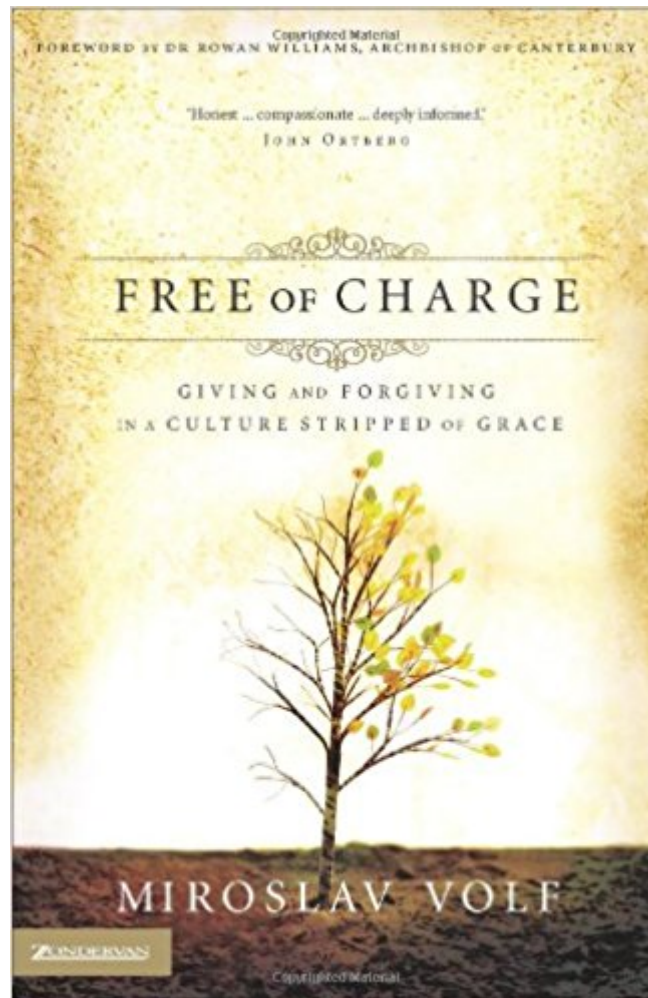




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# **Free Of Charge: Giving And Forgiving In A Culture Stripped Of Grace**



## Synopsis

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

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## Customer Reviews

Arguing that Christians are called to imitate God's generosity, Volf, a theology professor at Yale Divinity School and Director of the Yale Center for Faith & Culture, explores what that looks like in the area of giving and forgiving. Volf relies heavily on Martin Luther's writings in this accessible book that demonstrates how to build "a bridge from self-centeredness to generosity." The first half of the book, on giving, and the second half, on forgiveness, are divided by a short interlude that tries to connect the two parts. While there is a relationship between the two, this book might have been more successful as two separate volumes. Nonetheless, Volf's thinking and writing are lucid and instructive. He eschews pop psychology, relying instead on biblical, ethical and theological understandings of God's generosity. Volf never shies away from the difficult personal and communal issues that giving and forgiving pose; the result is a practical and hopeful resource for those struggling to understand their responsibilities in these areas. Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote the foreword. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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

In Short This is a book that many readers will enjoy "living with." Volf's stated purpose for the book is to encapsulate the whole of Christian living within two axiomatic concepts. In other words, what

does Christianity really look like when it is lived in a contemporary life? In *Free of Charge*, Volf's answer follows two principles - one that flows from the nature of who God is and, by way of extension, another that reveals the heart of the Gospel. According to Volf, the Christian life can be summarized by participating with God in giving and forgiving. Because God's nature is so bound up in his ability to give purely, forgiveness becomes the backdrop of all of his interactions with a creation marred by sin. If we truly follow, then our lives must mirror such giving and forgiving. As such, the book serves as a wonderful devotional tool. While it is deeply theological, it is admirably accessible. He does not drown the text in technical writing or lofty language. I have many friends that started reading this book a long time ago. Often, in eager anticipation of their thoughts on the book, I'll ask how it is going. They always reply, "It is so good, but I can only get so far before I have to put it down and reflect on it." In this sense, this book is not only a wonderful resource for those that want to practice generosity or forgiveness, but it might just be the kind of reading experience that drives self-reflection in order to help those who struggle with selfish ambition or unforgiving hearts break those chains of bondage.

