

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "The Keys: Binding and Loosing" (Colossians 2:18-23, Matthew 16:19)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 4/29/2012

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If you are able as you are listening today, please turn with me in your Bible to the book of Colossians, chapter two. We are continuing our careful consideration of the warning against the tyranny of man-made doctrines that God the Holy Spirit has given us through the pen of the Apostle Paul. That warning begins in verse eighteen. Let me read those verses for you once again – Colossians chapter two, beginning at verse eighteen.

Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the Head [that is, to Jesus Christ], from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God.

Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations — “Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,” which all concern things which perish with the using — according to the commandments and doctrines of men?

These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh. (Colossians 2:18-23)

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A Pattern in Church History – Protestants Not Immune

In our most recent messages on these verses, we have been focusing on the fact that man-made doctrines – doctrines which are, as Paul tells us, merely “the commandments and doctrines of men” and not of God – these counterfeit doctrines are founded upon counterfeit authority.

We have seen that this sin of robbing God of His rightful authority was a problem in the early church, and so that is why Paul has written this warning to the Colossian believers. And we have seen the same pattern throughout church history down to the present time – sinful men seeking to take upon themselves the doctrinal authority that rightly only belongs to God.

We have seen this most vividly in the history of the Roman Catholic church. But as I mentioned to you in an earlier message, Roman Catholicism is not the only place where we find man-made doctrines that are based on counterfeit, man-made authority. We also find this happening in the history of the Protestant church. Protestants have not been immune to this evil tendency.

So before we leave our focus on the evil of counterfeit authority in church history, as we have been looking at it in relation to our passage in Colossians, before we leave this aspect of our study, let me point out for you an example of the same evil tendency from Protestant church history.

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The Anabaptists

Our example comes from a group that church history recognizes as being among the most staunchly Protestant of all the Protestants. That group is the Anabaptists. The Anabaptists trace their spiritual heritage back to one of the great Protestant Reformers of the 1500s in Switzerland, a great Reformer named Ulrich Zwingli.

The Anabaptists took a strong stand against Roman Catholic authority. The Anabaptists believed strongly in the doctrine of justification by faith alone in the person and work of Jesus Christ alone for salvation. The Anabaptists were opposed to infant baptism, and they believed that only those who publicly professed saving faith in Jesus Christ should be baptized.

The name "Anabaptist" comes from a Greek word that literally means "twice baptist". This name reflected the fact that the Anabaptists believed that anyone who had been baptized as an infant under Roman Catholicism needed to be re-baptized after that person was truly saved. They believed this because they rightly understood that Roman Catholic infant baptism was an illegitimate form of baptism, a form of baptism that was based on the falsehood that the church could commence the salvation of children merely by baptizing them with water.

So there were many very good and godly elements in the beginnings of the Anabaptist movement. But soon there were branches of the Anabaptist movement that began to depart from the path of sound doctrine and legitimate authority.

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The Mennonites

One of these groups was the Mennonites. The Mennonites take their name from that of Menno Simons, who was a contemporary of Zwingli in the 1500s. Now, without going into all the details, let me summarize for you the problem that developed among the Mennonites. The problem was that the Mennonites developed a very strict structure of human authority within their congregations. At first the idea of this structure was to keep the church true to the Word of God in the face of severe persecution. But as time went on, these men took upon themselves the authority to develop and impose standards of doctrine that are not to be found in the Word of God.

Now for the sake of time, I need to fast-forward our consideration of the Mennonites from the 1500s and 1600s, when these problems first developed, so that we can look at where these problems have led in the 20th and 21st centuries.

And here is what we find. We find that today the Mennonites are a very diverse and fragmented group in terms of their theology and practices. There are many people today who identify themselves as Mennonites who are really, in most respects, no different from people in the liberal mainline denominations. Counterfeit, man-made authority has led their Mennonite churches in that kind of liberal direction.

