

A GREEK & ORIGINAL-CONTEXT STUDY

Binding and Loosing

"Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven" (Matthew 18:18). Popes, reformers, Anabaptists and revivalists have all claimed this sentence. What did Matthew mean — and what did the congregation who first heard it read aloud understand him to be saying?

The Big Idea

There is a sentence in Matthew that almost every branch of the church has claimed as its own charter. Rome heard in it the authority of an office. Luther and Calvin heard the preaching of the gospel. The Anabaptists heard the gathered congregation discerning together. In our own century, a great many believers have heard permission to speak directly to the devil. Four readings, one verse: *"Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven"* (Matthew 18:18).

Somebody has to be wrong. Possibly everybody is partly right. The only way to find out is to do what we always do at Pleasant Springs: ask **who wrote it**, **who first heard it**, and **what it originally meant** — before we ask what it means for us. We will read the Greek New Testament alongside the ESV, walk the whole field of interpretations with their sources, settle the argument that has run over four Greek words since 1939, and then answer the question this lesson exists for: *what would the congregation in Matthew's own church have understood, sitting in a house, hearing this scroll read aloud?*

Fair warning: the answer is both more modest and more serious than any of the four popular versions.

The method in one sentence. A verse means what its author meant and what its first audience could have understood.

Everything else — every doctrine, every application, every sermon — has to be built on that foundation or it is being built on us instead. This lesson has a companion research page with the full bibliography: [Deep Research: Matthew 18:18 →](#)

First, read the whole paragraph. Verse 18 has been quoted alone so often that most Christians have never seen the four sentences it is attached to. It is not a free-standing promise. It is the hinge in the middle of a procedure.

GREEK NEW TESTAMENT — MATTHEW 18:15–20

18:15 Ἐὰν δὲ ἁμαρτήσῃ εἰς σέ ὁ ἀδελφός σου, ὑπάγε **ἐλεγξον** αὐτὸν μεταξὺ σοῦ καὶ αὐτοῦ μόνου. ἂν σου ἀκούσῃ, **ἐκέρδῃσας τὸν ἀδελφόν σου**.

18:16 ἂν δὲ μὴ ἀκούσῃ, παράλαβε μετὰ σοῦ ἓτι ἓνα ἢ δύο, ἵνα ἐπὶ στόματος δύο μαρτύρων ἢ τριῶν σταθῇ πᾶν ῥήμα·

18:17 ἂν δὲ παρακούσῃ αὐτῶν, εἰπὲ τῇ **ἐκκλησίᾳ**. ἂν δὲ καὶ τῆς ἐκκλησίας παρακούσῃ, ἔστω σοι ὥσπερ ὁ ἐθνικός καὶ ὁ τελώνης.

18:18 Ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν· ὅσα ἂν **δῆσητε** ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς **ἔσται δεδεμένα** ἐν οὐρανῷ, καὶ ὅσα ἂν **λύσητε** ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς **ἔσται λελυμένα** ἐν οὐρανῷ.

18:19 Πάλιν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι ἂν δύο συμφωνήσωσιν ἐξ ὑμῶν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς περὶ παντὸς πράγματος οὗ ἂν αἰτήσωνται, γενήσεται αὐτοῖς παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς μου τοῦ ἐν οὐρανοῖς.

18:20 οὗ γάρ εἰσιν δύο ἢ τρεῖς συνηγμένοι εἰς τὸ ἑμὸν ὄνομα, ἐκεῖ εἰμι ἐν μέσῳ αὐτῶν.

ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

18:15 "If your brother sins against you, go and **tell him his fault**, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, **you have gained your brother**."

18:16 "But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses."

18:17 "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the **church**. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

18:18 "Truly, I say to you, whatever you **bind** on earth **shall be bound** in heaven, and whatever you **loose** on earth **shall be loosed** in heaven."

18:19 "Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven."

