

Binding and Loosing: A Paradigm for Ethical Discernment from the Gospel of Matthew

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Twice in Matthew's Gospel the words "bind" (δέσσης) and "loose" (λύσης) occur in what is apparently a formula that the readers are expected to recognize:

- (Jesus says to Peter), "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" (Matt 16:19).

- (Jesus says to the twelve), "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" (Matt 18:18).

Notably, the immediate literary contexts for these two passages include the only two texts in Matthew (or anywhere in the New Testament) where Jesus explicitly refers to "the church" (16:18; 18:17). Thus, we may observe that Matthew closely connects the business of binding and loosing with the mission of the church that is built by Jesus (16:18) and sustained by his continuing presence (18:20). It would not be an overstatement to say that Matthew considers binding and loosing to be a constitutive aspect of the church's mission on earth.

Meaning of the terms

A majority of scholars now recognize that the terms "to bind" and "to loose" are best

understood with reference to a practice of determining the application of scriptural commandments for contemporary situations.¹ The words are used in this regard by Josephus and in targumic materials. Jewish rabbis "bound" the law when they determined that a commandment was applicable to a particular situation, and they "loosed" the law when they determined that a word of scripture (while eternally valid) was not applicable under certain specific circumstances.

Other interpretations of the terms have been offered.² A few scholars have related them to exorcism (binding and loosing of demons—but why would the church ever want to loose a demon?). More often, interpreters throughout church history (including Luther) have thought that the terms referred to the church's authority to forgive or retain sins. The scriptural basis for the church having such authority is secure but is better derived from John 20:23. Modern scholarship has cautioned against reading

¹ This accords with the definitions offered in *ABD* 1.743–45 and *BDAG* 222.

² Dennis C. Duling, "Binding and Loosing: Matthew 16:19; Matthew 18:18; John 20:23," *Foundations and Facets Forum* 3, 4 (1987): 3–31.

the Matthean texts in light of the Johannine concept. It seems unlikely that the first evangelist would have favored the notion that the church might withhold forgiveness of sins; he seems to guard against such an interpretation of 18:15–20 via the addendum of 18:21–35 (cf. also 18:10–14).

For Matthew, the issue is the *identification* of sin. **Final authority rests with the community to identify which behaviors constitute sin and which therefore require repentance.** As in John, the person who does not heed the church's authority may be excluded from God's eschatological community, but **for Matthew the problem is ethical discernment (and lack of respect for the church's role in this) rather than mere obstinacy.** This is consistent with Matthew's understanding of the Great Commission as being to teach baptized people to obey the commandments of Jesus (28:20). **To fulfill such a commission the church must be able to discern what obedience to those commandments entails, and the baptized persons who are to be made disciples must accept the church's teaching on such matters.**

Matthew's Gospel is commonly understood as reflecting a close connection to the world of Second Temple and post-Temple Judaism.³ Within that milieu, debates over the **applicability of the law to specific situations were common;** they appear already in famous arguments between the first-century schools of Hillel and Shammai and continue to be a defining part of the discussions that would ultimately be codified as the Mishnah. For example, the question was raised whether one might be guilty of stealing if one finds something and keeps it without searching for the rightful owner. When is such a search required, and how extensive must it be? The Talmud states, "If a fledgling bird is found within fifty cubits of a dovecote, it belongs to the

owner of the dovecote. If it is found outside the limits of fifty cubits, it belongs to the person who finds it" (*Bava Batra* 23b).⁴

To use Matthew's terminology, the decision was that the law ("Do not steal") was *bound* when the bird was found in proximity to its likely owner; one who keeps the bird under such conditions has transgressed the law and is guilty of sin. But the law is *loosed* when the bird is found at a distance from any likely owner; the law against stealing does not forbid keeping the bird in that instance. Matthew's Gospel displays an awareness of such legal discussions when it refers to "the tradition of the elders" (15:2) and when it engages such questions as "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife *for any cause*?" (19:3). **Matthew's community seems to have been struggling with issues similar to those that exercised the rabbis.**

