# Binding and loosing

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Matthew 18:15-20.

15 “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. 16 But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18 Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” (NRSV)

## Introduction to *Body Politics*

We are all very aware that we are different from God. This means we do different things.

I want you to imagine some of the things that God does that you don’t do. Can you name some?

Now I want you to imagine some of the things that you do that God doesn’t do. Can you name some?

It’s not surprising when two people do different things. In fact, it’s the normal state of things. How much more is it unsurprising when the Creator of the Universe does different things from us, the creatures.

But what’s surprising and delightful and scary and amazing all at once is when God is doing something, and we are doing it at the very same time. When God and we synchronize, harmonize, act in concert, conspire. This collaboration is a peak experience for us as the creatures of the Creator. So pay attention, because God tells us about some times when we act in concert with him. When we bind and loose. When we take communion. When we baptize. When we use God’s gifts to grow into the fullness of Christ. When we follow the Spirit’s lead as we worship together.

These five practices are what John Howard Yoder describe in his book, *Body Politics*, that our little fellowship is going to read together. Our teaching team will do its best to approach these topics in Sunday worship. I ask and pray that you’ll take this book and do the same, to do the reading in preparation for Sunday teaching time and worship. Because what we are talking about is holy; a sacrament. Because what we are talking about are God’s rules for living together; an ordinance. It’s binding and loosing and bread and wine and water and death and gifts and glory and Spirit and conflict. Let’s wade together into these deep waters and hold one another’s hands; it could be rough going.

## Binding and Loosing

So, to our topic of the day, “binding and loosing.” Hear the words of Jesus as spoken in chapter 18 of Matthew, but also in Matthew 16:

Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

We’ll look at what binding and loosing means in a minute, but look—here is an example of our acting in concert with God. Whatever it means to “bind” or to “loose,” when we do it here on earth, God is doing it in heaven as well. God acts and we act in concert, in harmony. God wants us to do this; it is a rule for the church. Our acting this out is a pointer and a incarnation of God acting this out; it is a sacrament.

But what does it mean?

Yoder reminds us that Jesus is talking as a rabbi here, using rabbi language. The moral law of the Torah was binding on God’s followers, and previously Jesus had said that anyone who loosened those bonds was to be called the least in the kingdom of heaven. This moral law is the context for this text. We should understand that what the binding and loosing are have to do with doing the right thing—and not doing the right thing, and how we respond to people when they fail to do the right thing or do the wrong thing, of faults and failures.

So we have these steps to take.

The first step: “If another member of the church sins ~~against you~~, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.” Let us look at this carefully. First, although I very much appreciate that reasons why the translation says “another member of the church,” the fact is that this reads “If a brother sins….”. We are welcome to, and should, think of this as “another member of the church,” but this membership isn’t viewed in terms of carrying a membership card. This person is family. She’s a sister. He’s a brother. Family relations can be tricky, as we all know. But this word to us from Jesus is for people who see themselves as united, not just by bonds of institutional connection, not even just friendship, but brother, sister, family.

Secondly, I’m not sure why the translation has “against you” here. I think it’s very likely that this was added later by someone trying to rationalize this verse. After all, it makes sense—we should, in fact, especially consider others’ faults especially when they have an effect on us. But I think Jesus is calling us to do even more than that, and to care for one another souls, even if it isn’t to our own benefit (but of course it is to our benefit). So, let’s read this verse again, with these changes and a few others: The first step: “If a brother or sister sins, go and rebuke them when the two of you are alone. If they listen to you, you have gained your brother or sister back.”

Perhaps I’m reading too much into it, but it looks like this to me: You start with a brother or sister, they do something which breaks or threaten the family, but when then listen, you have your brother or sister back. The Greek for brother is used at the beginning *and* the end of this verse: we start in family, and end, we hope with the family restored.

Taking seriously this apostolic witness … gives more authority to the church than does Rome, trusts more to the Holy Spirit than does Pentecostalism, has more respect for the individualism than does liberal humanism, makes more standards more binding than did Puritanism, and is more open to the new situation than what was called “the new morality” a quarter-century ago. If practiced, it would radically restructure the life of churches. (BP, pg 6)