

1-1-2011

Matthew 16.19: Binding and Loosing in the Church Today

KindaLee Pfremer DeLong
kdelong@pepperdine.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

DeLong, KindaLee Pfremer (2011) "Matthew 16.19: Binding and Loosing in the Church Today," *Leaven*: Vol. 19: Iss. 2, Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol19/iss2/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

Matthew 16.19: Binding and Loosing in the Church Today

KINDALEE PFREMMER DE LONG

In recent years, an intriguing application of Matthew 16.19 has appeared in numerous sermons and blogs on the Internet, along with some published books and articles, most notably by Mark A. Powell and Rob Bell.¹ This verse, with the one preceding it, reads:

“ . . . And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. 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 16.18–19 NRSV)

The argument by Powell, Bell and others, which focuses on “binding and loosing,” makes the case that in Jesus’ day, these words referred to the decision-making practices of ancient rabbis regarding how the law of God ought to be lived out in specific instances or new situations. The rabbis bound the law in certain ways and loosed it in others by prohibiting or allowing specific behaviors. In Matthew 16.19, then, Peter and the church receive a similar kind of mandate: Jesus authorizes them to decide how the ethical principles of scripture ought to be lived out in particular times, places and situations. The church may decide to bind (prohibit) one practice and to loose (allow) another. As Rob Bell puts it, Jesus is

giving his followers the authority to make new interpretations of the Bible. He is giving them permission to say, “Hey, we think we missed it before on that verse, and we’ve recently come to the conclusion that this is what it actually means.” And not only is he giving them authority, but he is saying that when they do debate and discuss and pray and wrestle and then make decisions about the Bible, somehow God in heaven will be involved.²

Thus the church today ought to engage in a similar process of “ethical deliberation with regard to current issues.”³ In short, the concept of binding and loosing offers a model for how the church may remain true to biblical principles while retaining enough interpretive flexibility to adapt its ethical teaching to new questions or insights.

This proposal is intriguing because it finds inspiration in Jesus’ teaching for how to bridge the divide between contemporary ethical questions and the moral instruction found in scripture. One writer describes the gulf this way:

1. Mark Allen Powell, “Binding and Loosing: A Paradigm for Ethical Discernment from the Gospel of Matthew,” *Currents in Theology and Missions* 30 (2003): 438–445 and in condensed form, presented as a key theme in Matthew’s Gospel, in Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 117–118. The argument has become distributed widely in the popular book by Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Bell does not indicate a reliance on Powell.

2. Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 50.

3. Powell, “Paradigm,” 445.

The claim to be 'scriptural' is often linked to a desire to be holy and pure, to preserve the community from error, heresy or sin, and so those who want to be 'biblical' can be, or appear to be, 'exclusive' in their attitude towards those with whom they disagree. On the other hand, those who want to, or claim to, be 'inclusive' are open to the accusation that they have abandoned scripture.⁴

The argument about binding and loosing seeks to overcome this dichotomy: it offers a flexible, scriptural paradigm for a New Testament hermeneutic that neither disregards scriptural precepts nor applies them in a rigid way.

Thus, when given the opportunity to write about Matthew for this issue *Leaven*, I chose to investigate Jesus' statement in Matthew 16.19. I wanted to know, does close investigation of this passage support a binding-loosing model of ethical deliberation? What I discovered along the way is that this thirty-two-word verse has generated enormous debate! Thus, my goal in this article is to offer a guide through the main contours of this debate by laying out the two most convincing options for understanding binding and loosing in Matthew 16.19: this pair of words may refer either to the binding and loosing of *things* (behaviors regulated by biblical law)—as argued by Powell and Bell—or to the binding and loosing of *people* (admonishing or forgiving individuals within the church). After assessing the evidence for both options, I reach the conclusion that it seems best not to choose between the two but rather to recognize how they work together. In the statements about binding and loosing in Matthew, Jesus *does* offer a paradigm for biblical ethics, but the model he provides consists not simply of deciding which behaviors are acceptable and which are not. Instead, in binding and loosing, Jesus offers a dynamic process for ongoing, relationship-based moral discernment that enables and challenges the church not only to consider new situations in our ethical decision making but also to reflect deeply how we live out these decisions in the real world.

