

Binding and Loosing in the Gospel of Matthew

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus gives the church the authority to bind and to loose commandments of Scripture—that is, to determine when biblical commandments remain applicable to contemporary situations and when they do not.

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” (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” (18:18).

Examples of Binding and Loosing in Matthew

Jesus Gets It Right

In 5:21–22 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 reason 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 12:1–8 Jesus looses the prohibition against performing work on the Sabbath with regard to plucking grain to satisfy one’s hunger,

and in 12:9–13, Jesus looses the prohibition against performing work on the Sabbath with regard to performing works of healing. He declares, “It is lawful to do good on the sabbath” (12:12), and he says that those who do not recognize this “condemn the guiltless” (12:7).

The Scribes and Pharisees Get It Wrong

In 15:1–2 we find that the scribes and Pharisees preserve a tradition of the elders that binds certain priestly regulations regarding ritual handwashing as applicable to all Jews at everyday meals. Jesus rejects this interpretation for his followers, insisting that the scribes and Pharisees do not understand what truly “defiles” a person (15:19–20).

In 15:3–9 we hear that the scribes and Pharisees have loosed commandments requiring people to care for their elderly parents in instances where they can say, “Whatever support you would have had from me is given to God.” Jesus denounces this attempt at loosing the law as making “void the word of God” for the sake of human tradition and as “teaching human precepts as doctrines.”

Elsewhere, Jesus insists that his approach fulfills the law and the prophets while that of the scribes and the Pharisees abolishes the law and the prophets (5:17–20). They ignore commandments that should be kept while interpreting others in ways that become “heavy burdens, hard to bear” (23:4). Jesus is not always more lenient, but he claims to offer a “light burden” and an “easy yoke” (11:30).

Principles for “Binding and Loosing”

Jesus indicates that some matters are of fundamental importance and must be given priority if we are to have lives pleasing to God. The church is to remember these principles as it seeks to apply commandments of Scripture to the present day.

“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (7:12).

“Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” (9:13).

“If you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless” (12:7).

“‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (22:37–40).

“You tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith” (23:23).