

BINDING AND LOOSING

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“Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. “Those words of Jesus, as you know, apply not just to those who are ordained to ministry but to everyone within the body of Christ. All of us have the power to bind and to loose.

What is this power? How do we bind and loose each other on earth in a way that enjoins heaven?

Part of this is a little easier to explain: As a member of the Body of Christ, if you forgive someone, Christ forgives that person and he or she is loosed from sin. Likewise, if you, as part of the Body of Christ, love someone and remain connected to him or her, that person is connected to the Body of Christ and through you touches the hem of Christ’s garment, even if he or she is not explicitly confessing that.

But what about the reverse? Suppose I refuse to forgive someone who has wounded me in some way, suppose I hold grudges and refuse to let go of the wrongs that another has done me, am I binding that person in sin? Does God also refuse to forgive and let go because I refuse to forgive and let go? How does those the Body of Christ work regarding the “binding” part of the power that Jesus gave us?

This is a difficult question, though a couple of preliminary distinctions can already shed some light on the issue:

To begin with, the logic of grace – and grace, like love, has a logic – only works one way. In grace, just as in love, you can be gifted beyond what you deserve, but the reverse is not true. The algebra of undeserved grace works only one way. There can be gratuitousness to love but not to punishment. Hence God gives us the power to set each other free, but not the same kind of power to keep each other in bondage.

Second, in this life, as C.S. Lewis used to say, hell can blackmail heaven, but this is not true in the other realm. Thus, while we can hold each other captive, psychologically and emotionally, on this side, God does not ratify those actions.

When we bind each other here in this world by refusing to forgive each other, that refusal does not bind God to do likewise. Put more simply, when I hold a grudge against someone who has wronged me, making him constantly aware that he has done wrong, I am helping keep that person tied to their sin – but I hardly expect that God is endorsing this. Heaven will not go along with my emotional blackmail.

These distinctions though provide only an ambience for an understanding of this. What does it mean to bind a person?

The Christian power to bind and loose is the power to bind and loose in conscience, in truth, in goodness, and in love. When I refuse to forgive another, when I hold a grudge, I am acting not as the Body of Christ, not as an agent of grace, but precisely as part of the very chain of sin and helplessness that Christ was trying to break. When I act this way, it is I who need to be loosed from sin since I am acting contrary to grace. My non-forgiveness may well bind another person emotionally, keeping her bound in that way to her sin, but it is the very antithesis of the power that Christ gave us.

We bind each other in the biblical sense when, in love, we refuse to compromise truth, when we refuse to give each other permission to take false liberties and make bad choices. Thus, for example, parents bind their children when they, lovingly but clearly, refuse to give them permission

to ignore Christ's teaching on marriage and sexuality. We bind a friend when we refuse to give him our approval to cheat in his business so as to make more money. A friend binds me when she refuses to bless my moral compromises.

In Robert Bolt's play, *A Man For All Seasons*, we see Henry VIII literally beg Thomas More to bless his marriage to Anne Boleyn. Henry appeals to their friendship, appeals to their shared humanity, and tries to morally bully Thomas by telling him that his refusal to approve is a timidity and arrogance on his, Thomas', part. Yet Thomas refuses to approve. He binds Henry in conscience and Henry knows he is bound. In the end, he kills Thomas for his refusal to compromise and give permission.

Ever since God took on concrete human flesh, grace has a visible human dimension. Heaven is watching earth – and is letting itself be helped by the best of what we do down here.

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