

Critical Issues Commentary

A monthly commentary on Biblical concerns that impact you

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Binding And Loosing Part 1

written by Bob DeWaay

"I bind you, Satan!" is uttered in thousands of prayers every day in America. "Spiritual warfare" books that teach Christian how to "bind Satan" are hot sellers. Not only is Satan himself subject to continual verbal "binding," but a whole host of demons and "principalities and authorities" of the heavenly realm are also thus assaulted. Christians who practice this form of spiritual warfare hope to forestall calamities and sickness, convert loved ones, and turn cities, states and even the nation to righteousness. If binding Satan will do all this, we should put this new spiritual technology into practice.

However, if this practice is not Biblical, it may be more harmful than helpful. Those who teach and practice "binding and loosing" as verbal warfare against evil have several Biblical passages that they claim support the practice. The two most prominent ones are found in the book of Matthew: Matthew 16:19 and Matthew 12:28,29. Matthew 16:19 states, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." By combining that thought with the Matthew 12 passage, which speaks of binding the "strong man," they draw the conclusion that we have the authority to bind Satan, thus making his "goods" exposed for plundering. According to many followers of this theory, the "goods" are money, political power, people, etc. The church supposedly, therefore, has the opportunity to take world power away from Satan and deliver it to ourselves.

The crucial issue is whether this is what Jesus meant by these teachings.

What did **He** mean by the terms "bind" and "loose?" These words were commonly used by Jewish rabbis. New Testament scholars agree that "binding and loosing," when used in this way, retain the basic meaning that they had in the Jewish culture of the first century.

For example, the Theological Dictionary of The New Testament states under the entries for "deō and luō" (the Greek words for binding and loosing used in Matthew 16:19 and elsewhere), "Jesus does not give to Peter and the other disciples any power to enchant or to free by magic. The customary meaning of the Rabbinic expressions is equally incontestable, namely, to declare forbidden or permitted, and thus to impose or remove an obligation, by a doctrinal decision."¹ TDNT draws the conclusion that this is the meaning of the words as used in Matthew 16:19 and 18:18.

A. T. Robertson, one of this century's leading Greek scholars, also comments on Matthew 16:19,

To "bind" in rabbinical language is to forbid, to "loose" is to permit. Peter would be like a rabbi who passes on many points. Rabbis of the school of Hillel "loosed" many things that the school of Shammai "bound." The teaching of Jesus is the standard for Peter and for all preachers of Christ. Note the future perfect indicative..., a state of completion. All this assumes, of course, that Peter's use of the keys will be in accord with the teaching and mind of Christ.²

Dr. Robertson's comment about the use of the future perfect tense is important. If we were to translate the passage very literally (though awkwardly in English), it would read "...whatever you loose on earth shall having been loosed in heaven." This shows that the disciples were not unilaterally to decide a matter, thus binding "heaven" to their decision. It means that their decision, as Dr. Robertson suggests, will be in line with what already was God's mind on the issue.

Passing on an issue of doctrine or ethics does not equal shooting a verbal

barrage at Satan or another wicked spiritual entity. It is also quite different from "loosing" the money needed or the job wanted, as some are now prone to pray.

We can see how Peter and the others understood Jesus' teaching on binding and loosing by examining their actions as recorded in the Book of Acts. Acts 15 records a dispute that arose about the behavior of Gentiles who were recently becoming part of the church. Their customs were far different from the Jews, who then made up most of the church. Should the new Gentile converts be required to be circumcised and to keep other requirements of the Law of Moses? After "much debate" (Acts 15:7), Peter stood up and asked, "...why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?" (Verse 10). After James agrees with Peter, quoting Scripture as proof, they reached the decision that the Gentiles should abstain from idols, fornication, and what is strangled. No further burden was to be placed upon the Gentile Christians. The apostles herein exercised the power of binding and loosing, as given by Jesus.