18:20 "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

Three things to notice before we go further. (1) In verse 18 the verbs are *plural* — "whatever *you all* bind." In Matthew 16:19 Jesus says the identical thing to Peter alone, in the singular. (2) The object is *neuter*: "whatever *things*," not "whomever" — though whether that means *rules* or *people* is itself disputed. (3) The words are not "shall be bound" in the simple future; the Greek is ἔσται δεδεμένα — "shall be *in the state of having been* bound." Each of those three observations has decided somebody's doctrine. We will take them one at a time.

PART TWO • THE AUTHOR — A TAX COLLECTOR WRITING TO A CHURCH

Church tradition from Papias in the early second century onward names **Matthew the tax collector** (Matthew 9:9; 10:3) as the author of this Gospel — the most thoroughly Jewish of the four, organised around **five great discourses**. Matthew 18 is the fourth of them, and it is unique: it is the only extended block of teaching in any Gospel devoted to *how a congregation handles sin inside its own body*.

Two details of Matthew's authorship bear directly on our verse.

1

Matthew is the only evangelist who uses the word "church." Ἐκκλησία appears in the Gospels exactly twice, both in Matthew — at 16:18 and at 18:17. Both times, the binding-and-loosing promise stands immediately beside it. For Matthew, this saying is a *charter for the assembly*. It is not a private power and it is not a spiritual technique.

2

He frames it deliberately, and the frame is mercy. Immediately before verse 18 stands the parable of the shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep to go after one, ending "it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish" (18:14). Immediately after it stands Peter's question about forgiving seven times, the answer "seventy-seven times," and the parable of the servant who was forgiven a fortune and jailed a man over pocket change (18:21–35). Whatever authority verse 18 confers, Matthew has walled it in with mercy on both sides.

And there is a quiet irony in the author. The final step of the procedure is "let him be to you as a Gentile and a *tax collector*" — written down by a tax collector, in the Gospel that records Jesus being repeatedly accused of eating with exactly those people (9:10–13; 11:19). Matthew, of all men, knew what Jesus does with someone in that category.

PART THREE · THE AUDIENCE — A CHURCH THAT HAD JUST BEEN PUT OUT

Matthew wrote, most scholars judge, for a largely **Jewish-Christian congregation** — often located at Antioch — somewhere in the AD 60s to 80s. They were living through the most painful separation of their lives: the parting of the ways between the synagogue and those Jews who confessed Jesus as Messiah.

That single fact transforms the sentence. These people knew exactly what it felt like to be *excluded*. The synagogue ban was not theory to them. Judaism had two levels of it — נִדְּוִי (*niddui*), a temporary exclusion, and חֵרֶם (*herem*), full excommunication — and John 9:22 records that in Jesus' own generation anyone confessing him as Christ would be put ἀποσυναγώγος, "out of the synagogue."

A community that has just been thrown out is now being handed the authority to throw people out. Matthew knows precisely how dangerous that is — and every safeguard in the paragraph exists because of it.

So he hedges the authority four ways: with the Torah's own procedure of private reproof (v.15), with Israel's two-or-three-witness rule from Deuteronomy 19:15 (v.16), with a stated goal that is not justice but recovery — "*you have gained your brother*" — and finally with the promise that the risen Jesus is personally standing in the room while the verdict is read (v.20).

One more thing about this audience: **they had no bishops yet**. When Matthew writes "tell it to the church," his first readers do not picture a tribunal of clergy in another city. They picture the room they are sitting in.

PART FOUR · THE ORIGINAL CONTEXT — WHERE THIS LANGUAGE CAME FROM

"Binding and loosing" was not a phrase Jesus coined. It was in the air, and it was in the air in at least three different ways. Getting the chronology right is the whole game here — and it is exactly where most commentaries go wrong.

STREAM ONE · THE LEGAL IDIOM

To forbid and to permit

Rabbinic Hebrew: אָסַר ('asar, bind = forbid) / הֵתִיר (hittir, loose = permit)

In rabbinic legal language, to "bind" a thing is to rule it forbidden and to "loose" it is to rule it permitted. Strack and Billerbeck's great commentary gathered these references, and through that collection this reading passed into nearly every modern commentary on Matthew.