It is important to note that for the rabbis (and for Matthew) loosing the law never meant dismissing scripture or countering its authority. The law was never wrong when it was rightly interpreted. The issue, rather, was discernment of the law's intent and of the sphere of its application. Thus, in the above example, the rabbis did not decide that in some instances it is all right to steal; rather, they sought to define *stealing* in a way that would determine just what behavior was prohibited. The logic of rabbinic argument does not always hold up

³ W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964); Anthony J. Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁴ The citation continues with a humorous note: "Rabbi Jeremiah asked: If one foot of the fledgling bird is within the limit of fifty cubits, and one foot is outside it, what is the law? It was for this question that Rabbi Jeremiah was thrown out of the House of Study."



to modern critical scrutiny (especially from Gentiles), and, at times, decisions to loose the law may appear to us as simple dismissals of scripture; still, they were apparently never intended as such.

Likewise, in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus may seem dismissive of scripture when he says, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,' but I say to you . . ." (5:38). Most likely, however, Matthew intended to present Jesus' radical reinterpretations of the law as bringing out its true intent and defining its sphere of applicability, in a manner analogous to what was done by other rabbis. Certainly, Matthew does not intend to pit Jesus against Torah but strives to present Jesus as the one who indicates how Torah is to be fulfilled.⁵ Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the

kingdom of heaven" (5:17–19). The word that the NRSV translates "break" in this passage is exactly the same word that is rendered "loose" in 16:19 and 18:18 above.

If the latter two verses were absent from this Gospel, we might assume that Jesus is here rejecting the rabbinic practice of "loosing" the law altogether. But in 5:17–19 "loosing" the commandments is contrasted not with binding them but with doing (ποιήσῃ) them and teaching (διδάξῃ) them. Clearly, then, Matthew condemns the practice of loosing the law when this means abolishing the scriptures rather than fulfilling them through obedience and teaching. But 16:19 and 18:18 present him as commending the practice of (sometimes) loosing the law in some other undefined sense; most likely, the latter sense is the same as that employed by rabbis—discerning the intent of the law with regard to particular circumstances. Sometimes, Matthew's Jesus allows, the church will be expected to determine that the law, while eternally valid, does not apply to specific circumstances.

We may also note peripherally that the mere existence of the text cited above (5:17–19) is a fairly strong indication that some people were saying that Jesus (or the Matthean community speaking in his name) was abolishing the law. There would be little sense in issuing the disclaimer otherwise. Apparently, then, Matthew's community and possibly Jesus himself were sometimes regarded by their peers as people who "loosed the law" in ways that were dismissive of its intent and authority, though (like other rabbis) they would have maintained that this was not actually the case.

⁵ Klyne Snodgrass, "Matthew and the Law," in *Treasures New and Old: Contributions to Matthean Studies*, ed. D. R. Bauer and M. A. Powell (Atlanta: Scholars), 99–128.

We should also note that, if Matthew's Gospel contains warnings about the potential abuse of "loosing" the law, it likewise warns against abuses involved in *not* doing so. One of Jesus' primary accusations against the scribes and Pharisees is that they "bind (δῆσαι) heavy burdens that are difficult to bear" on the shoulders of those who listen to their teaching (23:4).

Examples of binding and loosing in Matthew's Gospel

Many passages in Matthew can be read as expressive of a concern for the church's responsibility in binding and loosing the law. The Gospel offers both good and bad examples with regard to how this ought to be done. Jesus consistently exemplifies the right way to bind and loose the scriptures, while the scribes and Pharisees consistently exemplify the wrong way to do so.⁶

In 5:21–23, Jesus binds the law prohibiting murder as applicable to anger and insults, and in 5:27–28 he similarly binds the law prohibiting adultery as applicable to lust. The apparent rationale for these decisions is that the "heart" is the locus of human sin and thus intentions of the heart are judged by the same standard as actions.

