

A Study in Matthew 18:17–18

*Tell It to the Church — Binding and Loosing — The Assembly as God's
Administrative Center*

We are reading Matthew chapter 18, verse 17, and continuing.

"And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican."

"Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

More Than Personal Trespass

This passage is sometimes labeled personal trespass, as though its subject matter is simply a private matter between two individuals that runs its course without broader implications. That label is not wrong as far as it goes — the trespass was indeed personal, and it was between a brother and a brother. But the label is inadequate, and using it to define the entire section causes the passage to be misread.

If this were only a personal matter between two individuals, why would others need to be brought in at all? Why would the assembly need to be brought into it? Why would the binding and loosing of verse 18 be introduced here? Why would the presence of the Lord Jesus in the midst of those gathered in His name be brought in at this point? And why, if the result is simply that the offended brother regards the unrepentant one as a heathen man and a publican, would any of that be necessary? If the thing finally ends only as a private arrangement between two individuals — one of whom simply adjusts his personal opinion of the other — there was no need to involve the assembly at all, no need to speak of binding and loosing, and no need to invoke the presence of the Lord Jesus.

The truth is that this process supposes that the assembly is gathered together to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, that the Lord is in the midst, and that the assembly acts with His authority. By the time the matter is before the assembly — with the sin proven, the case established in the mouth of two or three — and the man is still defiant, that defiance is now an offense not merely against a brother but against the assembly of God and against the presence of the Lord Jesus in that assembly. It is of a dreadful order. The passage as a whole supposes that there is one place in the world where moral integrity — the

ability to distinguish between good and evil and to act accordingly — is maintained, and that place is the assembly of God.

1 Timothy 3:15 is relevant: the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. This is not read there to make a remark about good behavior as such, but because it says pillar and ground of the truth. Where moral integrity is let go, where there is no longer a real difference between good and evil, where what is evil cannot be judged — such a state is incompatible with the presence of the Lord Jesus in the midst of His assembly. In the middle of the 1870s, J. N. Darby, then more than seventy-five years old, was exercised to leave the brethren on the grounds of a deficiency of moral integrity. He could point to no specific act. Nothing had been done that he could name as an offense. He felt it — a loss of moral uprightness before it became overt. A division came shortly after, in 1881, at the bottom of which was exactly that question. That is what this passage presupposes to be intact.

The Heathen Man and the Publican — Matthew's Own Testimony

Let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. The word publican in Darby's translation is tax gatherer. In that land and time, a tax gatherer was an employee of the Emperor of Rome — a fellow Jew who had taken a job collecting taxes for the hated foreign occupier. It was not merely unpopular, as tax collection can be unpopular today because people dislike paying. It was regarded as treason. To be a tax gatherer was to be the lowest of the low, a traitor to one's own people, the most despised figure in the social landscape.

What makes this expression especially beautiful is the identity of the author of this Gospel. Matthew was a tax gatherer. The Lord Jesus called him, and he was saved. He wrote this Gospel. And when the time came to describe the absolutely lowest place in Jewish society, the place outside the covenant and outside the fellowship of Israel, he used himself as the illustration. Oh, I know just the right expression, Matthew must have thought — a tax gatherer. That was me. Isn't that lovely? It is the testimony of a man who truly got saved. If he had not been genuinely converted, he could never have written it that way. He would have had a conscience about it, a discomfort. But the man who is truly saved can speak freely of where the Lord found him, because he knows what it cost to bring him from there to here.

The two descriptors — heathen man and publican — combine to show what is true of the one who has been put outside the assembly. As one of the nations, such a person is outside the covenant. As a tax gatherer, he is regarded as having aligned himself with an alien power, a traitor to the people. Both characteristics together say: this person is not to be in the assembly, not at the Lord's table, not in the remembrance of His death. That is the force of what the assembly pronounces. It is not a matter of private opinion — it is a corporate action with the authority described in verse 18.

Binding and Loosing — Governmental, Not Judicial

Verily I say unto you — a phrase the Lord did not always use, but He uses it here for good reason. Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. This is a remarkable statement about the authority given to the assembly on earth. Heaven sanctions what is bound here. The head is in heaven; the authority is His; the action taken by the assembly in His name and in His presence carries that authority.

