

RECONCILIATION (PART 5)

“BINDING AND LOOSING”

MATTHEW 18:15-20

(NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

15 “If your brother sins, go and show him his fault when the two of you are alone. If he listens to you, you have regained your brother.

16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others with you, so that at the testimony of two or three witnesses every matter may be established.

17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. If he refuses to listen to the church, treat him like a Gentile or a tax collector.

18 “I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will have been released in heaven.

19 Again, I tell you the truth, if two of you on earth agree about whatever you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you.

20 For where two or three are assembled in my name, I am there among them.”

In **Lesson 2** we noted that in **Matthew 18:15-20**, the reconciliation of believers is dealt with under the theme of church discipline. In verses **15-17** the Lord Jesus outlines five steps that are to be taken as it relates to the disciplining and reconciling of a professing believer. At every stage of the process the overriding purpose is to regain the brother or sister.

The **first** step in the process is a **Private Meeting**. In verse **15** our Lord says, *“If your brother sins, go and show him his fault when the two of you are alone.”*

If we have been offended by a brother or a sister, or if we are aware that a brother or a sister is involved in sinful activity, we are to go and confront him or her directly. Our Lord says, *“If he (i.e. the offending brother or sister), listens to you, you have regained your brother.”*

In the event that a private meeting fails to resolve the issue, it is necessary to proceed to the **second** step which is a **private conference** with witnesses. In verse **16** our Lord says, *“But if he does not listen, take one or two others with you, so that at the testimony of two or three witnesses every matter may be established.”*

The point of the increased number of persons is to cause the offending brother or sister to realize the seriousness of the situation. The witnesses represent the beginning of the entire church’s involvement in the matter. If after a private conference with witnesses, the offender remains obstinate, the disciplinary process must be taken to another level.

The **third** step to be taken in the disciplining of a professing believer is a **public announcement** to the church. In verse **17** our Lord says, *“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.”*

If the offending brother or sister is finally convicted by the gathering together of the church and repents, the entire church has a duty to reaffirm their love and forgiveness toward him or her.

Unfortunately, there are times when the offender still refuses to repent even after the third step of church discipline has been taken. In these situations the Lord provides for a fourth, drastic step in the disciplinary process. In verse **17** He says, *“If he refuses to listen to the church, treat him like a Gentile or a tax collector.”* The **fourth** step in the disciplining of a professing believer is **public exclusion** from the church.

This step includes the revocation or cancelling of the person's membership in the local assembly. He or she is no longer to be regarded as a member of the Body of Christ. Rather, he or she should be treated as an unsaved person, and therefore should not be allowed to participate in any activity that is reserved for members. In particular, he or she should be barred from participating in the celebration of Communion.

If after being excommunicated a person subsequently demonstrates genuine repentance, he or she is to be welcomed back into the fellowship. This is the **fifth** step in the process of disciplining and reconciling a brother or sister. It is the step of **Public restoration**.

If a person who has been excommunicated repents of his or her sin and expresses genuine remorse, the church should be informed and the person should be publicly restored and accepted back into fellowship. Of course, there should be a period of observation of the person's life before he or she is asked to serve in any official capacity in the church. It may also be necessary to assign spiritually mature persons to work with the person as he or she renews his or her walk with the Lord.

But what authority does a local Christian assembly have to administer church discipline? In verses **18-20** the Lord Jesus answers that question. He says,

18 "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will have been released in heaven.

19 Again, I tell you the truth, if two of you on earth agree about whatever you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you.