The catch: the Mishnah was compiled around AD 200 and the Talmuds later still — a century and more *after* Matthew. The idiom may well be older than its earliest surviving witness; legal shorthand usually is. But "may well be" is an argument, not a proof, and it is worth admitting that out loud.

There is one genuinely first-century witness. Josephus writes that under Queen Alexandra the Pharisees held power "to banish and to recall, to loose and to bind" (*Jewish War* 1.111). Note what that describes: not classroom rulings about permitted foods, but authority over *persons* — sending away and bringing back.

STREAM TWO · THE COMMUNITY RULE

Reproof, witnesses, and exclusion

Leviticus 19:17 → the Dead Sea Scrolls (CD 9:2–8; 1QS 5:24–6:1) → Matthew 18:15–17

Here the parallel is startling, and unlike the rabbinic evidence it is demonstrably *older* than Matthew. The community at Qumran had a written procedure for confronting a sinning member that runs step for step alongside Matthew 18:

- **Damascus Document 9:2–8** — no charge may be brought against a brother unless he has first been *reproved*, before witnesses, in obedience to Leviticus 19:17. To accuse without first reproof is itself the sin.
- **Community Rule 5:24–6:1** — "they shall rebuke one another in truth, humility and charity... let no man bring a charge before the Many unless he has first rebuked him in the presence of witnesses."
- **Community Rule 6:24–7:25** — a full penal code of graded exclusions from the community meal, ending in permanent expulsion for the incorrigible.

Lawrence Schiffman showed that at Qumran reproof was not pastoral etiquette but a *legal prerequisite* for any punishment, formally witnessed and recorded, and derived directly from the command of Leviticus 19:17. Matthew 18:15–17 is that same procedure, in Greek, from the same Levitical root, for a community that met in houses instead of by the Dead Sea.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Whatever else verse 18 means, the sentence before it is a judicial procedure and the sentence after it convenes a quorum. That is the context, and context is not optional.

STREAM THREE • THE COSMIC IDIOM

Binding spirits and loosing their captives

1 Enoch 10; Jubilees 10; Tobit 8:3; Testament of Levi 18:12 — and Matthew 12:29

The same two verbs run through the Second-Temple Jewish literature (valuable historical witnesses, not Scripture) in an entirely different sense — and this material is *contemporary with or earlier than* the New Testament, not later:

- **1 Enoch 10:4–12** — "*Bind* Asael hand and foot and cast him into the darkness"; the fallen angels bound for seventy generations.
- **Jubilees 10:7–11** — the evil spirits bound, a tenth left loose.
- **Tobit 3:17; 8:3** — Raphael "*bound*" the demon Asmodeus.
- **Testament of Levi 18:12** — the coming priest "shall bind Beliar" and give his children authority to trample the evil spirits.
- And in the New Testament itself: Jesus *binds the strong man* before plundering his house (Matthew 12:29); the bent woman is one "whom Satan *bound* for eighteen years" and who must be *loosed* (Luke 13:16); Satan is bound with a key and a chain (Revelation 20:1–3).

STREAM FOUR • HEAVEN IN THE ROOM

"Where two or three are gathered"

Matthew 18:20 and its Jewish analogue

Verse 20 has a close parallel in the rabbinic saying that "if two sit together and words of Torah pass between them, the *Shekhinah* — the divine Presence — rests between them" (Mishnah, Avot 3:2). The logic is identical. But watch the substitution: what the rabbis said of God's Presence and the Torah, Matthew's Jesus says of *himself* and *his own name*.

That is the engine of verse 18. The assembly's verdict holds in heaven because heaven is standing *in the room*.

PART FIVE • THE EIGHT INTERPRETATIONS — AND WHO HOLDS THEM

Almost every dispute about this verse is really a dispute about *what kind of thing* is being bound: a rule, a person, a sin, a spirit, or an office. Here is the whole field. Each view is stated the way its best advocate would state it, followed by the honest objection and the names worth reading. Two of them the evidence supports strongly. Several are partly right. One reverses the sentence.