There are those who attempt to reverse the tense of the verse, reading it as whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven — as if the action on earth merely reflects a prior action in heaven, leaving the earth with no real authority of its own. This tampering with the tenses arises from a confusion between judicial and governmental action. God's judicial acts originate in heaven and come down. The judgment of a soul — the question of who is saved and who is lost — belongs to God alone, begins in God alone, and is not delegated to man. But what we have in verse 18 is not a judicial act. It is a governmental act. And governmental acts work differently.

In a government, authority is delegated. A local magistrate makes a decision in a local place. If you go back to the capital and ask the ruler of the whole country whether that action was sanctioned by the government, the answer is yes — not necessarily because the local magistrate was perfectly correct in every detail, but because the authority of the government stands behind delegated actions taken in its name. That is how government works in the earth, and that is how it works here. The assembly acts as a delegated body with the authority of the head in heaven. What it binds on earth is bound — bound in heaven. This is not a reflection of a prior heavenly act; it is a delegated earthly act to which heaven gives its sanction.

The same principle applies to loosing. When the man who had been put out of the Corinthian assembly had repented, Paul wrote to them in 2 Corinthians 2 instructing them to forgive him — that is, to loose him. He was not yet loosed when that epistle was written. The loosing had to be done by the assembly. Individuals who on their own begin treating the person as though he were loosed, before the assembly has loosed him, are setting aside the authority of the assembly and putting themselves over it. The authority to loose, like the authority to bind, is with the assembly gathered to the name of the Lord Jesus — not with any individual acting on his own.

Verse 18 and Independency

Verse 18 is incompatible with independency. Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven. If an assembly gathered to the name of the Lord Jesus, led by the Spirit, binds something — is it bound on earth? If so, why is it not bound in the next town, where another assembly gathered to the same name is meeting on the same earth? It does not say whatsoever ye shall bind in one local

geographical area. Earth is earth. This is talking about what is for the church of God on earth, which is the new center of God's administration.

What one assembly gathered to the name of the Lord Jesus does is, in principle, what the whole assembly on earth has done, because the whole assembly on earth has one head, one Lord. If a second assembly, also truly gathered to that name, is led by the same Spirit, what will the Spirit lead them to do? To acknowledge that the thing is bound on earth. That is not something the first assembly forces on the second. There is no scripture for coercion of one assembly by another. But there is the simple logic of the one Spirit leading each to the same acknowledgment. The complications arise from the self-will of man.

It is a remarkable thing that the very first function of the assembly mentioned after Matthew 16 — where the Lord says He will build His assembly — is this, and it is immediately and plainly set against independency. That is what God thinks of independency. The thought of Scripture is that there is one church on earth, and the local assembly acts representatively for the whole. When the assembly at Corinth put out the man in 1 Corinthians 5, he was outside not only Corinth but the whole assembly on earth. He could not carry a letter of commendation to Ephesus and demand admission. He was without — outside the whole. 1 Corinthians 5:12 is clear: Do not ye judge them that are within? The within is not limited to one local assembly. It is that which locally expresses the whole assembly on earth. Scripture is uniform against independency throughout.

Binding, Loosing, and the Ruins of the Church

The line of demarcation between the within and the without was clearly marked at the beginning of the church's history. Now the church is in ruins — which does not mean the divine principles have been ruined, because divine principles cannot be ruined. What Christ builds according to Matthew 16 — the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. But the responsible testimony of the church on earth is in ruins.

What do we do then? We do not throw up our hands and say that since the ruin has come in, none of these things apply anymore. We act on the principle of the within and the without. All of those who are genuinely gathered together to the name of the Lord Jesus, wherever they may be found, act on the principle. The expression of it is not the same as it was when the line of demarcation was clearly marked at the beginning; it cannot be identical. But the principle is operative, and we are bound by it and act according to it. The head is still in heaven. The Lord is still in the midst where two or three are gathered in His name. The binding and loosing are still His to sanction. And when Peter says judgment must begin at the house of God, that applies now just as much as it did when the testimony was clear and bright.

*Heaven sanctions the actions of an assembly gathered to the name of the Lord Jesus, led by His Spirit,
acting for the whole.*