



Forgive, and you shall be forgiven

Often little words have a range of meanings. Consider "as". Sometimes it describes a matter of quantity or extent, as in "*As much as you can eat*". Sometimes it means a way of doing something or behaving as in "*Do as I say, not as I do*". Sometimes it gives a reason

to do something "*You should wash up today, as I did it yesterday*", where it means something like "because". Or it can refer to things happening at the same time: "*As I was going up the stair, I met a man who wasn't there*".

We regularly pray "*Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us*". So what do we make of "as" here? Arguably, there is a reasonable interpretation for any of the above four senses. We might think that how much we are forgiven depends on how much we forgive, so that those who forgive much are forgiven much, and those who forgive little are forgiven little. Or we could think that it describes the manner in which we forgive and are forgiven; if we forgive freely, we shall be forgiven freely, whereas if we forgive grudgingly we will be grudgingly forgiven. Or we might suppose that our forgiveness earns us a right to be forgiven, that those who forgive deserve forgiveness and those who do not, do not. Finally we could think it was there to emphasise the reciprocity of forgiveness, that forgiving and being forgiven are essentially the same, two sides of the same coin. In a sense all our interpretations seem to be true, so which should we choose?

We should not forget that we are already a forgiven people: God's forgiveness is assured to us through the life and death of Jesus. We do need to claim that forgiveness, through repentance and confession. But we also need to respond to that forgiveness, and the proper response to being forgiven is to forgive. Our membership of the kingdom of heaven is shown in our love – and forgiveness – of others.

We don't need to choose one meaning: all apply and can be borne in mind: we should forgive all, forgive freely, and forgive mutually, so that we can claim the gift of God's forgiveness.