VIEW 1

Halakhic ruling — forbidding and permitting

To bind is to declare a thing forbidden; to loose is to declare it permitted.

The case: the rabbinic idiom means exactly this — the schools of Hillel and Shammai were described in these very terms, Shammai binding much on the people and Hillel loosing — and the neuter "whatever *things*" fits rulings more naturally than people. Matthew's church faced real questions — sabbath, food, marriage, the terms of Gentile inclusion — and Acts 15 shows the apostolic church doing precisely this: "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements" (Acts 15:28). Some things bound, some things loosed.

The problem: the clearest evidence for the idiom is centuries later than Matthew, and the paragraph in front of us is not a doctrinal question at all — it is one brother sinning against another. The neuter argument also cuts less cleanly than it looks: Greek routinely uses neuter forms of people as *classes*, and D. A. Carson judges that in 18:18 "the context demands that persons are meant."

WHO HOLDS IT

Strack–Billerbeck; Günther Bornkamm; Davies & Allison (ICC); Ulrich Luz (Hermeneia); R. T. France (NICNT); Craig Keener. This is the majority position in modern commentaries.

VIEW 2 • PRIMARY SENSE HERE

Church discipline — exclusion and restoration

To bind is to exclude the unrepentant; to loose is to forgive and restore.

The case: this is what the paragraph is *about*. Verses 15–17 are a disciplinary procedure ending in "let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector"; verse 18 ratifies it; verse 19 supplies the quorum. The pre-Christian parallel at Qumran matches step for step. And the apostolic church did exactly this — 1 Corinthians 5:1–5 binds a man, and 2 Corinthians 2:5–11 looses the same man: "you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him."

The problem: by itself it does not explain the neuter "whatever things," nor the same saying in the very different setting of Matthew 16:19.

WHO HOLDS IT

Göran Forkman; Lawrence Schiffman on the Qumran reproof rule; Davies & Allison; Luz; Hagner; Nolland. Among the ancients: Chrysostom (*Homilies on Matthew* 60) and Augustine — "when the Church excommunicates, the excommunicated person is bound in heaven; when one is reconciled by the Church, the person so reconciled is loosed in heaven" (*Tractates on John* 50.12).

VIEW 3

Forgiving and retaining sins

The authority to declare sins forgiven or unforgiven — the same gift as John 20:23.

The case: John 20:23 ("if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven... if you withhold forgiveness, it is withheld") is formally parallel, and the very next paragraph of Matthew 18 is about forgiving seventy-seven times. The church's whole penitential tradition grew from this reading.

The problem: John 20:23 does not contain the words *bind* or *loose*. The identification is assumed, not argued. And Matthew elsewhere expects believers to forgive without any authorisation whatsoever (5:23–26; 6:12–15; 18:21–35). If forgiveness required a licence, the parable that follows this passage would make no sense.

WHO HOLDS IT

The dominant patristic and medieval reading; assumed by the sacramental traditions. Questioned on these grounds by Richard Hiers (*JBL* 104, 1985). On John 20:23 itself, Andrew Lincoln and J. Ramsey Michaels argue that the apostles *announce* forgiveness to those who receive their message.

VIEW 4

Exorcism — binding demons, loosing their captives

A grant of authority over the powers of darkness.

The case: this is what the verbs actually mean in the literature closest to Matthew *in time* — 1 Enoch, Jubilees, Tobit, the Testaments — and in the New Testament itself (Matthew 12:29; Luke 13:16; Revelation 20:1–3). In Matthew 16 the promise stands beside "the gates of Hades shall not prevail," and the *keys* of 16:19 have their counterpart in the key of the abyss (Revelation 20:1) and the keys of Death and Hades (Revelation 1:18). Jesus had already given the Twelve authority over unclean spirits (Matthew 10:1, 8).

