

Forgiveness: Following Jesus into Radical Loving

reviewed by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [September 8, 2009](#) issue

In Review



Forgiveness: Following Jesus into Radical Loving

Paula Huston

Paraclete

Paula Huston is a straightforward and gentle teacher of the spiritual life. In *Forgiveness: Following Jesus into Radical Loving*, she combines practical counsel, easy-to-read prose and absorbing storytelling to offer a challenging account of forgiveness rooted in the Christian gospel.

But if you're thinking about buying this book for all of your friends, parishioners and family members who you think need to pay a little extra attention to the issue of forgiveness, I advise you to read it first. The welcoming simplicity of the book, with its bright yellow cover and sparkling, clear prose, conceals the fact that it contains hard teaching. This is not a pious, sentimental discussion of forgiveness. Nor is it an account of personal forgiveness only. It expands to consider culture, society, theology and justice. Perhaps most difficult of all, the book requires and models rigorous self-examination.

The portrait of forgiveness that Huston paints is paradoxical. On the one hand, forgiveness is falling all around us, like rain, at every moment. We hardly move or speak, act or enter into a relationship without the need to extend or receive forgiveness. And yet, despite its closeness to us, we usually miss it. We berate ourselves or blame others, ignoring the free-flowing grace extended to us.

To understand how to live into forgiveness, we must enter a process of discipline that is none other than the spiritual life itself. Huston tells us that we must first determine what role our ego is playing in our desire to forgive. Is our desire to extend forgiveness merely an extension of our desire to be right? Huston turns to the Desert Fathers and Mothers for practices to help us discern whether gluttony, sloth, lust, greed or pride is sneaking up on us. For example, through silence and prayer we can become better attuned to each anxious or fearful thought. Then we can gain the habit of interceding with prayer. Traditionally, that prayer is from Psalm 68, "Lord, make haste to help me." By substituting prayer at the moment of the sinful thought, we apprehend the thought and change our patterns of thinking.

Huston also recommends instituting a discipline that is the opposite of the sin you are confronting. The example she offers from her own experience is that of counteracting the sin of gossip with the practice of intentional silence. We must confront sin, Huston says, because it may be clouding our vision, preventing us from understanding what precisely needs to be forgiven. "Asceticism"—or self-discipline—"is really about getting to know the self," Huston writes. Once we are aware of our own

weaknesses, we might be able to see what in another person or ourselves we need to forgive.

Huston addresses three specific locations where practices of forgiveness might be enacted: with our parents, in marriage and in community. This section of the book is rich in stories, but I found it difficult to apply the concepts directly. While “letting go of anger” and “waiting patiently” are undoubtedly beneficial, can they apply in every situation? And how does one go about letting go of anger? The steps toward forgiveness that Huston offers are potentially beneficial, but they are also superficial.

While the focus of this book is rightly on removing the log from one’s own eye, I wondered about those who aren’t ready for the spiritual disciplines that Huston prescribes. I got an inkling of this at a church supper when I mentioned the beneficial challenge this book was to me. One woman said, “So basically she is saying it is your fault after all?” Instead of finding Huston’s message powerfully liberating, people who are already burdened by shame may find in it a reason to build the wall between themselves and others even higher.

Huston is concerned that we allow sin to grow in ourselves when we desperately try to avoid shame. She sees shame as a good indication that we are not paying sufficient attention to our sin. But many of the people around me are steeped in shame. Shame, not grace, is the water in which they swim.

Whether in a troubled marriage or a troubled community, the moment when forgiveness happens is clothed in mystery. When Huston calls her ex-husband, whom she betrayed as a young woman, to ask his forgiveness, she finds that he had already forgiven her long ago. Even with self-examination and good discipline, the ability to let go of old hurts, to forgive and to accept forgiveness, is a gift, not a work. The best we can do is prepare ourselves to recognize it.

This book might be most productively read in a discipleship group or with a spiritual director. Readers will naturally connect their own stories to Huston’s, and with the help of others around them, they will be able to apply the message in ways that will help rather than hurt. But no matter how this book is read, it demands a response. Huston makes us understand that nothing is more fundamental to our religious tradition than forgiveness.