

Practical Hermeneutics: JAP391

MATTHEW 18:18 AND BINDING SATAN IN PRAYER

by Mark Ryan

This article first appeared in the Practical Hermeneutics column of the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 39, number 01 (2016). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>.

“I Bind You, Satan”

I sometimes wonder how many times a day the words “I bind you, Satan” are declared. Through popular books, widely viewed blogs, and YouTube clips, prayers binding Satan or other malevolent spiritual forces have become routine in various circles of the Christian church. Generally speaking, the idea behind prayers of binding and loosing, whether for one’s self or others, is often expressed as enabling the “breaking of spiritual strongholds” and as achieving a more “effective ministry” in light of perceived demonic incursion and activity. On some occasions, the focus of binding and loosing prayers seem related to one’s own experience of achieving freedom and wholeness. On other occasions, the focus of such prayers relate to those who seem troubled, held back, or otherwise rendered impervious to Christian truth. In one particular manual, binding and loosing prayers are encouraged on a daily basis and are applied not only in the face of alleged spiritual attack but also for a host of situations and conditions ranging from financial hardship, tormenting thoughts, and sexual sin to protection before anesthesia, blood transfusion, or surgery.¹ While various Scriptures are appealed to in support of this practice and its attending outlook, Matthew 18:18 (together with Matthew 16:19) tends to figure prominently.

Proponents of such prayers read Matthew’s references to binding and loosing as supplying believers with the ability to overcome Satan and as a strategy for either confronting spiritual attacks or ministering in situations where dark forces are suspected. This reading of Matthew’s words views Jesus, who unquestionably exercised

the power of exorcism in His ministry,² as authorizing and empowering present followers to bind Satan and demons and to loose those who are victims in need of release.³

Satan Is Real, But Are We Called to “Bind” Him? I recognize the reality of a world populated with evil spirits and oppressive demons. Likewise, I fully appreciate Jesus’ ministry of exorcism—a ministry that ably testified to His authority to plunder Satan’s ranks in order to populate the kingdom of God.⁴ And yet, I am forced to part ways with those who look to Matthew 18:18 to ground the practice of binding Satan in prayer.

If Matthew 18:18 is not teaching the deployment of binding and loosing prayers against Satan, then what are Jesus’ words about? As many biblical scholars maintain, the words “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”⁵ address the exercise of authority and discipline within the believing community. It is the treatment of a sinning brother (or sister) that is in view,⁶ not the “temporary spiritual handcuffing” of spiritual forces.⁷ That Matthew 18:18 is focused on the exercise of authority and discipline within the believing community is bolstered by two interpretive factors.

(1) Focusing on the Immediate Context. Generally speaking, Matthew 18:18 is read in context of 18:1 through 19:2. This portion of narrative is made up of two basic sections, both occasioned by questions that the disciples put to Jesus (18:1 and 18:21). Whereas the second main section (Matt. 18:21–35) is centered on a parable, the first main section (Matt. 18:1–20)—to which Matthew 18:18 belongs—not only includes a parable but also collects together material from Mark and Luke, all in order to aid in understanding Jesus’ mind in relation to addressing sin and authority within the community.⁸

Concisely summarized, this first section opens with the disciples’ question to Jesus, establishing the setting for what follows (18:1). In response, Jesus introduces a child as a live illustration to teach His disciples the relation of humility to greatness (18:2–5), makes manifestly clear how grave it is to cause a disciple⁹ to stumble, and how serious disciples must be in addressing sin in their own lives (18:6–9). Highlighting how valuable each disciple is to Christ (and therefore just how much disciples are to matter to one another) is the parable of the lost sheep (18:10–14). Taken together, the two concluding subsections (18:15–17 and 18:18–20)—at which Matthew 18:18 is at the center—apply the parable of the lost sheep. When a brother or sister in Christ sins and is at risk of being drawn away on account of his or her sin, there is both a plan of pastoral recovery that is to be followed (18:15–17) and the promise of Jesus’ own

presence and authority amid the recovery efforts of faithful disciples toward their erring brother or sister (18:18–20).

As for Matthew 18:18 itself, whatever the language of “binding and loosing” means, it is clearly uttered in reference to making decisions with respect to a wayward member. Not only is there no reference in any portion of Matthew 18 to Satan or demons, but the clear burden of the immediate context is to address the sin of a fellow disciple. Matthew 18:18, including its language of binding and loosing, speaks of the ability of the believing community to bring to bear on the wayward disciple the instructions of Jesus in an authoritative way. Matthew 18:18 pertains to the attempt of fellow believers to bring one of their own back into the fold by way of confirming “the standard of behavior to which the erring one is being called to conform once more.”¹⁰ There is nothing in the immediate context that suggests Matthew was thinking of binding demons.

(2) Paying Attention to the Wider Context. As all who treat Matthew 18:18 note, it is an almost verbatim repetition of Matthew 16:19. There are some slight differences,¹¹ but it remains clear that Jesus’ words in Matthew 18:18 must be read in relation to this earlier “binding and loosing” reference. While this rich passage deserves its own treatment, even a cursory reading of Matthew 16:19 sheds light on the matter of so-called binding and loosing prayers.