BINDING AND LOSING OF THINGS: DECISIONS ABOUT THE LAW (*HALAKHAH*)

One interpretation of binding and loosing in Matthew 16.19—the view held by Powell and Bell described above—is that Jesus refers to decisions about living out the law. To decide if this is a viable option, it is helpful first to explore in more depth how the ancient rabbis used these words to describe their legal decisions (also called *halakhah*) and then to look closely at the words that appear in Matthew: is there evidence in the passage that Jesus refers to ethical decision making when he gives Peter and the church the authority to bind and loose?

The Hebrew word *halakhah*, which refers to discussions about how to live out the law, derives from the verb “to walk.” This verb, which appears in the Bible, sometimes takes on the metaphorical sense of “walking the law,” that is, “living out the law.” For example, Moses exhorts the Hebrews: “Today you have obtained the LORD’s agreement: to be your God; and for you to walk (*halakh*) in his ways, to keep his statutes, his commandments, and his ordinances, and to obey him” (Deut 26.17). But in order to “walk” the law, certain details must be decided, and so *halakhah* eventually becomes a shorthand expression for the whole process of debate and discussion by which ancient rabbis determine and teach which specific behaviors are prohibited or allowed. In many ancient texts, the rabbis refer to *halakhah* with the words bind and loose, which take on the sense of forbid and permit.

For instance, some rabbis agree that the faithful should not depart on a sea voyage on the eve of Sabbath, the fifth day of the week, but they disagree about departure on the fourth day. The school of one Jewish teacher (Shammai) “binds it” to the fourth day, while the school of another teacher (Hillel) “looses it.” In other words, Hillel and those who follow him allow a Thursday departure.⁵ Similarly, certain rabbis allow a hot bath on Sabbath but “bind” washing and “loose” sweating. In other words, if a person soaks in

4. Richard A. Burrige, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 3.

5. *Y. Šabb. 1.4a*.

a warm bath on Sabbath, scrubbing is considered work—a violation of the divine command to honor the Sabbath—but sweating is not.⁶ In these examples, the command to honor the Sabbath remains consistent but the particulars of how to “walk” or live out this command find clarification in the process of binding and loosing.

In this practice of *halakhic* binding and loosing, rabbis uphold the law as eternal and universal but recognize that new contexts require new decisions about how to bind or loose particular behaviors. In the bathing example above, the Roman tradition of public baths raises new questions about law-keeping for ancient Jews. Similarly, travel by boat is not a situation anticipated in scripture. By responding to new situations or new ways of thinking, *halakhah* keeps ancient law relevant to the realities of human life. As Powell puts it:

For the rabbis . . . loosing the law never mean[s] dismissing scripture or countering its authority. The law [is] never wrong when . . . rightly interpreted. The issue, rather, [is] discernment of the law’s intent and of the sphere of its application.⁷

Thus when the rabbis loose a command found in the Bible or bind an action not addressed in the Bible, their decisions ought not be considered dismissals of scripture but faithful attempts to “walk” or live out the law while adapting to new contexts.⁸

But *halakhic* binding and loosing is not precisely the same thing as exegesis and application along a modern, rational model. The words bind and loose can also be used to describe spiritual power, as in binding a demon or loosing a curse. This sense of spiritual powers carries over into binding and loosing as *halakhah*, because decisions about the law are sometimes described as exercised “by the spell” of a rabbi’s divine authority or ratified in the “celestial court of justice.”⁹ Thus, binding and loosing the law refers not only to a logical process of debate and interpretation but also to a spiritual practice: it connects heaven and earth.

With this understanding of binding and loosing as *halakhah* among ancient rabbis, we turn now to Matthew. Does Jesus give Peter and the church the authority to engage in *halakhah*? In seeking to answer this question, two difficulties become immediately apparent. The first difficulty has to do with language. Matthew is written in Greek; Jesus presumably spoke Aramaic; and the rabbinic texts are composed in various forms of later Hebrew or Aramaic. The fact that these texts are in different languages presents a challenge for interpreters who see a link between Matthew (which has the Greek words for bind and loose) and rabbinic texts (which have the Hebrew or Aramaic words). The connection among this vocabulary is possible but far from straightforward.¹⁰

The second difficulty relates to the date of the rabbinic texts discussed above. The earliest such texts were penned in the second century AD, so some historians argue that they are too late to be useful for understanding the Jewish context of the New Testament. Other scholars, by contrast, contend that these texts accurately preserve some rabbinic debate and decisions from earlier centuries, and so portions *are* able to offer insight into the first century. Even if the latter position is true, identifying the various layers within the texts is not easy. For example, the teachers Hillel and Shammai, mentioned in the bathing example above, lived around the time of Jesus. But the Talmud does not describe these teachers’ *own* binding and loosing but that of their “schools,” that is, of their

6. *Y. Šabb. 3.6a*. Later in history, both scrubbing and sweating were prohibited.