Did the apostles ever utter "I bind you, Satan?" Not once is such an utterance recorded in the New Testament. It is not credible to assume that they understood Jesus' teaching as an instruction to "bind Satan" through prayers and verbal declarations and then never followed the instructions personally. The church of the twentieth century should not understand and practice the teachings of Jesus differently than the church of the 1st century. If it does, the authority of Scripture is depreciated.

Other Bible commentators also believe that "binding and loosing" find their meaning in rabbinical usage. Concerning Matthew 16:19, William Hendriksen states, "The very wording - note 'whatever,' not 'whoever' - shows that the passage refers to things, in this case beliefs and actions, not directly to people. Binding and loosing are rabbinical terms, meaning forbidding and permitting."³ Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon Of The New Testament, under the entry "deō" (to bind), states, "...by a

Chaldean and rabbinic idiom to forbid, prohibit, declare illicit: Matthew 16:19; 18:18.” Each source I have checked (including several not quoted here) agrees with this interpretation of these words. I have to wonder if those modern teachers who have popularized the “spiritual warfare” teachings that command the saints to “bind Satan,” supposedly based on Matthew 16:19, have carefully researched the passage. They should at least offer some evidence that suggests that the scholars of Biblical Greek are uniformly wrong.

The authority to bind and loose is the authority to declare what is God's mind on a matter of doctrine or practice. This is what the early church did in Acts 15. To “bind” is to obligate, to “loose” is to remove obligation. The future perfect tense (“shall having been bound”) shows that this authority is only valid when used in submission to Christ's word or teaching. It does not give the church the authority to make up new teachings later in church history. Binding in this context has nothing to do with speaking words to Satan or demons.

Satan's House Plundered

Let us turn to Matthew 12:28,29, which at least **is** addressing the issue of Satan and demons. The verses read, “But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or how can anyone enter the strong man's house and carry off his property, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house.” Upon hearing about Jesus casting out demons, the Pharisees, those perpetual critics of Jesus, said that He “...cast out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons” (verse 24). The Lord first shows the illogic of their accusations by saying that if Satan was casting out Satan, his kingdom would not stand. He then asks about their own misguided deliverance attempts (the Jewish historian Josephus wrote about some Jewish exorcism practices which were quite strange).

The verses we are studying describe Jesus' own interpretation of the powerful deliverances He had accomplished. These were done by the Spirit of God

and showed the power of the kingdom of God in the person of Christ. In Christ, there is a confrontation with the powers of darkness, and Christ is victor! The Pharisees should have recognized this and committed themselves to Christ, but they were unwilling. Jesus goes on to warn them about blaspheming the Holy Spirit (verse 31) by accusing Christ of being of the Devil.

The key verse, which some claim as support for “binding” Satan through direct verbal assault, is verse 29. In this passage, Jesus uses a metaphor to illustrate His own mission. A strong man controls his own house until a stronger man comes, binds him, and plunders the house. Luke 11:21,22 record the same illustration. Luke does not use the term “bind,” but says the stronger man “...attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away from him all his armor on which he had relied...” (Luke 11:22).

New Testament scholar George E. Ladd gives the following interpretation of Jesus' words: “Satan is a strong man. His palace or house is `this present evil age' (Gal. 1:4), and his `goods' are men and women under his evil influence. However, he has not been left in peace to manage his affairs. A stronger, Jesus, has assailed and overcome him.”⁴ The deliverances in the ministry of Jesus demonstrated Jesus' power to deliver people from the power of Satan. The spoiling of the kingdom of darkness will go on throughout church history, though the final victory is not complete until Christ returns in glory.

“Bind,” as used here in Matthew 12, is metaphorical terminology, not a magic word, the utterance of which will stop the activity of evil spirits. That the Luke account does not even use the word “bind” shows this. “Bind” is incidental to the picture of a strong man's house being plundered. Whether victory is accomplished by binding, overpowering, disarming, etc., is not as consequential as the fact that it is a stronger man who must do it.