The problem: neither Matthew 16 nor Matthew 18 mentions demons, and in chapter 18 the surrounding paragraph is unmistakably about a sinning brother and a congregational hearing. The reading is considerably stronger at 16:19 than at 18:18.

WHO HOLDS IT

Richard H. Hiers, "'Binding' and 'Loosing': The Matthean Authorizations," *JBL* 104 (1985) 233–50; H. C. Kee, "The Terminology of Mark's Exorcism Stories," *NTS* 14 (1968). **Michael S. Heiser** endorsed Hiers' case in full (Naked Bible Podcast 329, 2020), arguing that commentators default to late rabbinic material and never run the search through Second-Temple Greek — a methodological point worth taking seriously even where one lands elsewhere on this particular verse.

VIEW 5

The keys of Peter — jurisdiction and office

Authority given to Peter in 16:19 and extended to the apostles and their successors.

The case: Matthew 16:19 is addressed to Peter alone, in the singular, with the keys of Isaiah 22:22 — the steward's key of the house of David, which opens and no one shuts. Matthew does record a personal commission before he records a corporate one.

The problem: Matthew 18:18 repeats the identical promise to the whole assembly in the plural, which is hard to square with a transferable office. The ancients felt the difficulty immediately. Origen insisted the promise belongs "to every one who becomes such as that Peter was" (*Commentary on Matthew* 12.11), and Tertullian went to the opposite extreme, arguing the gift was Peter's *personally* and concluding: "the right and arbitrament is the Lord's, not the servant's; God's Himself, not the priest's" (*On Modesty* 21).

WHO HOLDS IT

Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Church* 4; the medieval canonists; Vatican I; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§553, 1444–45. Contrast Tertullian and Augustine, who read Peter as *representing* the whole church.

VIEW 6 • THE RIGHT CONTROL

The office of the keys — declaring, not deciding

The church announces heaven's verdict; it does not create it.

The case: it takes the Greek construction seriously (see Part Six), and it explains how a fallible assembly can speak with heaven's authority — because it is not speaking on its own. Jerome had already made the point in the fourth century: the minister who binds and looses is like the Levitical priest inspecting a leper (Leviticus 13–14). He does not *make* the man clean or unclean. He *declares* what God has already determined.

The problem: it can be pressed until nothing actually happens in the room — which does not fit a text whose previous verse renders a verdict and whose next verse convenes a quorum.

WHO HOLDS IT

Martin Luther, *The Keys* (1530) and the Small Catechism's "Office of the Keys"; the Augsburg Confession; John Calvin, *Institutes* 3.4.14 and 4.11.1–2; the Reformed and Presbyterian books of discipline. Grammatically defended by J. R. Mantey, by the grammarian Nigel Turner, and — most carefully — by D. A. Carson, whose conclusion is the sentence to memorise: the disciples are "authoritative in binding and loosing *because heaven has acted first*."

VIEW 7

The Rule of Christ — congregational discernment

The gathered body reconciles offenders and discerns what is right, without a hierarchy.

The case: it fits Matthew's plural verbs and the conspicuous absence of any officer in the passage. The deciding body in Matthew's own text is simply "the church." Acts 15 shows a whole assembly — not one man — reaching a decision.

The problem: a congregation can be as wrong as a bishop. Without the controls of verse 20 and the mercy of verses 12–14 and 21–35, "discernment" becomes majority opinion with a proof text attached.

WHO HOLDS IT

The Schleithem Confession (1527), art. 2; Menno Simons; Marlin Jeschke, *Discipling in the Church*; John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics* ch. 1 — the most-cited modern treatment, though Yoder's own record of abuse has rightly complicated his legacy.

VIEW 8 • THE MODERN MISREADING

"I bind you, Satan"

The believer verbally binds demonic powers and looses blessing, health or finances.

What is right in it: Christ genuinely has given his people authority over the powers (Luke 10:19; Ephesians 6:10–18; James 4:7), and View 4 above shows that the vocabulary really does belong to that world. The instinct that this language touches spiritual conflict is not baseless.

