

Grace to You :: esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time

Can Believers Manipulate the Power and Presence of Christ?

Scripture: Matthew 18:18–20

Code: B151002

In the lead-up to the Truth Matters conference in October, we will be focusing our attention on the sufficiency, authority, and clarity of Scripture. Of our previous blog series, none better embodies that emphasis than Frequently Abused Verses. The following entry from that series originally appeared on October 2, 2015. -ed.

Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst. (Matthew 18:18–20)

How often have you heard that passage (or at least part of it) quoted in a church setting?

During my time in the charismatic church, Matthew 18:18–20 was quoted in every prayer meeting and regularly from the pulpit. In fact, I cannot think of any other Scripture passage I heard quoted so frequently without ever hearing a sermon on the passage itself. And yet we would regularly bind demonic forces on earth and loose angelic armies from heaven. And we always reminded ourselves that Jesus was there because at least two or three of us were present.

Our church was far from alone in its dependence on Matthew 18:18–20. In fact, the passage is a favorite of self-appointed experts in spiritual warfare and those who put special emphasis on Christ's presence. The passage has been chopped up and subdivided all sorts of ways in service to a number of doctrinal positions and practical applications.

For example, notorious faith healer and prosperity preacher Benny Hinn emphasizes Matthew 18:18 as a promise of supernatural power and heavenly authority:

Do you realize that movements on earth govern movements in heaven? Do you realize that a child of God in prayer affects decisions in heaven? The Lord declared: "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven (Matthew 18:18). So awesome is this power that it releases angels to do God's bidding on the earth and binds demons as it destroys the purpose of the enemy! [1]Benny Hinn, <https://www.bennyhinn.org/tiyd-video/prayer-that-gets-results-part-1/>

Contrast that with the conclusions of Rick Warren, who offers a far less spectacular interpretation and application of the passage, while employing similar hermeneutical technique in his assessment of verses 19–20:

Many people miss out on so much because they only pray by themselves. Yet, when Jesus gave us an outline for prayer, he spoke about praying together. There is power in group prayer. If you're not

praying with other believers, then you're not getting the support you need. You're missing out on one of the major benefits of being a Christian. Jesus says "whenever two of you on earth agree about anything you pray for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them" (Matthew 18:19-20 TEV). That's the power of praying with other people. [2]Rick Warren, http://rickwarren.org/devotional/english/a-powerful-key-to-prayer_700

Joyce Meyer comes out of the same Word Faith stream as Benny Hinn and also enjoys a huge television following. But her ministry prefers to traffic in practical advice for day-to-day life. She actually deploys Matthew 18:20 in the realm of marriage counsel:

The Bible says that there is power in agreement. . . .

If you want to have power in your marriage and in your prayer life, then you have to get along. The big question is: How can a disagreeing couple learn to agree? Agreement comes when the people involved stop being selfish. Selfishness is an immature inward focus. The key is to care about what the other person needs, be willing to humble yourself, and do what you can to meet those needs.

When this happens, you can live together in agreement before the Lord, and "wherever two or three are gathered" in His name, God is there with them. So make a choice with your spouse today to pursue agreement and unity before the Lord. [3]Joyce Meyer, <https://www.bible.com/reading-plans/199-promises-for-your-everyday-life/day/360>

How can one passage support such disparate meanings? Are any of those interpretations the true meaning of Matthew 18:18–20? Do they skirt around the edges of the author's original intent, or are they missing the point of the passage altogether? Bottom line: Does this passage have anything to do with spiritual warfare, group prayer, or marital unity?

As with previous posts in this series, the first thing we should check is the context of our passage. What do the surrounding verses tell us about the meaning of our text? In this case, the preceding verses are likely just as familiar as the passage in question:

If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. (Matthew 18:15–17)

Just a simple reading of the text makes it clear that the focus is not spiritual warfare, unity in marriage, or empowering your prayer meetings. Instead, verses 15–17 speak exclusively about church discipline.

Therefore, all of Christ's instructions about binding and loosing, unity, and the promise of His presence come in the context of church discipline. In other words, Matthew 18:18–20 means that when church leaders gather together to deal with unrepentant sinners, they have heavenly backing.

In his commentary on this passage, John MacArthur explains how many of the popular interpretations go wrong when they divorce the verses from their context:

Jesus' promises in verses 18 and 19 have suffered serious misinterpretation throughout the history of the church. . . . Many charismatics use these promises—along with others, such as those of Matthew 7:7 and 21:22—to claim from God every imaginable blessing and privilege just for the asking.

But in light of the context of what Jesus had just said, in the light of common rabbinical expressions of that day, and in light of the grammatical construction of the text, it is clear that He was not teaching that God's power can be bent to men's will. He was not saying that men can force heaven to do things. Quite to the contrary, His promise was that when His people bend their wills to His, He will endorse and empower their act of obedience.

Jesus was here continuing His instruction about church discipline. He was not speaking about petitioning God for special blessings or privileges, and even less was He teaching that the church or any of its leaders has power to absolve the sins of its members. He was declaring that the church has a divine mandate to discipline its members when they refuse to repent. [4]John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Matthew 16–23* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1988) 137.

And what about the power to bind and loose in the spiritual realm? John also carefully debunks that misinterpretation:

The rabbis sometimes spoke of a principle or action as being bound in heaven or loosed in heaven to indicate, respectively, that it was forbidden or permitted in light of God's revealed Word. . . . Believers have authority to declare that sins are either forgiven or not forgiven when that declaration is based on the teaching of God's Word. If a person has received Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, the church can tell him with perfect confidence that his sins are loosed, that is, forgiven, because he has met God's condition for forgiveness, namely, trust in His Son. If, on the other hand, a person refuses to receive Christ as Savior and acknowledge Him as Lord, the church can tell him with equal confidence that his sins are bound, that is, not forgiven, because he has not met God's condition for forgiveness. [5] *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Matthew 16–23*, 137.

Matthew 18:15–17 is Christ's explanation of how church discipline is to be practiced. Verses 18–20 expand on His instructions by informing us of the immense heavenly support provided to leaders who maintain the discipline of the church. Here's how John MacArthur describes it:

Jesus also assures His people that He Himself acts with them when they work to purify the church: "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst." Not only does the Father confirm discipline when it is administered according to His Word, but the Son adds His own divine confirmation. . . . To use this statement to claim the Lord's presence at a small worship service or prayer meeting does not fit the context of church discipline and is superfluous. Christ is always present with His people, even with a lone believer totally separated from fellow Christians by prison walls or by hundreds of miles.

The context demands that the two or three are witnesses in the process of discipline. To ask or to do anything in God's name is not to utter His name but to ask and to work according to His divine will and character. For the witnesses to have gathered in His name is therefore for them to have faithfully performed their work of verifying the repentance or impenitence of a sinning brother or sister on the Lord's behalf. When the church gathers in the Lord's name and for His cause and glory, it must be

engaged in self-purifying ministry under His power and authority, and with His heavenly confirmation and partnership. [6] *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Matthew 16–23*, 138.

One could make a case that the church's silence on the issue of biblical discipline (Matthew 18:15-17) has allowed for a cacophony of misinterpretations and misapplications of Matthew 18:18-20. Ripped from their original setting and intent, those verses have been made to serve a variety of false positions and pretexts.

Our interpretation of Scripture has serious practical repercussions. We would all do well to receive Paul's counsel to Timothy: "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15).

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