

SESSION FOUR

Binding and Loosing

Matthew 16:19; 18:15-20; 23:1-3

PART ONE · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim: Participants discover what binding and loosing meant in first-century Judaism, that Israel's own Torah established a living court whose rulings bound the people, that the Twelve share the binding power while Peter alone holds the keys, and that Jesus himself distinguishes a teaching office from the worthiness of the men who hold it.

Catholic Touchstone: The Magisterium. Bishops in communion with Peter's successor teach with Christ's authority, a service to the Word of God, not a lordship over it (CCC 85-87; 880-882): the steward and the officers of the one household.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Binding and loosing was not a mysterious phrase to Jesus' hearers. In the Jewish idiom, well attested in later rabbinic literature and already reflected in first-century usage, to bind was to declare something forbidden and to loose was to declare it permitted: authoritative rulings on conduct and doctrine. The terms also covered discipline, imposing or lifting exclusion from the community. When Jesus hands over binding and loosing, he is conferring recognizable juridical and teaching authority, the kind Israel's teachers claimed, now given to his own appointed officers with heaven's ratification.

The grammar of the two texts is the architecture of the Church. Matthew 16:19 is second person singular: to you, Peter, the keys; whatever you bind. Matthew 18:18 extends binding and loosing to the disciples corporately: whatever you (plural) bind. The household of Session Three has both a steward and officers. The Catholic shape, one pope and the college of bishops with him, is not a medieval accretion; it is the grammar of Matthew (CCC 880-882). Note carefully what is never repeated: the keys. Those are given once, to one man.

Matthew 18:15-18 sets binding and loosing in the context of sin and reconciliation: a brother confronted, witnesses brought, and finally "tell it to the church," with exclusion as the last resort and restoration always the goal. The Church's power is disciplinary and medicinal, exercised at the door of the community: excommunication and absolution are the same key turning two directions. John 20:21-23, where the risen Lord breathes the Spirit and confers forgiving and retaining, is the same authority in its sacramental register.

Deuteronomy 17:8-13 is the sleeper text of the night, and most Catholics have never seen it. The Torah itself commands that hard cases go up to the priests and the judge at the chosen place, and their verdict binds: "you shall be careful to do according to all that they direct you... you shall not turn aside from the verdict that they declare to you, either to the right hand or to the left," on pain of death for presumptuous refusal. Israel was never a religion of text alone; the Torah that Protestants and Catholics both revere itself establishes a living, binding interpretive authority. Let the group discover this cold; it reframes the entire sola scriptura conversation without a single polemical word.

Matthew 23:1-3 supplies the distinction that guards the doctrine from its favorite objection. Jesus tells the crowds that the scribes and Pharisees "sit on Moses' seat; so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach, but do not practice." In one sentence the Lord separates the office from the officeholder: the seat's authority survives the sitter's hypocrisy. Whoever asks tonight about bad popes (someone will) has stumbled onto Jesus' own category, and deserves to hear that Sessions Nine and Twelve take the question head-on.

A small honesty note on 16:19 and 18:18: the Greek future perfect ("shall be bound" or "shall have been bound in heaven") is genuinely debated, whether heaven ratifies the Church's act or the Church declares heaven's prior decision. The Church's doctrine does not hang on the parsing: either way, Christ has promised that heaven stands behind the Church's exercise of the binding and loosing he conferred, a promise the Church herself understands with precision: it guarantees her definitive teaching on faith and morals and her sacramental absolution, not every prudential, disciplinary, or administrative act of the men who hold office. Those remain human acts, reformable and sometimes wrong. Say so plainly if it comes up, and move on.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Deuteronomy 17:8-13. The Torah's own supreme court: hard cases decided by the priests and the judge, verdicts binding under the gravest penalty. God's covenant people were constituted with a living interpretive authority from the start. Tonight's central live discovery.

Numbers 11:16-17, 24-25. God takes some of the spirit that is on Moses and puts it on seventy elders, who share the burden of governing, while Moses remains uniquely Moses. Collegial authority with a personal head is Israel's ancient shape, not the Church's innovation.