7. Powell, “Paradigm,” 439.

8. Hermann Leberecht Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 16.

9. Kaufmann Kohler, “Binding and Loosing,” in *The Jewish Encyclopedia* 3, ed. Isidore Singer (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1905), 215.

10. The arguments about language are complex, involving speculation about which Aramaic words spoken by Jesus lie behind the Greek words that appear in Matthew. Readers interested in such discussions will find the following articles useful: Herbert W. Bassler, “Derrett’s ‘Binding’ Reopened,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (1985): 297–300; Bruce T. Dahlberg, “Typological Use of Jeremiah 1:4–19 in Matthew 16:13–23,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94 (1975): 73–80; J. Emerton, “Binding and Loosing: Forgiving and Retaining,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 13 (1962): 325–331.

disciples, active for generations after the original teachers. If we nevertheless accept that this text preserves a *halakhic* debate that occurred earlier than when the Talmud itself was written, a precise date is impossible to pin down. And even if we could make a case that such a debate occurred during Jesus' time, we still could not be sure whether the terminology "bind" and "loose" derives from the time of the debate or reflects the usage of later centuries. Given such complexities, there continues to be a lively debate among historians about the extent to which rabbinic texts shed reliable light on Jewish terminology and practices in the pages of the New Testament. Thus, to be more certain that the words bind and loose as *halakhah* go back to the time of Jesus, we would need to find earlier examples.

For a link to the first century, some authors have pointed to a bind-loose passage in Josephus' *Jewish War* (circa 95 AD).¹¹ In this text, Josephus, a Jewish historian, looks back at the rule of Queen Alexandra (76–67 BC) and describes the Pharisees of her day as exercising the authority "to banish and to recall, to loose (*luō*) and to bind (*desmeuō*), whom they would."¹² While Josephus uses the word pair bind and loose, notice that he does not use the phrase to mean *halakhah*. Rather, he describes the Pharisees' power over *persons*: the political influence they had during the reign of Alexandra.¹³ So this example does not lend support to the interpretation of Jesus' words as meaning *halakhah*. However, two other passages, from the Gospel of John, do offer first-century evidence for the single word "loose" as referring to *halakhah*. In this Gospel, opponents accuse Jesus of "loosing (*luō*) the Sabbath" (John 5.18), and he describes a violation of Sabbath law as "loosing (*luō*) the law of Moses" (John 7.23).

Despite these uncertainties about language and dates, a good number of scholars who have studied the issue believe that rabbinic *halakhah* is the best way to understand Jesus' words in Matthew 16.19, a view that dates back at least to the seventeenth century.¹⁴ In support of this perspective, interpreters point out that in the phrase "whatever you bind" (Matt 16.19), the Greek word translated "whatever" (*ho*) is neuter. This gender typically points to *things* rather than persons, which suggests that "whatever" refers not to the binding and loosing of people but of actions according to law. They also observe that in speaking about binding and loosing, Jesus describes a connection between heaven and earth, a link that is also characteristic of rabbinic *halakhah*, as noted above.

However, on this point too, an alternative understanding is possible. As translated in the NRSV, the link between heaven and earth seems to move from earth to heaven: "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matt 16.19). Something is bound or loosed first on earth and subsequently bound or loosed in heaven. But Jesus' statement could be understood the other way around, with the movement of binding and loosing flowing from heaven to earth. Because of a rather unusual combination of verbs, this grammatical construction could be translated: "what you bind on earth will be something that has been already bound in heaven . . ." ¹⁵ In other words, Jesus could be saying that Peter's decisions of *halakhah* are made *first* in heaven and only secondarily on earth, in Peter's binding and loosing. While the grammar of the passage allows such a translation, it does not *require* it: the simpler sense reflected in most contemporary translations—of a movement flowing from earth to heaven—is quite possible.¹⁶

11. For example, Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 183 f42; Kohler, "Binding and Loosing," 3:215; Powell, "Paradigm," 438.

