

A Study in Matthew 18:18–20

Binding and Loosing — Agreeing in Prayer — Where Two or Three Are Gathered

We are reading Matthew chapter 18, beginning at verse 18.

"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."

Why Some Try to Reverse the Tenses of Verse 18

There are those who attempt to read verse 18 so that the action in heaven precedes the action on earth, as if the verse says: whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven. The effect of this reading is to leave the assembly with no real authority of its own — it merely recognizes and ratifies on earth what has already been determined in heaven. The motive behind this reading is not always stated, but it is not difficult to discern. A verse that really does mean what it says — that an assembly gathered to the name of the Lord Jesus can bind something on earth with heaven's sanction — has a frightening force if applied to oneself. There are those who have spoken very confidently about whatsoever is bound on earth being bound in heaven, right up until the moment something was bound on them. Then, suddenly, they found problems with the verse.

There is also a paper that has been read, in which the author argued that since prayer in verse 19 does not always produce the desired result, therefore verse 19 does not mean what it says, and therefore verse 18 does not mean what it says either. That logic is worth stating plainly, because in stating it the refutation is immediate. To deny the truth of one verse in order to undermine the truth of another — and to build that denial on one's own experience of apparently unanswered prayer — is not engagement with Scripture but a departure from faith in God's word altogether.

Verse 18 and Verse 19 Are Not the Same

Verse 18 concerns governmental action: binding and loosing. Verse 19 concerns prayer: if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any matter that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. These are closely related but distinct. Scripture is not generally redundant, and even where identical words appear in different passages, the context always gives them a different bearing.

Verse 18 is governmental: the assembly acts, and what it does is bound. Verse 19 is petitionary: two who agree together ask the Father, and He does it. The closeness of verse 20 to verse 19 connects the prayer of verse 19 with the presence of the Lord Jesus in the midst. It is not that two persons happen to share a preference and call that agreement. It is agreement in the presence of the Lord, with His mind, in the context of the assembly gathered to His name.

The limitation on verse 19 is real: the word any matter does not mean any matter whatsoever without qualification. 1 John 5:14 bears upon it — if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. The supposition of verse 19 is that the two who agree are asking with the mind of the Lord, in submission to His will. James 4 warns explicitly about asking amiss to consume it on our own lusts. The same lusts that produce bad asking also produce wars and fightings — they are incompatible with the symphonizing that true agreement means. True agreement supposes that both parties have the mind of Christ, and by virtue of both having the mind of Christ, they agree. Their unity in prayer is a unity of mind with one another and with the heart of God.

True Agreement — Symphonizing Together

The Greek word for agree in verse 19 means to sound together, to be in harmony — from which we derive symphony. There is something to that observation, though it is possible to wax eloquent on it while not being in any real agreement with one's brethren at all. True symphonizing is not a matter of two people deciding they both want the same thing. It is a matter of two people both having their faces turned in the direction God has indicated — both looking where God says to look. Those who look west when God says to look west will all see the same horizon, even if some see further out than others. Those who look east when God says west have only one thing in common with each other — their disobedience — and they cannot be said to symphonize with those who are obedient. The unity in verse 19 is the unity of souls bowed to God's word and shaped by His Spirit, not the unity of shared desires that happen to align.

The flesh never truly agrees with other flesh. Pontius Pilate and Herod became friends on the occasion of the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus. One cannot believe that they were in any true agreement in the scriptural sense — their interests happened to converge on a point, but that is not symphonizing. James paints the picture starkly: those who ask and do not receive ask in a spirit of adultery toward God — asking from God while belonging to the world. That is as far from true prayer as it is possible to be. The

symphonizing that verse 19 speaks of is the prayer of souls wholly surrendered to God's will, asking in the presence of the Lord Jesus, with His mind, for what He desires.