In 5:31–32, Jesus binds the prohibition against adultery as applicable to divorce and remarriage, and does so with explicit repudiation of scriptural allowance for the latter. This is taken up later (19:3–9), where he explains that such allowance was merely a concession granted in recognition of "hardness of hearts" and that it never expressed the actual intent of God. (We note in passing that the notion that some biblical prescriptions and proscriptions are concessions to the human condition that do not represent the intent of God is a fairly radical hermeneutical innovation). But Jesus also looses his own prohibition of divorce and remarriage for those instances involv-

ing *porneia* (i.e., when the spouse has been unfaithful or, possibly, when the marriage itself was illegal; the exact situation governed by this exception clause is debated). In 5:33–37, Jesus binds the prohibition against swearing false oaths (Lev 19:12) as applicable to *all* oaths (without explanation, but possibly because human frailty or unseen circumstances can make even an oath that was intended in good faith into a false one).

In 5:43–48, Jesus effectively binds the commandment to "love your neighbor" as applicable also to enemies (or, we might say, he rejects a loosing of the love commandment by which some have indicated that "enemies" are distinct from neighbors and so not covered by the prescription). He does so with an appeal to the nature of God who bestows blessings upon the good and the bad alike.

In 12:1–9, Jesus looses the prohibition against performing work on the sabbath with regard to plucking grain to satisfy one's hunger. He further opines that the Pharisees' attempt to bind the law in such an instance causes them to "condemn the guiltless" (12:7).⁷

In 12:9–14, Jesus looses the prohibition against performing work on the sab-

⁶ So polemical a presentation obviously reflects the strained relations between church and synagogue. The bias of Matthew's construal is a matter of record and need not concern us here. Even those who question the historical accuracy of his attributions recognize that the reports of legal disputes reveal this evangelist's own ideas regarding what constitutes proper and improper ways of binding and loosing the law.

⁷ Similar discussions are found in (later) Jewish literature. Plucking grain on the sabbath is forbidden without qualification (as equal to harvesting) in *y.Sabb.* 7.9b.67, but *b.Sabb.* 128a says, "One may pinch with the hand and eat but not with a tool."

bath with regard to works of healing and then declares, "It is lawful to do good on the sabbath." The latter pronouncement would potentially allow sabbath prohibitions to be loosed in a great many other instances as well (whenever the otherwise prohibited activity can be construed as "doing good"). In 15:1–2, 10–20, Jesus looses some law (we're not sure which one) with regard to ritual hand-washings. By so doing, he rejects a binding of the law that was found in the tradition of the elders. Apparently, that tradition interpreted some purity regulation in the law as necessitating such hand-washings.⁸ Jesus rejects that interpretation and looses the law on the broad observation that "what goes into the mouth does not defile a person."

In 15:3–9, Jesus binds the commandment "Honor your father and your mother" as applicable to caring for one's parents in old age. He strongly rejects the scribes and the Pharisees' attempt to loose the law for those instances in which one might say, "Whatever support you would have had from me is given to God." He denounces this attempt at loosing the law as "making void the word of God for the sake of human tradition" and declares that those who favor such an interpretation teach "human precepts as doctrines."

There are many other instances in which disputes over binding and loosing the law seem to stand in the background. For example, no Mosaic law is mentioned explicitly in 22:15–22, but the question of paying taxes to Caesar turns on an interpretation of the biblical prohibition against idolatry: one might bind that prohibition to forbid offering tribute to a man who claims to be a god; Jesus appears to loose it on the ground that a person who does not recognize Caesar's divinity may regard the "payment" as a meaningless act. Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman in 15:21–28 is

intriguing in that she appears to loose a commandment that Jesus himself had given earlier ("Go nowhere among the Gentiles but only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," 10:5–6). She does not repudiate or invalidate his command but stipulates an exception, which he allows.

Some observations from the Matthean examples

Emerging from this survey of Matthean texts are the potentially contradictory notions that (a) the scriptures must be properly bound and loosed if God's will is to be discerned and obeyed, but that (b) the scriptures are often bound when they should be loosed, and loosed when they should be bound, with the result that God's will is *not* discerned or obeyed.

We may note that Jesus binds laws more frequently than he looses them. Yet this observation must be balanced by the fact that he claims—almost programmatically—to offer an "easy yoke" and a "light burden" to those who follow him (11:30; cf. 23:4). Further, although the instances in which he looses the law are relatively few, his justifications for doing so (e.g., "it is lawful to do good on the sabbath"; "what goes into the mouth does not defile a person") set sweeping precedents with potentially radical implications for ways in which laws could be loosed in many other instances (as they obviously were in the developing Christian church).