12. Josephus, *Jewish War*, 1.111 [1.5.2], trans. from *Loeb Classical Library*.

13. This view derives from a fairly straightforward reading of the Greek text. See translator's note in Flavius Josephus, *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (Baltimore: Armstrong & Berry, 1839), 416.

14. The argument that Matthew 16.19 provides a flexible hermeneutic for contemporary ethics is rather recent, but the more basic idea that binding and loosing means *halakhah* goes back at least to John Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica, Matthew—I Corinthians* (4 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 2:236–241; repr. of John Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica, Matthew—I Corinthians*, trans. unknown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1859); trans. of *Horae hebraicae et talmudicae* (Cantabrigiae: Excudebat Joannes Field, impensis Edovardi Story, bibliopolae, 1658–1674).

15. In Matthew 16.19, the phrases "will be bound" and "will be loosed" translate a future verb in combination with perfect passive participles. This distinctive grammatical construction appears elsewhere in the New Testament only in Matthew 18.18 (a parallel verse to 16.19), Luke 12.52 and Hebrews 2.13.

16. For details on this grammatical issue, see J. R. Mantey, "Evidence That the Perfect Tense in John 20:23 and Matthew 16:19 Is Mistranslated," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 16 (1973): 129–138, 131; Joel Marcus, "The Gates of Hades and the Keys of the Kingdom (Matt 16:18–19)," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988): 443–455, 449.

Regardless of this disagreement about the meaning of verb tenses, many, if not most, modern exegetes view binding and loosing in Matthew 16.19 as *halakhah*. They understand Jesus as giving Peter and the church the spiritual power to declare “what is prohibited and what is permitted” in the rabbinic sense and thus to determine how followers of Christ ought to act.¹⁷ And Jesus further asserts that these *halakhic* decisions made on earth will be ratified in the heavenly realm. It is a reasonable—albeit not airtight—argument.

BINDING AND LOOSING OF PEOPLE: ADMONITION OR FORGIVENESS

This understanding of binding and loosing in Matthew 16.19 as *halakhah* has been argued for at least four hundred years, but an even older interpretation holds that the word pair describes not the binding and loosing of *things* (referring to ethical decision making) but rather *people* (referring either to church discipline or the forgiveness of sins). This view, which was the majority opinion among the church fathers, offers the primary competition to the *halakhah* interpretation.¹⁸ From this perspective, Jesus gives Peter authority either (a) to disassociate the community from an unrepentant sinner (with the hope of securing his or her restoration), or (b) to offer forgiveness (or lack thereof) to Christians who have gone astray.¹⁹

The first option—binding and loosing as authority over membership within the community—is the classic Roman Catholic position, evident, for example, in the work of Augustine and Basil, among other writers.²⁰ In Matthew, support for this interpretation may be found in 18.18, a parallel verse to 16.19, which reads in context:

So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.
¹⁵ “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.¹⁶ But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.¹⁷ If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.” (Matt 18.14–19 NRSV)

Since Matthew 18.18 (which matches 16.19 exactly) appears in the midst of instruction about how to interact with a wayward community member, it offers a good contextual reason to view binding and loosing as referring not to *halakhah* but rather to accountability. Moreover, close attention to rabbinic texts reveals that while the words bind and loose most often refer to *halakhah* (things) they do sometimes refer the inclusion or exclusion of individuals from the community (people). Thus, while some modern interpreters assert that *halakhah* is the “natural” rabbinic meaning of bind and loose, the rabbis could also use the word pair in reference to decisions about the exclusion and inclusion of people, similar to the example from Josephus quoted above.²¹

17. This position has been described as the “major opinion of modern exegetes,” W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (3 vols.; International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 2:638. For additional bibliography, see Marcus, “Gates,” 450 f35.

18. John K. Mozley, “Binding and Loosing,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* 4, ed. James Hastings and John A. Selbie (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1925–1935; repr. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2003), 618–621.

19. Traditional terms for this authority are “excommunication” and “absolution.”

20. For example, Augustine, *Letter to Auxilius* (60) (NPNF 1.1:589–590); Basil, *Letter To Amphilochius, the Canons* (217), 74 (NPNF 208.257–258).

21. For example, Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament Aus Talmud und Midrasch* (6 vols.; Munich: C. H. Beck, 1922–1961), 738–739.

