



Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace

Miroslav Volf

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We are at our human best when we give and forgive.

But we live in a world in which it makes little sense to do either one.

In our increasingly graceless culture, where can we find the motivation to give? And how do we learn to forgive when forgiving seems counterintuitive or even futile? A deeply personal yet profoundly thoughtful book, *Free of Charge* explores these questions -- and the further questions to which they give rise -- in light of God's generosity and Christ's sacrifice for us.

Miroslav Volf draws from popular culture as well as from a wealth of literary and theological sources, weaving his rich reflections around the sturdy frame of Paul's vision of God's grace and Martin Luther's interpretation of that vision. Blending the best of theology and spirituality, he encourages us to echo in our own lives God's generous giving and forgiving.

A fresh examination of two practices at the heart of the Christian faith -- giving and forgiving -- the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lenten study book for 2006 is at the same time an introduction to Christianity. Even more, it is a compelling invitation to Christian faith as a way of life.

'Miroslav Volf, one of the most celebrated theologians of our day, offers us a unique interweaving of intense reflection, vivid and painfully personal stories and sheer celebration of the giving God ... I cannot remember having read a better account of what it means to say that Jesus suffered for us in our place.'

-- Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury

Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace Details

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Lindsey says

When thinking about grace and forgiveness of others, Volf really focuses on the forgiver, not the person to be forgiven. This book is engaging, and it includes many relevant stories from Volf's life to illustrate how forgiveness can be found, even in the worst of circumstances. He also includes a postlude that answers some of the more significant arguments against the claims made in his book, as a true apologist would. His writing is accessible to all, not just philosophers or those in the world of theology or apologetics.

Kipi says

I do love to read, and I love to pass along my love of books, but there are very few books that I wholeheartedly recommend. Miraslov Volf's *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* is one I would not only recommend, I would encourage every person who believes in God to read.

Volf is a professor of theology at Yale Divinity School, but this is not an intimidating read. Each of the two sections, giving and forgiving, begins with discussing how God does each. He reminds us that God is neither a negotiator nor a Santa Claus. God gives because that is His nature, and He delights in giving *to* us so that He can also give *through* us. He uses the visual of God pouring gifts out to us and makes the point that the flow of giving was never intended to stop there...it should flow through us and on to those around us, who in turn give to those around them, and all of it flows around and then back to us to begin again. He often refers to the necessity of living within a giving community of givers (the body of Christ), not only so that we encourage one another in the grace of giving but so that we pour those gifts onto others outside the body so that they, too, will come to know God through us. This picture is one that has me captivated. Certainly it is of the ideal...the one that God intended and not the one that we as sinful humans are able to create perfectly...but the ideal is the goal.

The second half of the book deals with forgiving, and for me there were ideas here that might be called transforming. I was especially impressed with his discussion of the relationship between forgiving and repentance. Does forgiveness precede repentance? I had never considered it, but his reasoning seems sound.

I can not recommend this book highly enough. It is not expensive and not so "theological" that those of us without a degree in theology can't understand it.

Justin says

I'm confused by my own response to this one. For stretches, I found it quite dull. Then I'd be really into it for a bit. In both cases, I was highlighting more than the typical number of passages. When it was insightful, it was really so, but it wasn't an exciting read, despite being smart and often challenging.

The first half of the book, on giving, is a nice bit of Christian philosophy on giving and the gift. It both swats away the work of thinkers like Derrida and Caputo with a quick stroke and also spends considerable time

developing its own idea. Some of this could have been more fleshed out to be convincing -- the ideas on Adam and Eve and Cain were novel but felt reductive.

The second half builds on that thought to consider a lifestyle of forgiveness. The heart here is wonderful and it reads better (for the most part) than the second half, even if I couldn't stay settled into it.

Kathy says

3.5

Amazing insight, stories, and richness but got long winded and found myself skimming some.

Adam Gossman says

Wow

Andrew says

this review first appeared on [<http://intraspace.blogspot.com>]

this is a book that i randomly picked up after anna brought it home from the library. looked pretty interesting and was the archbishop of canterbury's official lent 2006 book - who could resist?...

miroslav volf is apparently a fairly well-known theologian who teaches at yale. this book covers the twin themes of giving and forgiving. the thing that struck me most in the book was volf's description of the common ways that people view God. with regard to giving, people often see God as either a negotiator or santa claus. ie, they either see God as someone you can strike a deal with in order to get what you want, or they see him as someone who just gives stuff willy-nilly. with regard to forgiving, people tend to see God as either an implacable judge, or as a doting grandparent.

that's a pretty good observation i think, and volf goes on to explain what the true God is really like. bearing in mind that this is a book by a theologian, it is quite long-winded and volf likes to answer any question that might arise. but apart from the rigor of that for the casual reader, there is a lot of stuff to pick up on, and it is nicely carried by examples and illustrations, so is not too difficult to read.

here's a good quote summing up the point of book, and the argument that volf makes for a God that defies most people's perception of him:

"You can sum up where we've landed in four simple sentences. The world is sinful. That's why God doesn't affirm it indiscriminately [like santa claus or a doting grandparent]. God loves the world. That's why God doesn't punish it in justice [like a negotiator or implacable judge]. What does God do with this double bind? God forgives."