Isaiah 22:22. Last week's key: "he shall open, and none shall shut." Opening and shutting, binding and loosing: the steward's irreversible official acts, now distributed through the household.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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St. John Chrysostom *On the Priesthood, Book 3*

Chrysostom stands in awe of the authority Christ lodged in his ministers: God has given to men, he says, an authority he gave neither to angels nor archangels, for what priests do below, God ratifies above, the Master confirming the sentence of his servants. Chrysostom's point is not clerical pride

but trembling: such power exists only as stewardship, and its holders will answer for it.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Augustine *Sermon 295, on the feast of Saints Peter and Paul*

Augustine preaches that what was given to Peter was given for the whole Church: Peter, bearing the figure of the Church's unity, received the keys so that when the Church binds and looses, Christ's promise is at work in her. For Augustine the singular gift and the whole body are not rivals; the one man holds the keys precisely so that the many may be one.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Cyprian of Carthage *Letter 33*

Cyprian grounds the Church's whole ordered structure in the words spoken to Peter: the Lord, establishing the honor of the bishop and the order of his Church, built her upon Peter, and from that founding the ministry of oversight and the authority to govern descend through time. For Cyprian, to attack the order is to attack the founding sentence itself.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 85-87 defines the Magisterium and immediately bounds it: the task of authentic interpretation is entrusted to the living teaching office, which is not superior to the Word of God but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on.

CCC 880-882 gives the two-text architecture in doctrinal form: the college of the Twelve with Peter at its head, and its continuation in the bishops with the pope, who has full, supreme, and universal power as pastor of the whole Church.

CCC 1444-1445 connects binding and loosing to reconciliation: the office of binding and loosing given to Peter and the college includes the authority to absolve sins, to readmit, and to exclude, the words of Matthew 16 and 18 living today in the confessional.

THREAD WATCH

The Office thread develops. Tonight adds the officers to the steward: singular keys, plural binding. The succession question sharpened last week stays parked until Session Ten; if the group reaches for it, praise the instinct and hold the line.

The Failing Steward thread gets its second planting. Moses' seat (Matthew 23:2-3) is Jesus' own office-versus-officeholder distinction. Name it clearly tonight and promise Sessions Nine and Twelve for the full reckoning with Peter's failures and the papacy's worst men.

Both sealed blanks stay closed. The fisherman's new job opens at Session Six, two weeks out. Groups get twitchy at this stage; the discipline is part of the fun.

SESSION GOALS

1.

Define binding and loosing from its first-century Jewish context: forbidding and permitting, excluding and readmitting.

2.

Discover Deuteronomy 17:8-13 cold and let the group articulate its implication: the Torah itself establishes living, binding interpretive authority.

3.

Map the singular-plural grammar of Matthew 16 and 18 onto the household: one steward with keys, many officers who bind and loose.

4.

Receive from Jesus himself, at Moses' seat, the distinction between the office and the worthiness of its holder.

TIME NOTE

75 to 90 minutes. If time runs short, compress Build 7 (Numbers 11) into a leader statement and trim the Dig Deeper. Protect Build 2, the Deuteronomy discovery, and Build 6, the steelman; they carry the night.

PART TWO · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer:

Father, you did not leave your people to guess their way through hard questions. You gave Israel judges, you gave the Church shepherds, and you promised that heaven stands behind the office your Son established. Give us tonight the humility to be taught, and the clarity to see your design. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN · OPENING QUESTIONS

1.

Think of a group you have been part of with no referee, no moderator, no final decision-maker. What happened when a real disagreement hit?

2.

When you have a genuinely hard moral question, where do you actually take it? A friend, a search bar, a priest, your gut? How is that working?

BUILD · INTO THE TEXT

1.

Last week ended with keys; this week asks what the keyholder actually does. Read Matthew 16:19 again. "Bind" and "loose" were technical terms Jesus' hearers already knew. Before I tell you: from the sound of them, what would you guess they mean? Then the leader supplies the first-century sense.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

In the Jewish idiom of the period, reflected richly in later rabbinic literature, to bind is to declare something forbidden, and to loose is to declare it permitted: authoritative rulings on doctrine and conduct. The same pair covered discipline: to bind someone under exclusion, or loose them back into the community.

So the steward's job is not ceremonial. He rules on what the household holds and how it lives, and verse 19's stunner is the ratification clause: what the officer binds on earth, heaven backs. Jesus is creating an authority whose binding rulings, within the competence he gave it, God himself stands behind.