Where it goes wrong: the formula reverses the sentence. Verse 18 does not say heaven ratifies whatever we declare; the Greek points the other way — earth aligns with a verdict already settled in heaven. No believer anywhere in the New Testament says "I bind you, Satan," and Jude 9 pointedly shows the archangel Michael *refusing* to presume on his own authority in a dispute with the devil, saying instead "the Lord rebuke you." As for "loosing" money or healing — there is nothing in this text to hang it on.

WHERE IT COMES FROM

Popular deliverance and Word-of-Faith teaching, largely twentieth-century. Criticised across the theological spectrum, including by scholars who are entirely open to the reality of demonic conflict — Hiers' own reading is about apostolic mission, not about formulas.

Verse 18 does not use a simple future tense. It uses ἔσται δεδεμένα — the future of "to be" plus a *perfect passive participle*. Grammarians call this a **future perfect periphrastic**. Woodenly: "shall be *in the state of having been* bound in heaven."

Everything turns on whether that perfect carries its normal sense of *prior* action. If it does, Jesus is saying: *whatever you bind on earth will have already been bound in heaven* — the church ratifies heaven's decision, not the reverse. If it does not, he is simply promising that heaven will back the church's decision.

In 1939, J. R. Mantey argued in the Journal of Biblical Literature that every English version had mistranslated the perfect, and that the sense is "shall have been bound." In the very same issue, Henry J. Cadbury of Harvard replied that the Greek perfect does not always imply antecedent time — and concluded, fairly, that the case for or against a priestly reading "does not rest upon disputable points of Greek grammar."

MANTEY, JBL 58 (1939) 243–49; CADBURY, JBL 58 (1939) 251–54

Where it stands today. The strongest argument on Mantey's side is not Mantey's. D. A. Carson freely grants that on syntax alone "it seems impossible to reach a firm decision" — plenty of Greek perfects do carry something other than perfect force. Then he asks the better question: *why this form and not another?* The verb λύω ("loose") has a full set of participles available, so "it is difficult to see why Matthew did not use either the future or the present participle... if that was all he meant." Carson concludes the two verbs "must therefore be rendered '*shall have been bound / loosed*.'" The grammarian Nigel Turner reached the same verdict. On the other side, Stanley Porter and other verbal-aspect scholars answer that the Greek perfect encodes *state* rather than *time*, so the construction stresses a settled condition without necessarily dating it.

It is worth noting that the Greek-speaking church seems to have heard the fuller force. When Theodoret tells the story of Ambrose barring the emperor Theodosius from communion after the massacre at Thessalonica, he has the emperor sitting in his palace in tears, quoting this very verse: "for me the door of heaven is shut, for I remember the voice of the Lord which plainly says, *Whatsoever ye bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven*" (*Ecclesiastical History* 5.17).

What is safe to say. Even on the most cautious reading, this construction will not carry the popular idea that the church issues orders which heaven then obeys. Carson draws the line exactly: the apostle "has no direct pipeline to heaven, still less do his decisions force heaven to comply; but he may be authoritative in binding and loosing *because heaven has acted first*." The state in heaven is settled. The church's task is to say on earth what is already true in heaven.

Now the payoff. Strip away twenty centuries of church politics and put yourself in that house in Antioch, hearing this scroll read aloud for the first time. You are not asking our questions. You are not wondering who runs the universal church or whether you may command a demon. You have a much more immediate problem: *a member of our congregation has wronged another member and will not stop — and we have already been thrown out of one assembly this year.*

Here is what you would have heard.

1

"This is our Leviticus, and it still binds us." The first thing they heard was not a new power but an old command. "Go and reprove him" is Leviticus 19:17 in Greek — and every Jewish hearer knew the rest of that verse (*lest you incur sin because of him*) and the line right after it (*you shall love your neighbour as yourself*). Silence about a brother's sin was not politeness; it was participation. Down at the Dead Sea, another Jewish community had drawn the identical conclusion from the identical verse, with the identical witnesses, a century earlier.