Matthew's readers are urged to avoid two pitfalls:

- if the church is cavalier about loos-

⁸ Jacob Neusner's theory is that the Pharisees (especially after 70) sought to apply laws for the purity of priests serving in the temple to the people of Israel in general. See *Das pharisäische und talmudische Judentum* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1984), 24–25, 62.

ing the law when it shouldn't, it will "make void the word of God for the sake of human tradition" (15:6), but

- if the church neglects to loose the law when it should do so, it will sometimes end up "condemning the guiltless" (12:7).

To help readers find the narrow way that lies between these pitfalls, Matthew's Gospel not only offers the good and bad examples cited above but also presents Jesus as articulating a number of principles that might guide the church in its deliberation. **Two points especially stand out:**

1. **Acceptable binding and loosing is founded in a hermeneutic that interprets scripture in light of scripture and, specifically, recognizes the priority of certain scriptural mandates.** These include the Golden Rule (7:12), a recognition of the divine preference for mercy over sacrifice (9:13; 12:7), a prioritization of love for God and neighbor (22:34–40), and identification of the "weightier matters of the law" as justice, mercy, and faithfulness (23:23).

All of these principles derive in some sense from scripture itself, and in every instance in which Jesus binds or looses laws (or criticizes the binding and loosing of laws performed by others) his decision is consistent with this hermeneutic. For example, when Jesus looses the sabbath prohibition for those who pick grain to satisfy their hunger, he does so with an appeal to the scriptural prioritization of mercy over sacrifice (12:7).

2. The authority to bind and loose is securely located in Matthean Christology and in this Gospel's christological understanding of eschatology and salvation history. Jesus possesses this authority because he is a unique manifestation of God's presence (1:23; 11:27). Thus, even apart from the appeal to mercy, his loosing of the sabbath law is justified because "The Son of Man is Lord of the sabbath" (12:8). The

ultimate question for Matthew is not simply "on what basis is the law to be bound or loosed" but "who has the authority to do this." God has given the authority to Jesus (and not to the scribes and Pharisees, cf. 7:29), and Jesus in turn gives it to the church.

The two key texts

In Matthew 16:13–20, the primary concern is not with *how* the church will exercise its authority to bind and to loose but with the establishment of this authority and its effects. Just as Jesus' authority to bind and loose is attributed in Matthew to his christological identity, so the church's authority is grounded here in its acclamation of Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the living God." We notice too that the authority to bind and loose is described metaphorically as utilizing the keys to the kingdom of heaven. By interpreting God's will rightly, the church opens the door for God's will to be done and, hence, for God's rule to become a lived reality. Likewise, this authoritative discernment of God's will facilitates the overcoming of the gates of Hades, such that the power of death and the devil may be undone.

Matt 18:15–20 presents the church's ministry of binding and loosing as necessary for the determination of who is to be subject to church discipline. As such, we are given a glimpse of how the process might actually work within the post-Easter community. Notably, it is no longer to be exercised by one gifted leader (e.g., Peter) but is now to be exercised by the community as a whole. Again, the authority to bind and loose is grounded in Matthew's christological claims—the church possesses such authority not because Christians have shown themselves to be wiser or more faithful than Pharisees but because Christ dwells in their midst (18:20; cf. 28:20). We

notice also that the church does not attempt to bind and loose laws for the world at large but only for its own community: the ministry is exercised with regard to a “sibling” (i.e., a member of the church) who is believed to be sinning. Thus, Matthew expects the church to exhibit a peculiarly Christian ethic that may or may not concur with the expectations of its social environment.

Specifically, 18:15–20 offers a perspective on how binding and loosing might function in a conflict situation, where there is disagreement. The sinful sibling in this passage is not to be understood as one who stubbornly persists in what he or she acknowledges to be sinful behavior (Matthew’s definition of “brother” and “sister” in 12:50 makes that unlikely). Rather, the text envisions a situation in which a number of church members confront a member of the community concerning behavior that they believe to be sinful but which he or she apparently does not believe to be sinful. Ultimately, the church as a whole is called upon to make a determination. Basically, they must either bind the law by deciding (with the accusers) that some scriptural injunction does apply to the person’s behavior or loose the law by deciding (with the accused) that cited scripture does not apply to this person’s behavior.