2.

LIVE DISCOVERY. You read Deuteronomy 17:8-13 cold this week. Someone read it aloud now, and everyone else listen for the answer to one question: according to the Torah itself, what was Israel supposed to do when a case was too hard to settle locally?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Go up. Bring the case to the priests and the judge at the place God chooses, and their verdict binds: "you shall be careful to do according to all that they direct you... you shall not turn aside from the verdict that they declare to you, either to the right hand or to the left." Presumptuous refusal carried the death penalty. This is a supreme court, established inside the Torah.

Sit with what that means: the Scriptures themselves establish a living authority to interpret the Scriptures. Israel was never a book-alone religion, by the book's own command. God's pattern for his covenant people has always been text plus living judges, and tonight's texts show Jesus renewing exactly that pattern for the rebuilt assembly.

3.

Now the grammar hunt. Put Matthew 16:19 and Matthew 18:18 side by side and read both aloud. Who is addressed in each? What is given in both, and what is given only once?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Matthew 16 is singular: I will give *you* the keys; whatever *you* bind. One man, just renamed, just made

rock. Matthew 18 is plural: truly I say to *you* (all), whatever *you* (all) bind: the disciples corporately receive binding and loosing.

Both texts, one household: a steward and officers, exactly the Davidic architecture from last week. And note the asymmetry with care, because it is the whole Catholic structure in miniature: binding and loosing is shared; the keys are never repeated, never pluralized, never given again. The Catechism draws precisely this map: the college of the apostles with Peter at its head, continued in the bishops with the pope (CCC 880-882).

4.

Back up and read Matthew 18:15-18 as one unit. What situation is binding and loosing embedded in here, and what does that tell us the power is *for*?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

A brother sins; you go to him alone; then with witnesses; then "tell it to the church," and only then, if he refuses even the church, exclusion. The process is patient, escalating, and aimed at winning the brother back at every step. Binding and loosing here is the community's door: the authority to exclude and to readmit.

The power is medicinal, not punitive for its own sake, and the risen Lord gives it a sacramental register on Easter night: "if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20:23). The same key turns both directions, and the Church still calls the confessional the tribunal of mercy (CCC 1444-1445).

5.

LIVE DISCOVERY. Now for the objection that guards the whole doctrine. Someone find and read Matthew 23:1-3, and listen for something almost shocking: what does Jesus tell the crowds to do about the scribes and Pharisees, and what distinction is he forcing us to make?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

"The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach, but do not practice." Jesus acknowledges a real teaching office in Israel, Moses' seat, and commands respect for its rulings, in the same breath that he condemns the men sitting in it as hypocrites, and then spends the rest of the chapter saying exactly how.

So the distinction between an office and the worthiness of its holder is not a Catholic escape hatch invented to survive the Borgias; it is Jesus' own category, stated in his own voice. The seat's authority can survive the sitter's sins because the authority was never sourced in the sitter's virtue. Hold this verse; when this study reaches Peter's own failures and the papacy's darkest holders, this is the ground we will stand on.

6.

Steelman chain. A thoughtful friend says: "This is exactly what worries me. Give men the power to bind consciences with heaven's backing, and you get inquisitions and abuse. Scripture alone is the only safe authority, because Scripture cannot sin." Give that its full strength first. What is it right about?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

It is right about the wounds: office holders have abused sacred authority, and the victims were real. It is right that conscience is sacred and that no man may simply replace it. And it is right to love Scripture as the standard that judges every teacher; the Catholic Church herself teaches that the Magisterium "is not superior to the Word of God but serves it," teaching only what has been handed on (CCC 86). Concede every word of that with a whole heart. Strengthen the objection further before answering it: the classic Protestant position is not authority-free individualism. Historic sola scriptura affirms real church authority in pastors, councils, creeds, and confessions, but insists that Scripture is the only infallible rule and that every human authority remains fallible and reformable.