The statement in Philippians — if any man be otherwise minded, God shall show this to him — rests on the principle that where God has said to look, all His people who are truly obedient must eventually look the same way. If there is some point where a brother sees less than another, God can show him. But the starting point is that we are all facing in the direction God has indicated. Out of that comes the unity of action in verse 18 and the unity of petition in verse 19.

Verse 18 and Responsibility

Verse 18 gives authority. But authority and responsibility go together. The assembly on earth has been given the authority of binding and loosing — but it also has the responsibility to use that authority. 1 Corinthians 5 shows the manna that needed to be put away. 2 Corinthians 7 shows the assembly clearing itself in the matter. The authority is the means by which the responsibility is met; the responsibility is the purpose for which the authority was given. They are inseparable.

1 Corinthians 5:12 establishes the sphere: do not ye judge them that are within? This governmental judgment does not occupy itself with those outside the assembly — God judges them. But it has a clear sphere of application for those within. And when the church was not in ruins, the line between the within and the without was sharply defined. The man put out at Corinth was outside not only that assembly but the whole assembly on earth. He could go nowhere claiming to be in fellowship. That expression of things is now obscured by the ruin of the testimony. But the principle remains: those who are genuinely gathered to the name of the Lord Jesus act on the principle of the within and the without, knowing that divine principles cannot be ruined even when their corporate expression has been marred.

Where Two or Three Are Gathered in My Name

For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. The passage that began with the littleness of a child, and moved through the steps of gaining a brother, and then the governmental authority of the assembly, and then the prayer of those who agree in His name — it all gathers here to this point: His presence.

The two or three are not two or three apostles in some specially constituted kingdom assembly, as some have taught. Such an interpretation generates a whole additional set of problems and requires the invention of an arrangement for which Scripture provides no evidence. The two or three are the assembly, gathered to the name of the Lord Jesus — however small the number, however simple the setting. And there He is in the midst.

The presence of the Lord Jesus in the midst is what gives every other element in the passage its weight. It is what makes the binding binding. It is what gives the prayer its confidence. It is what makes the assembly's action the action of God's administration on earth, not merely the consensus of a group of fallible men. And it is what makes the question of moral integrity so serious: to allow in the assembly that which the Lord cannot sanction is to act in defiance of the One who is in the midst. That is not merely a practical or administrative question. It touches the honor of His name.

It is in view of this passage that Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 5:4 — in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ. The power of our Lord Jesus Christ is there because He is there, in the midst of those gathered in His name. That is the same truth as Matthew 18:20, applied to the governmental action described in 1 Corinthians 5. The two passages illuminate each other.

My Father Which Is in Heaven — and Abba Father

A final observation on the close of verse 19: it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. This expression — my Father which is in heaven, or our Father who art in heaven — was the form of address the Lord taught His disciples in what is commonly called the Lord's Prayer. It was suited to their state at that time: they had not yet received the Spirit of sonship. They had not yet been sealed by the Spirit of God. They were disciples of the Lord Jesus while He was here in the flesh, before the cross, before Pentecost, before the Spirit was given.

That form of address carries with it a sense of distance. It acknowledges relationship but implies a certain remoteness — our Father who is up there in heaven. Christians today have been brought into something nearer. Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:6 speak of the Spirit of His Son in our hearts, whereby we cry Abba Father. Not our Father who art in heaven, but Father. The word Abba is the most intimate of all terms for a father — the word of a young child to its own father. We have been brought into that intimacy.

This does not mean the name Abba must be used in every prayer. But it means the spirit of it should characterize how we approach God. When the assembly is gathered to remember the Lord Jesus in His death, believing that in spirit they are in the sanctuary where the Lord is present, to address God as our Father who art in heaven is to imply a distance that does not accord with the reality of where the Spirit has brought us. The tendency in Christendom to inculcate the disciples' prayer as the normative form of Christian prayer keeps saints at a distance from the nearness that God's grace has provided through the gift of His Spirit. Christian position, properly understood, is nearer than that.

Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.