Main Question:

When Jesus said in John 20:22–23, *“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld”* , does that mean Christians—or church leaders—have the authority to forgive or retain sins whenever they want?

---

1. What Did Jesus Mean?

At face value, this statement could be misunderstood to mean that ordinary people—or church leaders—have personal authority to forgive or withhold forgiveness as they see fit. But that’s not what Jesus was teaching. The context is crucial.

Immediately before He spoke those words, John 20:22 says:

> “And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”

Jesus was commissioning His disciples for Gospel ministry. The

power to forgive sins was not being handed over to them as individuals, but through the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in the proclamation of the Gospel.

---

2. Only God Can Forgive Sin

Throughout Scripture, it’s made clear that only God can forgive sin. This is central to biblical theology.

Luke 5:21

> “Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

In the next verses (Luke 5:22–24), Jesus healed a paralyzed man to demonstrate that He had divine authority to forgive sins:

> “But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins…” *(v. 24)*

So, forgiveness of sins is God’s prerogative alone. But now, through Christ’s finished work on the cross and the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Church becomes the means through which that forgiveness is proclaimed and affirmed.

---

3. The Role of the Apostles and the Church

When Jesus gave this charge in John 20, He was commissioning the apostles to go out and preach the Gospel. Those who believed their message and repented would receive forgiveness. Those who rejected it would remain in their sin.

This pattern is seen again in Matthew 10:13–15

> “If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you… Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.”

Rejecting the Gospel is the same as rejecting the One who sends it—Christ Himself (cf. Luke 10:16). Therefore, the apostles were

not forgiving sin by their own power, but were announcing God’s forgiveness based on a person’s response to the Gospel message.

---

4. Authority Within the Church

The authority Jesus gave the apostles is continued in the Church—not as an absolute personal power, but through the faithful proclamation of the Gospel and the exercise of church discipline.

a) Forgiveness Through Prayer and Restoration

James 5:14–15

> “Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church... And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.”

This shows that intercession by the Church—especially through its leaders—is a God-ordained means by which forgiveness is experienced in the life of a believer.

b) Church Discipline for the Unrepentant

Jesus also taught that persistent unrepentance may lead the Church to treat someone as outside the faith.

Matthew 18:17–18

> “If he refuses to listen... let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

This “binding and loosing” language refers to the Church’s authority to act as a steward of God’s Kingdom—affirming who is in right standing with God, based on clear teaching and spiritual discernment.

The words of Jesus in John 20:22–23 do not give believers unlimited personal authority to forgive sins. Rather, they affirm that the Church, filled with the Holy Spirit, acts as God’s representative in declaring forgiveness to those who repent and

trust in Christ—and judgment on those who reject Him.

So yes, the authority to “forgive or retain” sins exists—but it is always grounded in the Gospel, guided by the Holy Spirit, and practiced within the community of believers, never as personal or arbitrary power.

May the Lord bless you with understanding and obedience to His truth.

JIUNGE NA GROUP LETU LA WHATSAPP HAPA >> WHATSAPP GROUP….

Share on:
WhatsApp