

**ZONDERVAN™**

*Free of Charge*

Copyright © 2005 by Miroslav Volf

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

---

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Volf, Miroslav

Free of Charge : giving and forgiving in a culture stripped of grace : the Archbishop's official 2006 Lent book / Miroslav Volf.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-10: 0-310-26574-6

ISBN-13: 978-0-310-26574-0

1. Generosity—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Forgiveness—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Title: Archbishop's official 2006 Lent book. II. Title.

BV4647.G45V65 2006

241'.4—dc22

{B}

2001017679

---

Miroslav Volf asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The website addresses recommended throughout this book are offered as a resource to you. These websites are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement on the part of Zondervan, nor do we vouch for their content for the life of this book.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

*Interior design by Michelle Espinoza*

*Printed in the United Kingdom*

---

05 06 07 08 09 10 11 • 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# CONTENTS

<i>Foreword by Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury</i>	9
<b>Prelude: The Rose</b>	11
1. God the Giver	19
2. How Should We Give?	55
3. How Can We Give?	89
<b>Interlude: Daniel's Death</b>	121
4. God the Forgiver	127
5. How Should We Forgive?	157
6. How Can We Forgive?	193
<b>Postlude: A Conversation with a Skeptic</b>	225
<i>Afterword</i>	235
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	237
<i>Endnotes</i>	241



---

# GOD THE GIVER

---



In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky tells a story about an old peasant woman, very wicked, who died without leaving a single good deed behind. All she did, she did for herself alone, illicitly taking what she could take and acquiring by legitimate means what she could acquire, but not giving anything to anyone, nothing useful or beautiful, no helpful deeds, not even a kind look. After she died, the devil seized her and plunged her into the lake of fire. The story continues,

So her guardian angel stood and wondered what good deed of hers he could remember to tell to God; “She once pulled up an onion in her garden,” said he, “and gave it to a beggar woman.” And God answered: “You take that onion then, hold it out to her in the lake, and let her take hold and be pulled out. And if you can pull her out of the lake, let her come to Paradise, but if the onion breaks, then the woman must stay where she is.” The angel ran to the woman and held out the onion to her. “Come,” said he, “catch hold and I’ll pull you out.” He began cautiously pulling her out. He had just pulled her right out, when the other sinners in the lake, seeing how she was being drawn out, began catching hold of her so as to be pulled out with her. But she was a very wicked woman and she began kicking them. “I’m to be pulled out, not you.

It's my onion, not yours." As soon as she said that, the onion broke. And the woman fell into the lake and she is burning there to this day. So the angel wept and went away.<sup>1</sup>

Some may read this story naïvely, as a recipe for how to get into paradise with minimal effort. If you do just a single good deed, God will pull you on the slender thread of that generosity out of the lake of fire. But the deed must be good, given to others in true generosity. If you do it just for yourself, just to get you out of hell, the thread will break, and you'll end up licked by flames for eternity.

If this wonderful story were a recipe for getting into paradise, it would be a bad one. True, it would get one thing right. God, here personified in the guardian angel, is immensely good even to the wicked. God seeks to save them and weeps when they are desperately stuck in their sin. But it would get the main thing wrong. It's not by our generosity, however slender, that we are saved, at least not according to the Christian tradition. We are saved by *God's* generosity.

But the story isn't about how to get into paradise as much as about how to avoid hell – not the fiery lake at the end of one's life and of the world's history, but the hell in the here and now, whose flames are made up of greed, selfishness, cold calculation, pride, indifference, exclusion, and many such things. No life worth living is possible without generosity. Indeed, it is doubtful whether the tender plant of newborn human life would even survive without generosity.

Yet from the get-go, we seem to be but one bundle of cravings that screams for satisfaction of needs that appear to go unfulfilled and for interests that feel threatened from all sides. That's the big fissure in the life of human beings, individually and collectively – a yawning gap between deep self-centeredness and true generosity.

Can we bridge the gap? We can, if we can show that in all our self-centered cravings, we are ultimately craving love – which is to say, craving both to receive love and to give it. Such recognition would be the first part of the bridge on which we could travel from the land in which even what looks like generosity is a form of self-centeredness to a land where generosity is our true self-interest. But how can we con-

struct such a bridge? We can't construct it using secular materials – or at least, I haven't seen it happen so far, and I can't imagine how it could. It takes God to make such a bridge, a God who is love, a God who gives and forgives, a God who created human beings to find fulfillment in love. This chapter – this book as a whole – is an attempt to construct such a bridge, and it is an invitation to then walk from one side to the other, from self-centeredness to generosity.