But on the other end of the spectrum are a number of Mennonite groups that have remained very much as their forbears were in the 16th and 17th centuries. These are what are known as the Old Order or Conservative Mennonite groups. There are many of them around the United States and around the world.

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Following Men Rather Than God

One of the most telling things about these groups is that so many of them are named for a man who they have submitted to as their source of authority. Now, these names will not be meaningful to you, but let me give you some examples. There is a group called the Holdeman Mennonites, named for a man named John Holdeman who was their first leader. There is another group called the Kauffman Mennonites, named after another man. There is another group called the Stauffer Mennonites, and within that group are sub-groups known as the Bowman-Wissler Group, the Weaver Group, the Aaron Martin Group, the Titus Hoover Group, the Jonas Nolt Group, and so on. You can see the pattern, I am sure.

And each of these groups have distinctive beliefs and regulations, a great many of them not to be found in Scripture, that have been developed by these men. Let me give you some examples. Some of these groups allow people to drive automobiles, while others do not. Some of these groups only permit men and women to wear black shoes and stockings, while other groups allow other colors. Some permit men to wear neckties, while others do not.

Some of these groups insist on closely controlling the finances of the households within their congregations, and even major decisions within the household, while others are less strict in this regard.

And here is the real problem: Many of these Mennonite groups still insist that they believe that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone,

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apart from works. But these groups also insist that your willingness to conform to these man-made doctrines, your willingness to submit to their man-made authority, is a key indicator of whether you are really a Christian or not. They will expel you from the church – they will treat you as an unbeliever – if you do not conform to their man-made authority.

So the bottom line is this: What really matters among these groups is not faith in Christ according to the one true Gospel, but the works of the flesh in conforming to man-made authority. The *de facto* “gospel” of these groups is justification by faith plus works – contrary to Scripture.

Matthew 16 Once Again

Now you may ask, where do these men claim to get their authority to formulate these kinds of doctrines and regulations? What they have done is to fall into the same trap that the Roman Catholics have fallen into, and that is to misinterpret the passage about the foundation of church authority that we find in Matthew chapter sixteen.

Roman Catholicism falsely asserts that Jesus Christ gave church authority into the hands of Peter and a continuing succession of popes, who have the authority to “bind and to loose.” The conservative Mennonites have misinterpreted this same passage, but in a different way. They say that the “binding and loosing” of which Jesus spoke means that the leaders of Mennonite churches have the authority to establish doctrine that forbids or permits – that is, that binds or looses – various kinds of thinking and behavior within their congregations.

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If you are able, please turn with me to Matthew chapter sixteen, verse nineteen. Matthew chapter sixteen, verse nineteen. Jesus says this: "And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

What did Jesus mean by this statement? To whom was he addressing it? It is very important for us to stop and consider this passage, because this is a key passage concerning the definition and limitations of legitimate authority within the church. There have been many false teachings placed upon this verse that clearly do not follow sound principles of Biblical interpretation. And so we need to be very careful. We do not want to fall into the errors of either the Roman Catholics on the one hand, or into the errors of Protestant groups like the conservative Mennonites on the other hand.

We need to look at three things, at a minimum. First, we need to make sure we understand this verse in the original language. Secondly, we need to make sure we understand other passages in the Word of God that speak about the same thing. And thirdly, we need to understand what Jesus said within the setting of the time and place in which He said it.

The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven

So first, let us consider these words in the original language. Several things are notable. First of all, who is the "you" to whom Jesus is speaking? The answer is clear from the context. It is Peter, who has just said, in Matthew sixteen, verse sixteen, "You [Jesus] are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

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And then we need to notice something else. In the original Greek, all of the words that are translated “you” in this verse are singular, not plural. Here in this passage Jesus is speaking to Peter personally. They are having, if you will, a one-on-one conversation. Jesus says, "And I will give you [Peter] the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you [Peter] bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you [Peter] loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

But does this mean that Peter is the only one to whom Jesus gave this authority? Well, this brings us to a second thing that we must always do in order to make sure we truly understand any passage of Scripture. We need to see if there are any other passages in the Word of God that speak about the same point. And in this case we find that there are. There are two places in particular, and in both cases once again the words are directly from the lips of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Turn with me, if you are able, just a page or two over in your Bible to Matthew chapter eighteen. Matthew chapter eighteen, beginning at verse fifteen. Jesus says this:

Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that “by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.”

