



Binding and Loosing part 1

By Bob DeWaay

“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.” (Matthew 16:19 NASB U)

“I bind you, Satan!” is uttered in thousands of prayers every day in America. Many books have been written based on the idea that Christians can verbally “bind Satan” and thus “loose” people from his nefarious activities. But in the process, the true Biblical doctrine of binding and loosing is obscured. It might surprise many to find out that “binding and loosing” are about declaring the terms of entrance into the kingdom, and about determining what is or is not binding on Christians after they have been added to the church.

Those who teach and practice “binding and loosing” as verbal warfare against evil have several Biblical passages that they claim support the practice. The two most prominent ones are found in the book of Matthew: **Matthew 16:19** and **Matthew 12:28, 29**. **Matthew 16:19** states, *“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”* By combining that thought with the Matthew 12 passage, which speaks of binding the “strong man,” they draw the conclusion that we have the authority to bind Satan, thus making his “goods” exposed for plundering. According to many followers of this theory, the “goods” are money, political power, people, etc. The church supposedly, therefore, has the opportunity to take world power away from Satan and deliver it to ourselves. In part 2 of this series of articles I will deal with the Matthew 12 passage. In this article we will examine Matthew 16:19 and the New Testament teaching about binding and loosing.

What did Jesus mean by the terms “bind” and “loose” as used in **Matthew 16:19**? These words were commonly used by Jewish rabbis. New Testament scholars agree that

“binding and loosing,” when used in this way, retain the basic meaning that they had in the Jewish culture of the first century.

For example, the Theological Dictionary of The New Testament states under the entries for “deo_ and luo_” (the Greek words for binding and loosing used in Matthew 16:19 and elsewhere), “Jesus does not give to Peter and the other disciples any power to enchant or to free by magic. The customary meaning of the Rabbinic expressions is equally incontestable, namely, to declare forbidden or permitted, and thus to impose or remove an obligation, by a doctrinal decision.”^[i] TDNT draws the conclusion that this is the meaning of the words as used in Matthew 16:19 and 18:18.

A. T. Robertson also comments on Matthew 16:19,

To “bind” in rabbinical language is to forbid, to “loose” is to permit. Peter would be like a rabbi who passes on many points. Rabbis of the school of Hillel “loosed” many things that the school of Schammai “bound.” The teaching of Jesus is the standard for Peter and for all preachers of Christ. Note the future perfect indicative..., a state of completion. All this assumes, of course, that Peter's use of the keys will be in accord with the teaching and mind of Christ.^[ii]

Dr. Robertson's comment about the use of the future perfect tense is important. If we were to translate the passage very literally, it would read “...whatever you loose on earth shall having been loosed in heaven.” The 1995 update version of the NASB (cited above) reflects this tense which the earlier version of the NASB did not. The tense of the verbs shows that the disciples were not unilaterally to decide a matter, thus binding “heaven” to their decision. It means that their decision, as Dr. Robertson suggests, will be in line with what already was God's mind on the issue.

This means that the apostles were Jesus’ authoritative spokesmen and that their decisions would be binding. Jesus spoke God’s authoritative words and authorized His apostles to speak those words to the church. We can see this idea in the book of Hebrews:

For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense, how shall we

escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.

(Hebrews 2:2-4)

We can see how Peter and the others understood Jesus' teaching on binding and loosing by examining their actions as recorded in the Book of Acts. Acts 15 records a dispute that arose about the behavior of Gentiles who were recently becoming part of the church. Their customs were far different from the Jews, who then made up most of the church. Should the new Gentile converts be required to be circumcised and to keep other requirements of the Law of Moses? After “much debate” (**Acts 15:7**), Peter stood up and asked, “...*why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?*” (**Verse 10**). After James agrees with Peter, quoting Scripture as proof, they reached the decision that the Gentiles should abstain from idols, fornication, and what is strangled. No further burden was to be placed upon the Gentile Christians. Thus the apostles exercised the power of binding and loosing, as given by Jesus.

Did the apostles ever utter “I bind you, Satan?” Not once is such an utterance recorded in the New Testament. It is not credible to assume that they understood Jesus' teaching as an instruction to “bind Satan” through prayers and verbal declarations and then never followed the instructions personally. The church of the twentieth century should not understand and practice the teachings of Jesus differently than the church of the 1st century. If it does, the authority of Scripture is compromised.

Other Bible commentators also assert that “binding and loosing” find their meaning in rabbinical usage. Concerning Matthew 16:19, William Hendriksen states, “The very wording - note `whatever,' not `whoever' - shows that the passage refers to things, in this case beliefs and actions, not directly to people. Binding and loosing are rabbinical terms, meaning forbidding and permitting.”^[iii] Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of The New Testament, under the entry “deo_” (to bind), states, “. . . by a Chaldean and rabbinic idiom to forbid, prohibit, declare illicit: Matthew 16:19; 18:18.”

The Keys to the Kingdom

Let us discuss the “keys of the kingdom” in regard to binding and loosing. The keys signify the terms of entrance. What keeps people “bound” in the sense of forbidden entrance is their own, unforgiven sin. What Peter (and the other disciples) were given was the terms of entrance into the Kingdom. They had the authority to declare on what basis sins would be forgiven or retained:

Peter was told he would possess the keys and be able to **bind** and **loose** people. These were decisions Peter was to implement as he received instruction from **heaven**, for the binding and loosing occurred there first. Peter simply carried out God’s directions. This privilege of binding and loosing was seen in Peter’s life as he had the privilege on the day of Pentecost to proclaim the gospel and announce to all those who responded in saving faith that their sins had been forgiven (Acts 2). He was able to do the same thing with the household of Cornelius (Acts 10-11; Acts 15:19-20). The same privilege was given all the disciples (John 20:22-23).^[iv]

So binding and loosing have at least two applications. The first (logically) is the authority to declare the terms of forgiveness of sins and thus entrance into the kingdom. This happens through preaching the gospel and authoritatively declaring that those who repent and believe the gospel are forgiven and are added to the church. Those who reject the gospel remain in bondage to their sin, are unforgiven, and are outside of the kingdom of God.

The second application is that to bind and loose is the authority to declare what is God's mind on a matter of doctrine or practice. This is what the early church did in Acts 15. To “bind” is to obligate, to “loose” is to remove obligation. The future perfect tense (“shall having been bound”) shows that this authority is only valid when used in submission to Christ's word or teaching. It does not give the church the authority to make up new teachings later in church history.

Binding and loosing were misused during the lifetime of the apostles. False teachers in Galatia decided to ignore the authoritative decision of the apostles and “bind” Gentile Christians to the Law of Moses. Furthermore they created false terms of entrance by saying that if people were uncircumcised they were denied entrance. This provoked Paul’s strongest reaction to any false teaching he corrected: “*I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ*” (**Galatians 1:6, 7**).

In part 2 of this article we will disuse the meaning of “binding the strong man” as found in the parable in Matthew 12.

End Notes

[i]. THEOLOGICAL DICTIONARY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT, edited by G. Kittel & G. Friedrich, vol. II, page 60.

[ii] WORD PICTURES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, A. T. Robertson, Vol. I, page 134.

[iii] THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW, New Testament Commentary, William Hendriksen, page 651.

[iv] Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (2:58). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

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