2

"We are a court, and we have a quorum." Verse 16 quotes Deuteronomy 19:15, the two-or-three-witness rule of Israel's courts. Verse 17 escalates to the ἐκκλησία — the Greek Bible's word for Israel assembled before God. Verse 20 supplies the two or three *again*, now as those in whose midst Christ himself stands. A congregation with no temple, no council and no standing in the synagogue is being told that its living room is a courtroom with heaven seated in it.

3

"We know this language — and it runs deeper than paperwork." They heard the legal idiom and the cosmic one at once, and would not have felt any need to choose between them. To bind was to forbid or exclude; to loose was to permit, release, restore. But they also knew from Enoch and Tobit that God binds spirits and looses their captives — and they had heard how Jesus bound the strong man and loosed a daughter of Abraham whom Satan had tied up for eighteen years. To put someone out was not to revise a membership roll. It was to say: *this man is, for now, outside — and outside is where the enemy still has a claim*. Which is exactly how Paul described it (1 Corinthians 5:5), and exactly why he moved so fast to reverse it (2 Corinthians 2:11).

4

"The verdict is heaven's, and we are reading it out." Jesus does not say "heaven will do whatever you decide." He says that what you bind on earth *will stand bound in heaven* — and the perfect participle leans toward a state already settled there. A frightened minority handed the terrible power to exclude is told two things in one breath: your decision is not trivial, and it is not yours. You are a herald reading a verdict, not a judge inventing one.

5

"And the whole thing is aimed at getting him back." The loudest thing in the chapter is the thing most often ignored. Before: a shepherd abandons ninety-nine sheep for one. After: seventy-seven times, and a jailed servant who would not forgive. The stated success condition of step one is *you have gained your brother*. Even the final step lands strangely in this Gospel, written by a tax collector, whose Jesus is famous for eating with Gentiles and tax collectors. The door is shut in a way that leaves the Shepherd free to go out after him.

The original sense, in one sentence

To a small, recently-excluded Jewish-Christian congregation, Matthew 18:18 said: **when this assembly, following the Torah's own procedure of reproof and witnesses, gathered in the name of the risen Jesus who is standing among you, declares a matter closed or a brother out — or declares him forgiven and back in — that verdict is not a human opinion. It is heaven's verdict, spoken on earth.**

The authority is real; it is *corporate* rather than personal; it is *derived* rather than autonomous; it is exercised under the Torah's procedures and under the Lord's own presence — and its entire purpose is to gain the brother back, not to win the case. What it did *not* mean to them: that a church may bind whatever it likes and heaven must comply; that one man holds the keys alone; or that a believer may issue commands to Satan and expect them enforced. Every one of those readings runs against either the plural verbs, the perfect participle, or the parable on either side.

PART EIGHT · HOW THE APOSTLES ACTUALLY USED IT

We are not left guessing. Within twenty-five years of the resurrection, the apostolic churches were doing this, and Paul describes both halves of it in letters we still have.



Binding — 1 Corinthians 5:1–5, 13. A man is living in open, unrepentant immorality. Paul tells the church to assemble "with the power of our Lord Jesus" and hand him over to Satan — and then states the aim: "*so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.*" Even the severest act in the church's authority is aimed at rescue.



Loosing — 2 Corinthians 2:5–11. The punishment has done its work. Now Paul has to *command* the church to reverse it: "you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow... so that we would not be outwitted by Satan." Note who benefits when a church is good at binding and bad at loosing.



Deciding — Acts 15:19–29. The assembly weighs what to lay on the Gentile believers and what to lift, and writes: "*it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.*" That sentence is the shape of the whole doctrine: a real human decision, and yet not merely a human decision.

And the range in between is always restorative: "restore him in a spirit of gentleness" (Galatians 6:1); "do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother" (2 Thessalonians 3:14–15); cf. 1 Timothy 1:20; Titus 3:10.

