say. You have this letter from me.

You've heard me teach. You've had many witnesses to confirm what I've said. You pass those on in your teaching to other men, and they in turn will pass those things on in their teaching to other faithful men.

And the idea is that from generation to generation, the authority of the original apostles in the form of their teachings that they left us would be passed along. This does not mean that we would in every generation have living apostles. We would simply have the living witness of the original apostles in the form of the scriptures that they wrote.

And these scriptures have been passed along by faithful men through the ages. Now I'm not going to argue that everyone who's ever taught in the church was himself a faithful man. That would be obviously not the case.

But there have been sufficient faithful men who have carried on the apostolic tradition. They've passed along the apostolic writings so that the church today is still in possession of apostolic authority, but not invested in men who hold apostolic office, but in the form of the writings of the original apostles. Their authority is in what they wrote.

And therefore, the authority of scripture is that authority which determines on earth

what is already determined in heaven. If you want to know whether someone is saved or not, whether someone belongs in the church or not, whether a certain activity is permitted or not, we don't have to have a living apostle to tell us. We have the scriptures of the original apostles, and they have told us those things.

They've told us who is to be put out of the church, who is not to be put out of the church. And as we follow their teaching, we are still operating well within the authority that was granted to them. And that's what Paul indicated when he wrote to Timothy, that this is how the authority of the apostle would be transmitted.

By those who heard the apostle and had his letters would pass those along to others, and those who received them would pass them along to others, and so forth. And this would be a carrying on of the authority of the original apostles in the church. So church discipline should continue to this day, and we can easily, from the writings of the apostles, determine which persons really should be disciplined.

And the lack of discipline in the church has led to tremendous compromise. Paul said, a little leaven will leaven a whole lump. And he was talking in 1 Corinthians 5 about church discipline.

If you don't get the sinner out, he will corrupt the whole church. The church has indeed neglected church discipline, and guess what? The church has been leavened and corrupted. Therefore, the teachings of Jesus in this, as in many cases, have been neglected by the church to its own detriment.

And we do well to get back to what Jesus said, to do it as he said to do it, and let the chips fall where they may. Many times we think it would be disastrous to do what he said. Well, maybe we should try it and just see what happens.

All right, thank you for joining us today. I'll be back with you next time to continue our studies in Matthew chapter 18 in the life of Christ.