The second possibility for the binding and loosing of people in Matthew 16.19 relates to forgiveness: forgiveness offered (or not offered) to people who have sinned. A conversation between Jesus and Peter about forgiveness occurs in close context (Matt 18.21). In addition, some readers see parallels between the passages in Matthew and a similar word pair that appears in John 20.23: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” While the Greek words in John are not the same as those used for bind and loose in Matthew, they could originally have matched in Aramaic, and researchers have found at least one Aramaic text that contrasts “loosing and forgiving” with “retaining” sins.²²

We are left then with good reasons to conclude that Jesus’ words about binding and loosing in Matthew give Peter and the church authority over people, either to hold Christians accountable for their actions or to forgive (or not forgive) people who have sinned. In short, all three ways of understanding the word pair in Matthew—*halakhah*, accountability and forgiveness—can be supported by relatively convincing evidence.

BINDING AND LOOSING AS REFERRING TO THINGS AND PEOPLE

Given this evidence, increasingly interpreters tend not to set these interpretations—the binding of things or people—in opposition but to combine them: the words bind and loose in Matthew refer *both* to things and people. One way to do so is to observe that Matthew 16.19 emphasizes *halakhah* while Matthew 18.18 focuses on “exclusion from and acceptance back into the community.” Another way is to draw out the interconnectedness between the three activities of *halakhah*, accountability and forgiveness. As one scholar puts it, Peter is given “. . . total power on earth to distinguish valid from invalid prohibitions, ‘binding’ upon human beings the observance of certain of them . . . and ‘loosing’ them from the observance of others of them.”²³ What the writer seems to mean here is that *halakhic* decisions never occur in a vacuum: they are lived out by human beings, who in turn live in relationship with others in the community. Thus, if a community binds a behavior, prohibiting it by the authority given to Peter, but a community member refuses to live in accordance with this decision, then Matthew 18.14–19 provides a process for holding this individual accountable to the community’s standards, which have in turn been ratified in heaven. If exclusion from the community brings about repentance, then forgiveness also becomes essential for restoring a wayward member to the community.

BINDING AND LOOSING IN MINISTRY TODAY

Unyielding and sometimes unloving applications of scripture may have caused communities of faith to shy away from discussions about Christian ethics. Similarly, abuses of power in top-down versions of church discipline or absolution may have left us distrustful of accountability. Yet in the passages on binding and loosing, Jesus seems to bring moral standards and accountability together with forgiveness, and this three-part model comprises his only teaching about the “church.” For this reason, John H. Yoder—in his short book *Body Politics*—argues that these three activities are crucial to Christian witness, urging the church to reclaim binding and loosing by learning anew how to practice moral discernment, fraternal admonition and reconciliation.

Yoder’s analysis focuses on the interconnectedness of these three practices. In *halakhah*, Jesus gives us not a law code but “decision-making potential,” which is dynamic enough to answer questions that “could not conceivably have been answered substantially ahead of time.”²⁴ But when Jesus gives us this potential for moral discernment, he includes a feedback loop, so to speak. Whatever the church “binds” is not theoretical: the community must come face-to-face with the implications of its *halakhah* in the real

22. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:636.

23. Marcus, “Gates,” 451.

24. John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001; orig. 1992), 8.

lives of its members. As Yoder puts it, “conversation with reconciling intent is the most powerful way for a community to discover when the rules they have been applying are inadequate, so that they may be modified.”²⁵ The process of accountability flows in both directions, challenging individuals to live in keeping with moral standards but also challenging communities to engage in ongoing ethical reflection. So too, the experience of forgiveness and reconciliation binds a community together.

Yoder points out that the church today tends not to practice this kind of holistic moral discernment. Too much “Christian debate about moral issues makes the mistake of concentrating on what the standards ought to be rather than on how they are to be discerned and implemented.”²⁶ By contrast, Jesus marries moral discernment to a process of dialogue that leads to reconciliation (admonition and forgiveness), providing the community with a robust model for meeting new situations and enabling “paths of change without infidelity, fidelity without rigidity.”²⁷ A tripartite paradigm for binding and loosing—*halakhah*, accountability and forgiveness—anchors the process of moral discernment in the real world and in our faith relationships. Ringing true to the texts in Matthew, this more complex understanding of binding and loosing offers a nuanced model for how the community of Christ might not only face difficult ethical questions today but also thrive in the process.

KINDALEE PFREMMER DE LONG TEACHES NEW TESTAMENT AT PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY IN MALIBU, CALIFORNIA.



25. *Ibid.*, 6.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*, 9–10.