Then press gently with tonight's own discoveries. Scripture cannot sin, but Scripture also cannot speak when two sincere readers disagree about what it means. So the real question is not Scripture versus a living authority; serious Christians on both sides affirm both. The question is what kind of living authority Christ established. Deuteronomy 17 attached heaven's own sanction to the court's verdicts; Matthew 16 and 18 promise that what the officers bind on earth is bound in heaven, and Jesus endorsed Moses' seat even under hypocrites (Matthew 23). If every ruling remains provisional and appealable by each reader, that promise means little, and the fragmentation of communions holding the same Bible shows what a merely fallible referee can and cannot settle. The question is not whether such an office is dangerous in human hands; it is whether Christ, knowing that, established it anyway, and promised to stand behind it.

7.

LIVE DISCOVERY. One more Old Testament pattern. Someone find and read Numbers 11:16-17, 24-25. What does God do with the spirit that is on Moses, and what does Moses remain?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

God takes some of the spirit resting on Moses and puts it on seventy elders, who prophesy and share the burden of governing the people. Authority is genuinely distributed; Moses is genuinely relieved. And yet Moses remains uniquely Moses: the seventy extend his government, they do not replace or outvote it.

Collegiality with a personal head is Israel's ancient shape: Moses and the seventy, the king and his steward and officers, and now the rock with the Twelve. When Catholics describe the pope and the bishops, they are not describing a corporate org chart bolted onto the Gospel; they are describing the oldest governing pattern God's people have.

DIG DEEPER · Bound in heaven: who moves first?

The Greek of "shall be bound in heaven" (*estai dedemenon*) is formally a periphrastic future perfect. Scholars genuinely debate its force: does it function like a simple future (heaven will ratify the Church's act), or does it carry true future-perfect force (the Church declares what heaven has already bound)? The doctrine survives either reading: on both, Christ promises that the official acts of the office he created carry heaven's backing, and on both, the office is a servant declaring God's will rather than a

rival inventing it. It is a fine case study in Catholic confidence: the Church's claim never depended on winning every grammatical coin flip.

8.

Assemble the night. Using Deuteronomy's court, Matthew's grammar, and Moses' seat, describe in your own words the authority structure Jesus built, and what it is for.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

One household of God, rebuilt by the Davidic King: a steward with the keys, officers who bind and loose with him, verdicts that heaven stands behind, all in continuity with the pattern God gave Israel from the beginning, judges for hard cases, seventy for the burden, a seat whose authority outlives its sitters.

And its purpose, on every page tonight, is service: hard cases answered so consciences can rest, sinners excluded only to be won back, the deposit guarded so that the household's children inherit it whole. The authority is real because the promises are real; it is safe, in the end, not because its holders are sinless, but because the King who ratifies from heaven never stops being the one in charge.

SEND · TAKING IT WITH US

1.

Where in your life right now are you refusing to bring a hard case "up": carrying a moral question alone that the Church has actually answered, or that a confessor could actually settle?

2.

Jesus commanded respect for Moses' seat while its sitters were hypocrites. Is there an authority in your life, in the Church or out of it, that you have dismissed because of its holders rather than engaging its office?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

1.

Take one hard question you have been carrying and actually look up what the Church teaches, in the Catechism, not a comment section. Bring what you find, and how it landed, next week.

2.

Go to confession this week and notice the binding and loosing happening in real time: the tribunal of mercy is Matthew 16 and 18 still operating.

3.

Keep the daily Our Father for the pope, adding this week: "Lord, give your Church shepherds who practice what they preach."

Closing Prayer:

Lord Jesus, you promised that what your Church binds on earth, heaven stands behind. Thank you for not leaving us alone with our hardest questions. Thank you for judges, elders, shepherds, and a steward. Make the men who hold your offices holy, and make us humble enough to be taught. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Matthew 16:19, RSV2CE)

PART THREE · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in Session Four, in order of use. All references RSV2CE.

PASSAGE WHERE IT IS USED

Main text, Builds 1, 3: keys and singular binding

Matthew 18:15-20

Main text, Builds 3-4: corporate binding, the community's door

Deuteronomy 17:8-13

Live discovery, Build 2: the Torah's binding court

Matthew 23:1-3

Live discovery, Build 5: Moses' seat, office versus officeholder

John 20:21-23

Build 4: forgiving and retaining, the sacramental register

Numbers 11:16-17, 24-25

Live discovery, Build 7: Moses and the seventy

Isaiah 22:22

Callback: the steward's irreversible acts

CCC 85-87; 880-882; 1444-1445