So the first and central question is, Who is God?

### **Images of God, Reality of God**

There is God. And there are images of God. And some people don't see any difference between the two.

A capable, good-hearted, and devout servant by the name of Félicité from Gustave Flaubert's "A Simple Heart" fell prey to this confusion between God and God's images. She was alone and unappreciated, and her parrot Loulou became "almost like a son, a lover to her", so much so that, when he died, she had him stuffed. Soon the gospel's image of the Holy Spirit as a dove began to merge with her stuffed parrot, and she fell "into the idolatrous habit of saying her prayers on her knees in front of the parrot". Finally, Flaubert wrote, as she breathed her last, "she thought she saw, as the heavens opened, a gigantic parrot hovering over her head."<sup>2</sup> Abandoned by others, she transferred her love to the parrot, transforming it into a god. An earthly image morphed into a divine reality.

Most people who fuse God's image and God's reality aren't nearly so naïve. Some, like great critics of religion, argue that God is simply a projection of human ideals onto a heavenly screen; that God is, as Karl Marx thought, a reflection of the human need to be consoled in misery and to cope with weakness. For them, God doesn't exist as a reality independent of human beings. "God" is the name that the foolish, the miserable, and the weak give to what is nothing more than a useful figment of human imagination.

I will leave these critics aside here, and instead focus on what is perhaps the most troubling confusion between God's reality and God's image, which falls somewhere between the naïve Félicité and

the shrewd Marx. It's believers who fall prey to this confusion. We don't see them kneeling before parrots. Neither do they trumpet, "God is a human projection." They don't brazenly say, "God doesn't exist; only images of God do." To the contrary, they piously affirm, "God is a reality independent of our minds" and "God is nothing like a parrot, or any other creature."

And yet they worship idols without even knowing it. Unlike Félicité's parrot, their gods are not made of the hard matter of this world and don't sit elevated on sacred pedestals. Instead, they dwell in their worshipers' minds and are made of the soft stuff of their own cherished ideas. They simply assume that who they believe God to be and who God truly is are one and the same. God is as large (or as small) as they make the Infinite One to be, and none of the beliefs they entertain about God could possibly be wrong.

But in fact, our images of God are rather different from God's reality. We are finite beings, and God is infinitely greater than any thoughts we can contain about divine reality in our wondrous but tiny minds. We are sinful beings, and God is different from what we conceive in our selfishness and pride. Finite and self-centered as we are, we often forget God's warning through the prophet Isaiah: "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (55:9). When we forget that, we unwittingly reduce God's ways to our ways and God's thoughts to our thoughts. Our hearts become factories of idols in which we fashion and refashion God to fit our needs and desires.

Yet the most powerful and seductive images of God are not the ones we craft in the privacy of our hearts. They are the ones that seep into our minds as we watch TV, read books, go shopping at the mall, or socialize with our neighbors. Slowly and imperceptibly, the one true God begins acquiring the features of the gods of this world. For instance, our God simply gratifies our desires rather than reshaping them in accordance with the beauty of God's own character. Our God then kills enemies rather than dying on their behalf as God did in Jesus Christ. To use Flaubert's metaphor, the dove of the Spirit becomes the parrot whose plumage bears a striking resemblance to our culture's values.

To worship *God* rather than idols of our own making, we must allow God to break apart the idols we create, through the Spirit's relentless and intimate work within our lives. First, we need to know where to look for knowledge of the true God. It would be a mistake to seek that knowledge primarily in the world around us. God is not an object in this world. There's no map that says "X marks the spot." Whatever we find in the world will be ... the world, and not God. Neither can we find God in the infinity that lies beyond the cosmos. God is not an unnamed something on the other side of the temporal and spatial edges of the universe. Rather, as Christians, we find God in Jesus Christ, God's Word incarnate as witnessed in the Scriptures, God's written word.

It's not enough, however, to know where to look for God. We also need eyes and ears that can recognize the true knowledge of God when we come across it. For it could be that even as we look at Jesus Christ and read Scripture, as the prophet Isaiah put it, we "keep listening, but do not comprehend" and "keep looking, but do not understand" (6:9). Think of people who observed Jesus teach and heal and embody the life of God – and they saw nothing but a "false prophet" or a "political rebel". Our eyes and ears need a heart ready to receive the truth of God's reality rather than one that longs for the comforts of false gods.