Darcy says

Simply put: this is an amazing work. While I may still consider *Exclusion and Embrace* his most important work, Volf's writing on forgiveness and giving is his most accessible and, from a pastoral perspective, critical. One will find much here that is helpful and that will provoke deep thought--and perhaps some life-change. I have referred the book to many and think it will be one of those books I have a hard time keeping on my shelf as I have already replaced it once!

So if you are wrestling with what it means to truly forgive or be forgiven, there really is no other book I could recommend more. I additionally recommend: start at the beginning. There is a reason he discusses giving before forgiving.

Jeff Borgman says

Theological yet accessible, Volf enters into the life and response of the Christian life in light of God's giving and forgiving character. This book is rich with context, content, and story to illustrate a life that can be beautifully lived. Volf describes the book as a spiritual journey that exercises his theology. I would agree and highly recommend.

Peter says

One of the best books I've ever read - deeply thought out and told in a personal voice all at once.

Melanie says

Aan het begin vorderde ik heel langzaam in dit boek. Miroslav Volf bouwt zijn betoog langzaam, zorgvuldig en in kleine stapjes op. Iets té langzaam naar mijn zin. Ik vond het boek saai en ik had het idee dat ik weinig nieuws leerde.

Maar nadat het thema van 'Giving' overging naar 'Forgiving' begon het boek me meer te boeien. En hoe verder ik las, hoe interessanter het werd. Ik ontdekte dat de kleine stapjes die hij in het begin van zijn boek zette, zijn uiteindelijke betoog over vergeving dieper en sterker maakte.

Volf gaf me een andere blik op vergeven. Hij haalde het 'softe' randje er af dat ik ergens in mijn hoofd nog had en maakte vergeving realistischer. Bijvoorbeeld door koppeling te laten zien tussen vergeving en oordeel én ook door niet alleen naar de kant van het slachtoffer te kijken, maar ook naar de kant van de dader. Hij beschreef vergeving ook zo mooi dat je gewoon bijna zin kreeg om te vergeven of zo (al laat hij ook juist zien hoe moeilijk het is): 'Het kwade verslaan door het goede!'

Toen ik het boek een laatste keer dichtsloeg was het boek gestegen van saai naar super-interessant. Knap! 4 sterren.

Lood says

His approach to the subject is very personal. He argues that in giving and forgiving we have to follow God's lead. We forgive because God forgives, we forgive without preconditions, because God does. Many of his ideas are personally challenging, and require a lot more introspection and study. A stunning book in my opinion.

Emily Isbell says

I highly recommend this book- theology applied to giving and forgiving, thoughtful, spiritual, and real, and written from the voice of Eastern influenced Christianity.

Rocky Woolery says

Very honest appraisal of the human character as well as the practices of giving and forgiving. Very good thoughts on the reasons to give and forgive, mainly as a reflection of God as a giver.

E. says

Volf's Exclusion and Embrace is one of the best books on forgiveness. But it is a deeply theological and philosophical book (with a section on Hegel, for instance) meaning it is unlikely to be read by the average lay person.

This volume is accessible and not an academic book at all. While also updating Volf's deep thinking about the topic.

Volf is from the Balkans and so his ideas have been refined in the crucible of political oppression, civil war, and genocide. And yet he takes seriously the Christian commitment to nonviolence, peacemaking, and forgiving. Even forgiving when you have been the victim of horrific violence and abuse.

I am about to preach a series on forgiveness, so it was good to refresh myself with this good book, one that I will also recommend to congregants grappling with this most essential of practices.

David says

Miroslav Volf is one of my favorite writers. His book Exclusion and Embrace might be in my top ten reads of all time, and his work comparing Christian and Muslim understandings of God (Allah: A Christian Response) is fantastic. So I came to this book expecting a lot and I won't say it disappointed, but it was different than what I expected.

Exclusion and Embrace was a heavy theological work that cut to the heart of Christian faith, with brilliant

insights into Jesus' death and how we ought to live in response to it. I think Free of Charge almost works as a popular level version of Exclusion and Embrace. Here Volf offers extended reflections on giving and forgiving. God is the ultimate giver and forgiver and we do these actions in imitation of God. More, we do these actions because God is working through us. Free of Charge is by no means simplistic, but I definitely think it would be an easier read than Exclusion and Embrace for people who want an entry into Volf's work.

It is one of those books where nothing really jumped out at me, yet nearly everything was insightful. Sometimes I read a book and am wowed, the experience of reading grabs me. At times I struggled to continue reading this book. Yet often those books that wow me disappear into oblivion, I see them years later sitting on my shelf and I smile as I remember our time together. Books like Free of Charge are ones that did not wow me, but when I am working on a sermon or Bible study I suspect I will pull off the shelf and reference frequently.

Maybe that is the best thing I can say about this book - it is nothing fancy, but it is a solid work. I suspect any reader interested in Christian theology will appreciate Volf's reflections on giving and forgiving.