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

Dr. John Macarthur states that a local assembly has the authority to administer church discipline for two reasons. We will deal with the first

of these reasons in this Lesson. **Firstly, MacArthur** says, our Father in heaven **acts with us**. In explaining the terms “*bind*” and “*release*” he writes the following:

“These are rabbinical terms, very familiar to the Jewish audience, very common terms to Matthew and to our Lord living in that time. They simply refer to the rabbis either binding someone’s sins on them or loosing their sins from them. And it basically is the idea that you’re either saying to someone, ‘Your sins are bound you,’ or ‘Your sins are loosed from you.’ In other words, you’re still under the bondage of sin or you’re free from sin...In other words, when the church finally gets around to saying your sins are bound on you or your sins are loosed from you, the church is then beginning to act in accord with the Father who is in heaven, who’s already said either their loosed or their bound based upon whether the person responded to the conviction of sin or not.

Now the point is this, a very simple point, heaven ratifies what is done on earth when the church follows this process of discipline. That’s exactly what it means. Now that’s authority...If you’re a sinning person in the church and somebody goes to you and you don’t repent, and two or three go to you and you don’t repent, and the whole church is pursuing you and you don’t repent, we can say your sins are bound on you and we can say that because we’ve gone through the process to determine that **based upon the revelation of the Word of God**, and when we say that, we are simply saying what the Father has already said in heaven. In other words, the church is acting in the behalf of the will of God. **The Father in heaven is acting with us**. What a tremendous thought.

On the other hand, if you’re in sin and we go to you, and say you don’t repent the first time, and two or three go and you do repent, and your heart is broken, and you grieve, and you turn from your sin, and we say, ‘Your sins are loosed. Welcome into the fullness of the fellowship.’ We

are merely doing on earth what has already been done in heaven. **So the authority then is that we are acting in behalf of the Father in heaven, who's already done what is right to do in your case."**

Brothers and sisters, when a church faithfully follows the five steps that the Lord Jesus outlined in verses **15-17** as it relates to the disciplining and reconciling of a professing believer, it is fulfilling the will of God on the earth! It is bringing the kingdom of heaven to the earth. Verse **18** gives us the assurance that when this process is followed, God Himself is at work in it. That is the authority that God has given to the local assembly **when it follows the biblical model of church discipline.**

In exercising biblical church discipline, the local assembly does not usurp Christ's lordship and authority over individual believers and their eternal destiny, but it does exercise the authority to discipline and, if necessary, excommunicate disobedient church members. We must not think that this means that we are able to change God's mind, as if whatever we decide on earth will necessarily be duplicated in heaven. Rather, it means that as we diligently pursue a biblical agenda on the earth, we are fulfilling God's plan in heaven. When the apostles "bound" something, or forbade it on earth, they were carrying out the will of God in the matter. When they "loosed" something, or allowed it on earth, they were likewise fulfilling God's plan.

Unfortunately, there are many persons who misuse this passage, as well others like **Matthew 16:19** and **John 20:21-23** to teach that believers have the power to "bind" and "loose" sickness, disease, financial and other "blessings" and even death. Some teach that Christians can bind their communities, cities and countries. Some go as far as claiming that believers can bind the devil! But do these passages really support such a view? Let us briefly consider them **in their context** to see if this is indeed the case.

Matthew 18:15-20

15 “If your brother sins, go and show him his fault when the two of you are alone. If he listens to you, you have regained your brother.

16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others with you, so that at the testimony of two or three witnesses every matter may be established.

17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. If he refuses to listen to the church, treat him like a Gentile or a tax collector.

18 “I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will have been released in heaven.

19 Again, I tell you the truth, if two of you on earth agree about whatever you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you.

20 For where two or three are assembled in my name, I am there among them.”

This passage clearly has nothing to do with the binding and loosing of sickness, disease, financial and other “blessings” or death. It has nothing to do with binding communities, cities, countries, demons, or the devil. The context of the passage is about sin and church discipline. This passage is about the authority of the local church to pass judgment on unrepentant sinners.

As the **IVP New Testament Commentary** states, “Bind and loose refer to the judicial authority of gathered Christians to decide cases on the basis of God’s law. Most scholars thus recognize that this passage applies to church discipline.”