Consonant with our discussion, we begin by once again noting that there is nothing in the context suggestive of binding prayers.¹² Rather, Matthew 16:13–20 records Peter’s confession of Jesus as Messiah and Jesus’ response—which is to highlight the responsibility and authority of Peter in relation to the new community Jesus is founding. Read in light of Peter and Jesus’ exchange, the language of “the keys of the kingdom of heaven” and “binding and loosing” signal power and authority to regulate behavior; both have to do with getting people into, and keeping people for, heaven in accordance with God’s determined purposes.¹³ The imagery of the keys of the kingdom represents the act of opening or closing the kingdom of heaven to men. Parallel to this, the well-known language of binding and loosing authorizes the prohibiting or permitting of particular behaviors and practices.¹⁴ In context, to “bind” and to “loose” refer to the exercise of authority such as regulates the affairs of those belonging to the household of God. Taken together, Matthew 16:19 has as its primary concern the establishing or grounding of authority and its effect, and Matthew 18:18, coming as an application of 16:19, offers a glimpse of how the process might actually work within the believing community and in a situation of conflict.¹⁵

A More Biblical Way. The interpretation of “binding and loosing” offered here is not only faithful to our text but also is further corroborated by the general teaching of the New Testament—which nowhere includes Jesus teaching His followers to bind Satan. Contrary to questionable uses of Matthew 18:18, the New Testament makes clear that our primary posture is to submit to God and resist the Devil.¹⁶ In light of the cross, “spiritual warfare now consists of holding onto our secure salvation, standing firm in our faith, preaching the gospel, and praying.”¹⁷

Mark Ryan is director of the Francis A. Schaeffer Institute at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri.

NOTES

- 1 Bern Zumpano, *Spiritual Warfare Prayers* (Miami: Harbor Light, 1999); available at http://walkinginpower.org/books/spiritual_warfare_prayers.pdf.
- 2 See, e.g., Matt. 8:16–17; Matt. 8:28–34; Matt. 9:32–34; Matt. 12:22; Matt. 17:14–21.
- 3 A more credible attempt to read the “binding and loosing” language this way is Richard H. Hiers, “Binding and Loosing: The Matthean Authorizations,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104,2 (1985), 233–50. Significantly, Hiers does *not* ground his view of “binding and loosing” as related to exorcism in Matthew’s use of these terms. He correctly recognizes that context does not support such a view.
- 4 See Matthew 12:28–29; Luke 11:20; Acts 10:36–38. See also James Kallas, *The Significance of the Synoptic Miracles* (New York: Seabury, 1961), 78, who states the connection plainly: “The arrival of the Kingdom is simultaneous with, dependent upon, and manifested in the routing of demons.”
- 5 All Bible references are from the English Standard Version (ESV).
- 6 D. A. Carson, *The Expositors Bible Commentary: Matthew 13 through 28* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew, New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); Parackel K. Mathew, “Matt. 16:17–19 and 18:15–18 and the Exercise of Authority and Discipline in the Matthean Community,” *Communio viatorum* 18 (1985); and David L. Turner, *Matthew, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).
- 7 The language of “handcuffing” comes from an article on binding and loosing by Robert L. (the author withholds his surname); available at: http://www.greatbiblestudy.com/binding_loosing.php.
- 8 Following France, *Matthew*, 672.
- 9 I say “disciple,” as it’s clear that Matthew’s ongoing use of “little ones” or “child/ren” is meant to indicate true disciples.
- 10 John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew, New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 2005), 748.
- 11 There is a shift from singular to plural (from Peter to the congregation at large); the addition of the phrase, “I tell you truly” (adding emphasis); and some development in focus (with recovery-motivated discipline coming more into view in Matthew 18:18).
- 12 The “gates of hell” (16:18) is a metaphor for death and communicates the inability of death to

imprison or impede the church of the living God. It is imaginative overreach to interpret the gates of hell as escaped demonic powers arising to attack the church. (See France, *Matthew*, 624; Carson, *Matthew* 13–28, 370.)

- 13 Nolland, *Gospel of Matthew*, 677, 681; France, *Matthew*, 626–27; and Carson, *Matthew* 13–28, 374.
- 14 A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1930), 134; J. D. M. Derret, “Binding and Loosing (Matt. 16:19; 18:18; John 29:23),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 102, 1 (1983); and Kaufmann Kohler, “Binding and Loosing,” *Jewish Encyclopedia*; available at <http://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/3307-binding-and-loosing>.
- 15 Mark Allan Powell, “Binding and Loosing: A Paradigm for Ethical Discernment from the Gospel of Matthew,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 30, 6 (December 2003), 443–44.
- 16 See Eph. 6:10–20; James 4:7; 1. Pet. 5:8–9.
- 17 Peter Bolt, *Living with the Underworld* (Kingsford NSW, Australia: Matthias Media, 2007), 140.