And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector [in other words, as an unrepentant sinner].

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Here Jesus is talking about the steps that are to be taken in dealing with sin within the church. But notice what Jesus says next, on this subject of dealing with sin within the church. Verse eighteen:

Assuredly, I say to you [notice], whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, [that is, anything having to do with this matter of dealing with sin within the church] it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them. (Matthew 18:15-20)

I want you to notice something very important here. When Jesus says, "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" – in this case the words that are translated "you" are not singular, as they were when Jesus was speaking to Peter, but plural. Who is the "you" whom Jesus is addressing?

We have the answer at the beginning of Matthew chapter eighteen, in verse one. Jesus is addressing all of the disciples. And we understand from parallel passages in Mark and Luke that Jesus was responding to a dispute among the disciples over who would be the greatest. And Jesus says to them clearly, there is to be no "greatest" among you. "He who is the least among you will be great" (Luke 9:48). "If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35).

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Clearly, Jesus is saying that the authority of "binding and loosing" is not given to Peter only. And clearly, because Jesus is giving an instruction not only for the disciples during their lifetime but also for the church throughout time, this authority of "binding and loosing" did not end with the original disciples. It extends to the church as a body throughout time.

This brings us to another question about the passage in Matthew 16 and also about this passage in Matthew 18: What exactly is this authority of "binding and loosing"? Let me take you to another related passage that leads us to the answer – John chapter twenty, beginning at verse twenty-one. John chapter twenty, verse twenty-one:

So Jesus said to them again [to the disciples] "Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20:21-23).

Let me now bring in the third thing that we must always do in order to be sure we properly interpret any passage of Scripture: We need to understand, if possible, the meaning of the words that were used within the context of the time and place in which they were written. The idea of having "the power of the keys" in those times meant the authority to admit or to bar someone from a certain building or place. Of what place was Jesus speaking? He says, Matthew 16:19, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven."

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What is the kingdom of heaven? The kingdom of heaven is the body of Christ. The kingdom of heaven is the number of those who are born again. Jesus said, John chapter three verse three, "Unless a man is born again, he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven." The kingdom of heaven is the true Church of Jesus Christ, under the headship of Jesus Christ.

And so Jesus is saying – to His disciples then and to the members of the true Church today – I give you the authority to bar an individual from the church who is living in unrepented sin, and I give you the authority to re-admit that individual to the local body if he truly repents.

This is what Jesus means by "binding and loosing." He means just what He says in John chapter twenty – "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Literally, Jesus is saying, "their sins continue to have a hold upon them."

Let me take you to another passage that completes the explanation by giving us an application of the principle. Turn with me, if you are able, to First Corinthians chapter five, verse one. First Corinthians chapter five, verse one. Paul writes to the Corinthian church:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles — that a man has his father's wife!

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Then notice what Paul prescribes as the course of action in this terrible situation.

Verse five:

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

Put this person, Paul says, out of the church. Bar the door to him. Such a person must repent, if he is to enter the kingdom of heaven. So let his sin be retained – let it continue to have its hold upon him – unless and until you recognize that he has repented.

But notice, dear friends, that the basis for this expulsion is not the counterfeit authority that is exercised by Roman Catholicism or by groups like the Mennonites. This is a church decision, a church action. Not the action of a pope. Not the action of a church leadership alone. And we do not put someone out of the church because he has violated the commandments and doctrines of men. We put someone out of the church because he has violated the commandments and doctrines of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And it is those who are born from above, those who have received the Holy Spirit, who have the authority to do this legitimate kind of binding and loosing. It is those who are holding onto the Head, the Lord Jesus Christ, "from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God."

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