The meaning is that Jesus **is** stronger than Satan and that the casting out of evil spirits in His ministry proves that fact. The “goods” that are “plundered” are people, previously held in bondage. This plundering has been going on since the Day of Pentecost. The coming of Jesus and the “binding” of Satan liberates the souls of people who were

all of their lifetime subject to slavery (Hebrews 2:15). How is this accomplished? The Bible does not leave us in the dark. It is not accomplished by people continually shouting “I bind you Satan” into the heavenlies!

Hebrews 2:14,15 declares “Since then the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is the devil; and might deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.”

Victory Through The Cross

The Bible consistently ties the conquest of Satan's kingdom of darkness and the liberation of its subjects to the Incarnation, which leads ultimately to the cross. The stronger man is Jesus, not us. When the author of Hebrews says that it was “through death” that Jesus would render the devil powerless to hold his captives, he can only be referring to the cross where Christ paid for our sins. Colossians 2:13-15 sheds further light on this:

And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him.

The margin of the NASB, as quoted here, has a note indicating that the last “Him” could be “it, i.e., the cross.” This agrees with the original Greek. Christ triumphed over the forces of darkness through the cross. If the “goods” of Matthew 12:29 are people held in bondage, then the “binding” of the strong man that accomplished their release was through the cross.

We can better understand this by contemplating how it was that humanity first came into this bondage. The book of Hebrews describes human bondage as the “fear of death.” We know that death

is the penalty for sin. Satan's first lie, as recorded in Genesis 3, was that Eve could sin and not die as God said she would. When Adam and Eve rebelled against God, sin entered human experience for them and all of their descendants. As Paul declares in Romans, the wages of sin is death. Romans 5:12 explicitly says that sin and death spread to all because of the original sin. We were born sinners by nature, children of wrath (Ephesians 2:3), in bondage to the "strong man." Spiritual death was our present reality, and ultimate death our certain destiny, unless God did something to rescue us! It is no wonder that the passage in Hebrews 2 calls human bondage, "The fear of death."

The way Christ was ultimately to "bind" the strong man and plunder his goods was to die a substitutionary death on the cross, paying the penalty for us. Now liberated by faith from spiritual and eternal death, we walk in victory because of the power of God. Christ's victorious encounters with demons before the cross were demonstrations of His Messianic mission and His power over evil. However, they were not an end in themselves. Had Jesus not gone on to die for our sins, the "houses" (Matthew 12:43-45) that had been "swept" clean would have remained empty, inviting places for evil spirits to return. Those delivered from particular spirits during the public ministry of Jesus were still spiritually dead sinners like everyone else. They were still needing to have the penalty for their sins to be paid, so that if they responded in faith to the gospel, they would be born of the Spirit and their "houses" thus filled. These were delivered from certain demons, but still needed to be transferred as individuals from the house of Satan into the Kingdom of God (Colossians 1:13).

John 12:31,32 also show importance of the cross in the defeat of Satan and the deliverance of people from his domination. These words of Jesus came during the week immediately preceding His crucifixion. He said "Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world shall be cast out. And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself." The next verse tells us explicitly that Jesus was speaking of His death on the cross. The casting out of Satan, and the drawing of men (previously "bound" by the Evil One) to Christ is accomplished through the cross! This confirms our interpretation of Matthew 12:28,29.

The deliverances recorded in the

Gospels were demonstrations of the power of the kingdom of God and the Messianic mission of Christ. The liberated people were freed from certain temporal bondage. Yet, clearly more was necessary. John 7:39 says, "But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified." The reception of the Holy Spirit is the end of spiritual death, which was the universal human bondage. Thus the cross (through which Christ was "glorified") is the key to the "spoiling" of Satan's power and kingdom. The Devil has no power to hold in his house anyone who believes the gospel, because any legal authority to do so is removed.