An example of such a situation (albeit an issue never mentioned in Matthew) would be the dispute elsewhere in the New Testament regarding food offered to idols (e.g., 1 Corinthians 8). According to the program presented in Matt 18:15–20, we may imagine that one member of the community might think that another is sinning if the latter individual is consuming such food. The proper procedure, then, is: (a) confront the person privately; (b) consult with two or three others; (c) bring the matter to the community as a whole for

resolution. The community would then ask, “Is the scriptural prohibition against idolatry applicable to eating food that was once dedicated to idols?” Conceivably, the church might bind or loose the law, but in either case, Matthew’s Gospel claims that the community speaks with divine authority: “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Implications for Christian practice

Although this discussion of binding and loosing strikes some as new and potentially controversial, it has in some sense been the practice of the church throughout the centuries. Churches do not usually have assemblies where they vote specifically on whether a particular scripture text is applicable to a certain type of situation, but discussions regarding such applicability have been in the background for many formal and informal decisions. Certain church bodies have bound the commandment against murder (“You shall not kill”) as applicable to situations it was not originally intended to address (abortion, capital punishment, warfare). The virtually unanimous opposition to slavery in global Christianity today also represents a binding of scripture, a recognition that the overall witness of scripture should be interpreted as denouncing behavior that was permitted in biblical times.

Christian churches have also loosed commandments, narrowing their range of application without dismissing their original intent. Indeed, the first commandment God ever gave to humans was “Be fruitful and multiply,” and at the time it was given it expressed the will of God for every human being on the planet. But few Christians today and no major church body would read this text as meaning that God wants all

people to reproduce without limit. Jesus' prohibition against saving money for the future (Matt 6:19, "Do not store up treasure on earth") has also been loosed with regard to many modern applications: Christians are permitted to save money for retirement or to pay for their children's education.

The church today may consider whether the Matthean understanding of binding and loosing can continue to inform its ethical deliberation with regard to current issues. To take an obvious example, contemporary questions regarding acceptance of homosexual behavior may be considered in this light. Should the biblical prohibitions of same-sex sexual relations be bound or loosed with regard to specific contemporary situations? What if, for example, the couple can be determined to be exclusively and irreparably homosexual in orientation, and what if they are willing to commit themselves to living in a monogamous relationship that is accountable to the church? Could the prohibitions be deemed inapplicable to that situation? Matthew's paradigm for ethical discernment would seem to suggest at least three points for our deliberation.

First, application of this paradigm assumes that the question is whether there might be exceptions to a normative policy. A church following the Matthean paradigm might maintain that while it is normally an abomination for a man to engage in sexual relations with another man, there could be circumstances under which such behavior could be accepted or affirmed. The obligation on those who would argue for such exceptions would be to show why the biblical prohibitions did not apply in the specified instances. This would be a different matter than arguing that the biblical perspective on human sexuality is so limited that it needs to be amended on the basis of modern knowledge.

The authority to bind and to loose is granted by Christ to the church as a whole.

Second, Matthew's Gospel suggests that the church does in fact have the authority to make such determinations. Persons who say that the church would violate scripture by allowing for exceptions to a normative policy against homosexual relations ignore the fact that scripture itself gives the church authority to do precisely that. For the church to loose the biblical prohibitions against same-sex activity under specified circumstances would not constitute a rejection of biblical authority but, rather, an exercise of ecclesiastical authority granted in the Bible by Jesus himself. Recognizing this does not, of course, prejudice what the church ought to do.

Finally, the authority to bind and to loose is granted by Christ to the church as a whole. Whatever that might mean in our modern context (local congregation? national church assembly?), such authority is not granted to the individual. The point of Matt 18:15–18 seems to be that the church as a community can and should sometimes offer individual Christians guidance on questions of what behavior is pleasing to God. The expectation, furthermore, seems to be that when the church does this, the individual Christian will heed that teaching and strive to live in a way that the church as a whole believes to be in keeping with God's will.



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