At Length

In Volf's own words, the book does four things. First, it is an examination of whether the landscape of Christian perspective can appropriately be viewed through the lens of giving and forgiving. Honestly, while some will have no issue with such a conceptualization, I think there will be many others that will not be able to fit all of their theological identity under both of these concepts - especially, not the way that Volf visualizes forgiving. Second, the book is an interpretation of Paul's theology. This, however, is likely to be a perspective that is widely accessible and acceptable. He confesses that he has not taken any scholarly stance, referencing the recent fighting going on over Pauline discourse (think N.T. Wright and John Piper). It turns out, that this kind of spiritual rumination over Paul may be much needed medicine for the soul. Honestly, though, I'd be surprised if those unfamiliar with theological discourse are not quite able to appreciate the nuanced way that Volf interacts with the primary source. Third, we get a glimpse into Volf's academic work on Martin Luther. At every turn in the book, he interacts with Luther on important points of Protestant theology; namely, Luther's time honored perspectives on grace and faith are explained in the context of practical Christian living. I don't want to spoil any of the content, but much of Volf's interaction with Luther has the same freshness that his atypical approach to Pauline theology has. The book is a beautiful demonstration of how deeply careful theological inquiry can impact our every day lives. Finally, the book was selected by the Archbishop of Canterbury to be used as the church's official Lenten reflection in 2006. The spiritual formation facet of the book is perhaps best attested to by the fact that I have seen several friends carrying this book around with their Bibles for weeks on end. The book deals with not only the deep things of faith, but

also the deep things of life - which, ironically, are not concomitant in Christian writing often enough. In my estimation, the greatest value of this book is the practical advice it provides on giving and forgiving as spiritual disciplines within the Christian life. I have not seen many other books with a straightforward process for giving and forgiving. Volf provides clearly defined and well thought out processes for each. Consequently, the careful reader can come away with a list of things detailing what pure giving and true forgiveness really look like, as well as a process for disciplining oneself into becoming that kind of pure giver and true forgiver. I must also confess, though, that there are stories in this book, the stories of real people and real hurt, that tore at my heart. It is, at times, difficult to read, especially if you tend to put yourself in the place of the people in the stories you read. Not once do you read Volf using a petty or trite situation as an affirmation of his points. The issues he deals with are the real issues of humanity, the gut-wrenching issues - and he interacts with them in courage and a true sense of compassion. There is no "feel good" theology going on here. Perhaps the greatest praise I can give any book, I can give *Free of Charge* without qualification. I will come back to this book again. It is worth reading over and over.

There are very few books that I whole-heartedly recommend, but 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 people of all faiths and even those without 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. 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.

Like a lot of people - I've struggled with real forgiveness and not having damaging resentments in my life. There is a lot of material out there - but it lacks. I've touched and tasted a potpourri of books that attempted to deal with forgiveness in a practical and Christian way - but they make no sense. And I see the result of this material in the void of the lives of my fellow travelers around me. People say they "forgive" - but most either error too much on the side of no accountability or on the other side of saying "I forgive" but still carrying the judgement and resentment toward the perpetrator in their individual lives. Volk covers this in his 2 images of God - the Judge or the Santa Clause. This was an excellent book - and I was in the right place to receive what he was talking about. It gave me a much needed balance on God, His view of man & womankind and of what Sin really is. This alone was truly transforming in the way I now look at the most important people in my life as well as the folks I work and exist around. Secondly, the aspects of forgiveness are workable and are working in a real way for me. First, this book by Volk helped me deal with the loss that impacts our ability to forgive and trusting Christ with the loss that usually keeps us from forgiving. Secondly, learning to see the whole person and not just the last event that carries the weight of hurt & loss with it - was vital to getting perspective on my hurts and my ability to love beyond what I was currently capable of. This is the only current book I recommend on forgiveness - and I recommend it to you. When I relate some of these principles to others - it always seems to provoke a new way of thinking or comments from them. A real life changing book for me, my relationship to God and to others.

I never miss reading a book or hearing a lecture given by Professor Miroslav Volf. My only regret is that I graduated too early from Yale -- years before Professor Volf graced the campus with his insight, kindness and concern for all humanity. I pray he continues to write, speak and openly engage us with the kind of candor rooted in the deep concern that shuns the silence within us and calls us to reclaim the voice (within all of us) which must be heard.

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