

Binding and Loosing

Related: [The Ground of Gathering](#); [1 Cor. 5:4](#); [Matt. 16:19](#); [Matt. 18:18](#); [Assembly Meetings](#)

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The local assembly has been invested with authority to "bind" or "loose" a person's sin (Matt. 18:18); which means to "retain" or "remit" their sin (John 20:23). Binding and loosing are two administrative actions that are done "*in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ*" and are backed by His authority (1 Cor. 5:4). The authority to "bind" and "loose" with heaven's ratification was given first to Peter (Matt. 16:19), then extended to the local assembly (Matt. 18:18).

“Verily I say to you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on the earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever ye shall loose on the earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Matt. 18:18

To "bind" a person's sin upon them is to associate them with that sin in an official sense. Morally, they were associated with it the moment the sin was committed, but this is a special association of an official character. Paul does this in 1 Cor. 5:4 with the words "being such"; that is, he formally connected that man with his sin. Excommunication of the wicked person follows binding of the sin (v.5). In 1 Cor. 5 we have an example of "binding", and in 2 Cor. 2 we have the "loosing". Once a person has turned from their sin, and their repentance is manifest, the assembly ought to "loose" the sin, or formally disassociate the person from it. The whole assembly, wherever it may be found "*on earth*" is required to acknowledge an administrative action once taken, because it is bound or loosed in heaven. To continue fellowship with a person that is put away is to ignore the action taken, and to rebel against the authority of heaven. The binding or loosing would occur in a solemn meeting for judicial action; "*when ye are gathered together*" (v.4). It is only when the assembly is formally gathered together that the presence and "*power of our Lord Jesus Christ*" is there to give weight to the action.

Translational Note: Is it “bound” or “already bound” in heaven? This argument has come up more than once. In a number of modern translations v.18 is rendered; “Whatever you bind on earth is already bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth is already loosed in heaven” (HSBC). The argument is that the assembly does not actually

influence heaven, but that the assembly is to do their best to act according to what God has already bound. I believe there is sufficient evidence, not only contextually, but grammatically to debunk this assertion.

- **The present participle.** The word “bound” in Matt. 18:18 is the Greek word *dedemena*, and it is the perfect verb participle (grammatical modification of the verb “to bind”). It helps to understand the Greek tenses and participles. There are seven tenses, and I believe three main participles, but maybe more. A verb tense is a grammatical modification of a verb that changes the timing of the action. The *aurist* is a once-for-all completed action (usually in the past). The *present* is an ongoing action. But the *perfect* is a *past action with a continuing result*. A great example of the perfect tense is John 12:46, “*I am come a light into the world*”. The action is in the past (the incarnation), but the effect of that action continued to the present time! Verb participles are a different grammatical modification. A verb participle doesn’t indicate the time-frame of an action, but actually functions more as an adjective to describe something. For example, the verb “race”. The present verb tense is “racing”. “I see a horse *racing*”. It is the action of racing in the present time-frame. But you could also take the present verb participle for a different purpose; “I see a *racing* horse”. Now you are describing the horse; it is a kind of horse used for racing. Hence, *dedemena* (a perfect verb participle) is transliterated “having_been_bound”. It doesn’t refer to the time of the action, but it describes the state brought about by the action.
- **The compound construction.** If you read a literal translation such as Young’s, you will see why other translations (KJV, NKJV, NIV, ESV) translate it as “will *be bound* in heaven”. Young’s gives the following: “Whatever things ye may bind upon the earth shall be having been bound in the heavens”. You may ask, what does “shall be having been bound” mean? It is a complex form that doesn’t make sense in our way of speaking. So if we want to know the timing of the action, we must look at the action itself, not at the adjective. Now, in Matthew 18:18 the present verb *participle* ‘*dedemena*’ is preceded by the future verb tense *estai* (“shall_be_being”). The verb is “be”, and it is in the future tense! “Whatever you bind on earth SHALL BE” (a future action) “HAVING BEEN BOUND” (something with a continuing result) “in heaven”. The *perfect* verb participle is preceded by a *future* verb tense! If the verse read “Whatever things ye may bind upon the earth shall be THINGS having been bound in the heavens”, then the verse would mean we bind *what God has already bound*. But it doesn’t say that. Instead, the preceding verb tense casts the action and the adjective describing it in the future. The construction makes (1) the event in the future, but (2) the result of the event ongoing. You could say “Whatsoever ye shall

bind on the earth shall be bound *and remain bound* in heaven.”

- **Inconsistent translations.** The word *dedemena* most often occurs as a perfect participle, and it is used this way, not so much to emphasize the timing of the *action* of binding, but the *resulting state* of having been bound. Context really determines these questions. To give you one example, look at Acts 24:27, “Felix also willing to lay a favour on the Jews, left Paul bound.” The word here is the same *dedemena* (“having been bound”) and yet clearly the force of its use is *the state* Paul was left in; i.e. as bound. The problem with some of these modern translations is the will of the translators seems to influence their translations. This is seen in Matthew 18:18 (and in Matt. 16:19). I took the World English Bible (WEB) for example. The word *dedemena* (“having been bound”) occurs eighteen times in the New Testament. Sixteen out of those times WEB translates it “bound”. The other two times are Matt. 16:19 and Matt. 18:18. They *ignore* the verb “be” and instead take the participle as a tense and the result is “will have been bound”. Go figure.
- **Motivations.** I don’t mean to vilify those who translate or view it this way. Often it comes from a fear of ecclesiastical evil similar to the Catholic Church. In Protestantism there is a huge push to go away from everything that resembles the Papal system, and that is a good instinct. To many, the idea that heaven will ratify an action taken by the local assembly is a scary concept. We tend to reject the very notion. I can see the bias toward translating it “Whatever you bind on earth is *already* bound in heaven”. However, the Lord is here giving this delegated authority to the assembly as a *special resource* in the time of His absence. Yes, man has a tendency to usurp the Lord’s authority, but our fear of that (it may be a Godly fear) should not lead us to discard or deny what the Lord plainly teaches in Matthew 18.
- **The contextual argument is sufficient.** This grammatical argument is totally aside from the contextual argument. To me, the contextual argument settles it. The Lord is not exhorting the assembly to “try their best” to discern what heaven has bound (although surely they should *never* act without having first consulted the Lord in prayer and having received direction from His Word). The Lord is encouraging the assembly that heaven’s authority will back up their actions. “Shall be bound in heaven” fits perfectly with the context.

I believe this “already been bound” argument is the same one made by the KLCs (or at least some of them). It essentially reduces the responsibility of others, in regard to assembly actions, to merely “*doing that which is right in their own eyes*”. This independency is entirely foreign to New Testament doctrine with regard to assembly actions (see 2 Cor.

2:6,10). Ironically, William Kelly was once asked this very question. He answered *unequivocally* that the construction of the phrase only admits it to be a future “binding” in heaven, with a continuing result. See [extract from Bible Treasury Volume 6](#).