In verse **21-22** the context clearly continues to focus on the subject of personal offense and forgiveness:

21 Then Peter came to him and said, “Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother who sins against me? As many as seven times?”

22 Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, I tell you, but seventy-seven times!”

What this passage is saying is that the local church has authority to make binding judicial decisions on matters of church discipline, and it has the authority to release persons who genuinely repent.

Matthew 16:13-20

13 When Jesus came to the area of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

14 They answered, “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

15 He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

16 Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

17 And Jesus answered him, “You are blessed, Simon son of Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven!”

18 And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.

19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will have been released in heaven.”

20 Then he instructed his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

Again, there is nothing in this passage that is even remotely connected with the binding and loosing of sickness, disease, financial and other “blessings” or death. It has nothing at all to do with binding communities, cities, countries, demons, or the devil. The keys to the Kingdom of Heaven represent the apostolic authority of the disciples to admit people into the Kingdom of Heaven. The terms “bind” and “release” are used here as references to the authority of the first-century apostles to declare whether or not someone has been forgiven or not, and on what basis that forgiveness was granted or withheld. This declaration was **not** to be made on the basis of their own personal notions or preferences. **It was to be made on the basis of the gospel message** entrusted to them as messengers and witnesses of Jesus Christ and His resurrection.

Jesus is not here giving authority to Peter and the other disciples the authority to bind or loose whatever they wish. He is saying that whatever they bind, or release on the earth has **already** been bound or released in heaven. Our Lord is informing His disciples that the declaration of the gospel is to be the means by which the Kingdom of Heaven would be opened to believers and closed to unbelievers, as ordained by God.

John 20:19-23 is to be interpreted in the same way as **Matthew 16:13-20**:

19 On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the disciples had gathered together and locked the doors of the place because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

20 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

21 So Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. Just as the Father has sent me, I also send you.”

22 And after he said this, he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.

23 If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone’s sins, they are retained.”

Verse **23** clearly indicates what it means to bind and loose. It’s all about whether someone’s sins and offenses have been forgiven or retained. It’s about the church’s authority to discipline and reconcile professing believers.

We must not confuse the authority to cast out demons with some imaginary power to bind the devil, sickness, finances or circumstances. Believers have not been given the authority to bind the devil. He will one day be bound for an initial period of a thousand years, and then He will be cast forever into the lake of fire as **Revelation 20:1-3 and 7-10** clearly state:

1 Then I saw an angel descending from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the abyss and a huge chain.

2 He seized the dragon—the ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan—and tied him up for a thousand years.

3 The angel then threw him into the abyss and locked and sealed it so that he could not deceive the nations until the one thousand years were finished. (After these things he must be released for a brief period of time.)

7 Now when the thousand years are finished, Satan will be released from his prison

8 and will go out to deceive the nations at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to bring them together for the battle. They are as numerous as the grains of sand in the sea.

9 They went up on the broad plain of the earth and encircled the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and devoured them completely.

10 And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet are too, and they will be tormented there day and night forever and ever.

Brothers and sisters, binding and loosing is the authority to declare what God's mind is on a matter of doctrine or practice. We can see an example of this in **Acts** chapter **15**. In this instance, an attempt was being made by the Judaizers to compel the Gentile believers to be circumcised and observe the Law. After Peter, then Barnabas and Paul had testified concerning the saving work of the Holy Spirit among the Gentiles, James used the Word of God to explain why it was unnecessary for them to be circumcised and keep the Law.

In this instance, the Gentiles were “loosed” from the stipulations of the ceremonial Law, not because the apostles had the power to bind and loose willy-nilly, **but because the Word of God had already released them!** The “loosing” of the Gentiles on the earth by the disciples was simply an endorsement of what God in heaven had already decreed and expressed in His Word.

Earlier we noted that **Dr. John MacArthur** stated that a local assembly has the authority to administer church discipline for two reasons. Having dealt with the first reason in this Lesson, we will consider the second reason next week, if the Lord says the same.