Notice that the previously quoted Colossians 2 passage speaks of nailing the "certificate of debt" to the cross (verse 14). Satan's ability to keep humans in bondage was not based on his great spiritual power, but on the legal debt we had before God. God cannot lie, and God said that the penalty of sin is death. The "decrees against us" of Colossians 2:14 are the things contained in the Law. The Law of God dictated that we are cursed (Galatians 3:10) and must die. We were spiritually dead (lacking the Holy Spirit) for this very reason. By canceling the certificate of debt through the cross, Christ delivered us from the power of Satan. God is proved true, and Satan a liar. The soul that sins must die; but Christ died for us, that we might be liberated. This was how Christ "bound" the strong man and plundered his house.

This teaching lays the basis for understanding the methods and teachings of the apostles. The New Testament apostles did not teach or practice the binding and loosing theories now taught in many churches. Peter, John, Paul, and the others knew the basis and authority they had to see people liberated from the power of Satan and translated into the household of faith. Paul describes it in 1 Corinthians:

For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside." ...has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ...God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wis-

dom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1:18,-20b,21b,22-24)

Paul was confident that a message that might seem foolish to some, the preaching of the cross, was the means God would use to save those who would believe. This message shows the "power" of God. There is a popular alternative now being taught by many.

The "binding and loosing" theory contends that people will not be saved as long as the "strong man" is still active. Because the Bible does teach that there are "principalities and powers" in the heavenlies, some theorize that certain evil powers rule over certain geographical territories. This may be true, though it is not clearly taught in the Bible. No New Testament passage of Scripture teaches us to identify or seek to manipulate "territorial spirits."

There is the incident in Daniel about "the prince of Persia," but this was only revealed to Daniel **after** the angel Michael had already fought the battle (see Daniel 10:12-13). Daniel did not personally "bind" any principalities in this passage. Daniel was humbling himself and praying to God, not consciously doing "spiritual warfare." Even if there are evil "principalities" over geographical areas, this does not prove that it is our God-given task to bind them verbally. We are now being taught that we must do what God never instructed us to do, and what Christ and His apostles never did. This is unacceptable no matter how many "pop" spiritual warfare books are being sold.

God Reigns Now!

Psalm 47 declares that "God is King over all the Earth" and that "God reigns over the nations" (verses 7,8). Psalm 103:19 says, "The Lord has established His throne in the heavens; And His sovereignty rules over all." The book of Job reveals that Satan needed permission from God to bring calamity upon Job. The principalities and powers (both the good and the bad ones) in the heavenlies are under God's authority. Rebellion and evil spiritual power are real and dangerous, but not outside God's ultimate and final control. If Christians are concerned about these principalities they should appeal to

God who is in final authority over them.

The false teachers described in 2 Peter 2 and Jude took it upon themselves to rail against these and the Word of God rebukes them for it: "...those who indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires and despise authority. Daring, self-willed, they do not tremble when they revile angelic majesties, whereas angels who are greater in might and power do not bring a reviling judgment against them before the Lord" (-2Peter 2:10,11). This warning is repeated in Jude 8,9 where it says that Michael the archangel "... did not dare pronounce against him [the devil] a railing judgment, but said, `The Lord rebuke you."

Today many Christians fearlessly overstep their bounds and go "where angels fear to tread." Emboldened by their over-stated power and authority, they daily do what even Michael dared not do. Satan is not disturbed by these verbal barrages; but God is displeased with such behavior. Those who would use extra-biblical spiritual warfare techniques to place themselves in rulership over principalities and powers in the heavenlies are usurping God's rightful place of authority.

Spiritual warfare teachers have been told about this problem with their practice. The response of some has been, "Yes, but we are higher than the angels. The angels cannot do this but we can." Besides the questionable assertion that **now** we are higher than the angels (see Hebrews 2:6-9), this response ignores the clear teachings of the 2Peter and Jude passages. Jude clearly states that those who "revile angelic majesties" are wrong for doing so and cites Michael as an example. "If Michael did not dare do this, even more should you refrain from such behavior" is the logic of Jude 8-10. It is amazing what modern teachers will do to get away from obeying the Scripture. They are rebelling against God in their zeal to fight Satan.