Finally, even when we look in the right places with a ready heart, we still might miss the one true God. We need to be willing to let our very effort to know God slide out of our hands, opening them to God's continued and unexpected self-revelation. Otherwise, like the dog from Aesop's fable, we may end up dropping the real piece of meat in order to grab its reflection in the water.

Two false images of God are particularly irresistible to many of us – mostly unconsciously. The first I'll designate as *God the negotiator* and the other, *God the Santa Claus*. Though we have fashioned both to serve our interests, they are each other's opposites. With one, we want to make advantageous deals. From the other, we want to get warm smiles and bagfuls of goodies. We run from one to the other. Some of their features are reminiscent of the God of Jesus Christ. But

we've drawn these images of God mostly from two currents of the culture in which we swim – the current of hard and unforgiving economic realities, in which we exchange goods to maximize benefits, and the current of soft, even infantile, desires, in which we long to be showered with gifts simply because we exist.

### **God the Negotiator**

There is a scene in the movie *Amadeus* in which the renowned Viennese composer Antonio Salieri, as a boy, kneels before a crucifix and tries to make a bargain with God: “Lord, make me a great composer! Let me celebrate your glory through music – and be celebrated myself. Make me famous throughout the world, dear God! Make me immortal!” What will God get for doing him the favor? “In return I vow I will give you my chastity – my industry, my deepest humility, every hour of my life. And I will help my fellow man all I can.”<sup>3</sup> He was offering God a deal: I'll sacrifice for you, and in return you'll fulfill my desire for immortality and glory.

Why did Salieri even think that God would consider such a proposition? Because, like many of us, he must have believed that God is a negotiator. We propose to do something for God, and God in turn agrees to do something for us. Alternatively, God demands something of us, and if we do what God demands, then God gives. This is the way God is, such reasoning goes. God is basically a negotiator.

We don't think very far ahead when we embrace the image of God as negotiator, however, because if that really were the case, human beings would always end up with a raw deal. For one thing, God doesn't need anything we have to offer. God can walk away from any proposition. And as any negotiator knows, it is impossible to strike a good deal under these conditions. When Salieri offers God his chastity, industry, and humility in return for musical genius, God can tell him, “I've got something you want, but you've got nothing I need,” and then proceed to give musical genius to Salieri's nemesis, a young brat by the name of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

Second, even if we could entice God into making a deal with us, we would have no way of enforcing compliance. Since God doesn't

need anything and divine power infinitely exceeds human, God can break any contract – give us a bit of “cash” as compensation, and leave us out in the cold.

We are at a disadvantage if *we* are the ones trying to obtain something from God – if it is *we* who say, “I’ll give you this (devotion) in exchange for that (musical genius).” But that’s not the end of our disadvantages if we basically see God as a negotiator. Before we even think of offering anything to God, God has already made demands on us, tough demands. Take, for example, the law of Moses as encapsulated in the Ten Commandments, a summary of God’s will for humanity. It was a heavy burden for the people of Israel. Even though God gave it for their well-being, it proved to be too difficult for them to fulfill, and we today find it daunting as well.

If we see the God of Jesus Christ as negotiator, we’ll experience the law of Christ as an even heavier burden than the law of Moses. In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ intensified the Old Testament commands and interpreted them to refer to inner states, not just outward acts: He intensified the prohibition against murder into the command not to be angry (Matthew 5:21–23); he transmuted the prohibition against adultery into the command not to lust (Matthew 5:27–30); he expanded the command to love one’s neighbor to include the command to love one’s enemies (Matthew 5:43–47). Even tougher than the Ten Commandments, what Jesus is urging upon us in the Sermon on the Mount is nothing less than to be “perfect . . . as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Clearly an impossibility for mere humans! And yet if we had to relate to God as a negotiator, we would have to be divinely perfect before we could fulfill our end of the bargain and receive anything from God.

But God is not a negotiator. It is true that Scripture portrays God in ways remarkably similar to that image. In the Old Testament we read, for instance, “If you will only obey the LORD your God . . . all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the LORD your God” (Deuteronomy 28:1–2). Yet before the commandments were given to the people of Israel, God delivered them from slavery in Egypt. But it wasn’t to get something out of them.