1

Go first, go alone, go to *him*. Step one is the step almost nobody takes, and it is the only step with a stated success condition: *you have gained your brother*. Most of what we call church conflict is people executing step three — telling everyone — without ever attempting step one.

2

Hold both edges of the same paragraph. A church that will never exclude anyone has not understood verse 18. A church that excludes easily has not understood verses 12–14 or 21–35. Matthew wrote all of it on the same page.

3

Loosing is the harder half. Every tradition in history has been competent at binding. Paul had to order a church to reinstate a repentant man — and warned them that Satan gains the advantage when they refuse. Ask honestly which half your congregation finds difficult.

4

Speak nothing you did not receive. The whole weight of the grammar, of Jerome's leper, of Origen's warning, is this: we do not invent verdicts. We read out heaven's. That is a limit and a comfort at once — the church cannot make something sin that God has not, and it cannot withhold what God has given.

5

Take verse 20 back from the poster. "Where two or three are gathered" is not chiefly a consolation for small attendance. In context it is the promise that Christ is present for the hardest thing a church ever does. Which makes it a far greater comfort than the one we usually take from it.

A warning from the third century. Origen, commenting on this very verse, said that the man who "imagines as a Peter that he will so bind on earth that the things bound are bound in heaven... is puffed up, not understanding the meaning of the Scriptures." And Chrysostom noticed something startling: "He did not say to the ruler of the church, 'Bind such a man,' but, 'If *thou* bind'" — the whole procedure is put into the hands of the wronged brother and the assembly, and its purpose, Chrysostom says, is that the offender "may become more gentle."

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Read Matthew 18 straight through in one sitting. What difference does it make to verse 18 that the lost sheep comes right before it and the unforgiving servant right after?
2. Matthew 16:19 says this to Peter in the singular; Matthew 18:18 says it to everyone in the plural. What does Matthew intend by telling it twice?
3. Of the eight interpretations, which one have you been taught — and did you know there were seven others?
4. Why does the Qumran parallel (Leviticus 19:17 → reproof before witnesses) matter more for dating than the rabbinic parallel, even though the rabbinic one sounds closer?
5. If "bound in heaven" means the verdict was heaven's first, what does that rule out — and what does it protect us from?
6. Paul had to command a church to *restore* a man (2 Corinthians 2). Why is loosing so much harder for a congregation than binding?
7. Is there a relationship in which you have taken step three without ever taking step one? What would step one look like this week?

Lord Jesus, you gave your church a terrible and gentle authority, and you gave it to all of us together, standing in the room yourself so that we would never mistake it for our own. Teach us to go first, and alone, and quietly — to want our brother back more than we want to be right. Keep us from the cowardice that says nothing while a friend destroys himself, and from the cruelty that hurries to the last step and calls it faithfulness. Where we must bind, let it be your verdict we are reading and not our own preference. Where we may loose, make us quick — quicker than the enemy who profits from our slowness. And when we are the ones in the wrong, give us ears to hear the one who comes to us alone. You left ninety-nine to go after one; you forgave seventy-seven times; you were called the friend of tax collectors, and one of them wrote this down for us. Make us that kind of church. Amen.

Pleasant Springs Church · Pinson, Tennessee

This lesson online: ps-church.com/discipleship/binding-and-loosing

Full research page & bibliography: ps-church.com/deep-research/matthew-18-18

Scripture set in the Greek New Testament and the ESV, per the practice of Pleasant Springs Church. Research grounded in Davies–Allison (ICC), Luz (Hermeneia), France (NICNT), Keener, Nolland, Hagner and Carson (EBC); the 1939 *JBL* exchange between J. R. Mantey and Henry J. Cadbury; Richard H. Hiers, *JBL* 104 (1985); Dennis Duling, *Forum* 3 (1987); Göran Forkman and Lawrence Schiffman on exclusion and reproof at Qumran; and the ancient interpreters read in their own words — Origen, Tertullian, Chrysostom, Augustine, Jerome, Cyprian and Theodoret.