Victory over Satan and his hosts is achieved through submission to God and His Messiah, Jesus Christ. The terms of Christ's Lordship are clear in the Bible. Only through the obedient embracing of the cross are we His disciples. Those who enter through the door of the sheep (John 10) are true. Those who come to Him, He delivers from the powers of darkness. The Good Shepherd always protects His sheep from those who would rob, kill and destroy (see the Shepherd and sheep allegory of John 10).

Nevertheless, we are told by some that

evangelism will not go on successfully in certain areas until "binding and loosing" is performed by numerous Christians. They teach that spiritual principalities must be identified and bound for even Christians to be delivered from Satan and his evil emissaries. Some teach that if we can get revelations about the **names** of the particular evil spirits ruling the realm with which we are concerned, this is even better (some deem it essential).

The "binding" is accomplished verbally. Preferably, large groups of Christians are to gather frequently and, in unison, shout into the air "I bind you spirit of (whatever) over Minneapolis," etc. There are other nuances to the teachings and practices; but they share the common assumption that Satan must be verbally bound for any progress to be made by the Christian church.

"Star Wars" Theology

There are many problems with these theories, not the least of which is the obvious fact that the New Testament knows nothing of them. I call this "Star Wars theology." Popular spiritual warfare teachers urge us to fly by "revelation" into the heavenly realm and "duke it out" with the forces of darkness there resident. Attempts to do this sometimes become so prevalent that Christians unwittingly are spending more time speaking (although negatively) to Satan and his hosts than to God. The apostles prayed to **God** when they got into trouble. Please consider Acts 4:21-33. The passage is too long to quote in entirety, but it concerns the first major persecution that broke out against the early church.

Peter and John were "threatened" and told they could no longer teach in the name of Jesus. When the saints heard of this, they "immediately bound the spirit of unbelief ruling over the city." **NO!** They "lifted their voices to God with one accord and said, `O Lord, it is Thou who didst make the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them." (Acts 4:24). They quoted Scripture about the sovereignty of God and said a prayer to God! They went on and quoted more Scripture, "Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples devise futile things? The kings of the earth took their stand and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against His Christ." (4:25,26).

They further prayed about the sovereignty of God in verse 28, concerning what was done by wicked men against Jesus, "...to do whatever Thy hand and

Thy purpose predestined to occur." Those who uttered this prayer had a different theology than do many today. They saw the providence of God in the situation they faced, not merely the work of principalities and powers of darkness. They did not utter one word against any power of darkness in the heavenlies. Evidently they had not been to the latest spiritual warfare seminar! What they ask next in their prayer is crucial to understanding the apostolic view of spiritual warfare. They prayed, "And now Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Thy bond-servants may speak Thy word with all confidence, while Thou dost extend Thy hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Thy holy servant Jesus." (Acts 4:29,30).

They prayed to God for the boldness to speak His word! Preaching the gospel authoritatively is exactly what they did, as recorded in the rest of the Book of Acts. God would do signs and wonders as He willed (see Hebrews 2:4). As Paul said, "the Jews ask for signs...but we preach Christ crucified" (1Corinthians 1:22,23). Acts 4:33 tells the results of their prayer, "And with great power the apostles were giving witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all." God's power changes lives morally.

1Corinthians 1:18 - "For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." This truth needs no embellishment with extra-Biblical theories of the "Star Wars" sort. Modern binding and loosing theories are binding and "losing" because they mislead the saints. The time spent verbally "binding" Satan could have been spent praying to God and preaching the gospel.

Next month we will look at Paul's ministry in Ephesus to see how he brought the message of the gospel into this pagan, demonized city. The Holy Spirit has placed much of the historical record of Ephesus and the church founded there in the New Testament. This will allow us to understand spiritual warfare as practiced by the first century apostles.

End Notes

1. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Eerdmans, Vol. II, page 60.
2. Word Pictures in the New Testament, A.T. Robertson, Baker, Vol. 1, page 134.
3. The Gospel of Matthew, William Hendriksen, Baker, page 651.
4. The Presence of the Future, George E. Ladd, Eerdmans, 1974 (1984 edition), page 151.

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