



2024 Lenten Book Study Guide

*Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*¹

This guide is meant to be a help for self-study or to guide group conversation. Volf's book might be a jumping off point for any Lenten journey, where the ideas of giving and forgiving intersect as expressions of God's grace and human response to it. The sections below align with the sections of the book. Blessings on your reading, study, prayer, and experience of grace this Lent.

Prelude: The Rose

In the introduction to his book, Volf describes two very personal moments in his life: (1) the day he and his wife met their son for the first time as adoptive parents, after having been stopped and treated poorly by a police officer on their way to the hospital, and (2) the day when his son's birth mother and sister saw him again when he was three months old. He experiences these moments as gifts in his own life because of the child he and his wife were able to love and raise. But he also understands the "gift" not just as something he received, but as the privilege of caring for another.

- What do you associate with the word gift?
- When have you experienced the duality of giving and receiving as two sides of the same gift?

Chapter 1: God the Giver

In chapter 1, Volf breaks down our notions of giving in order to build a paradigm about God as a giver.

- First, he challenges our insistence on making God into our own image, imposing upon God identities that mirror our culture, such as **Negotiator** (an economic/consumer role in which we try to make advantageous deals) and **Santa Claus** (from whom we expect gifts without expectation, consequence, or participation). How do these identities of givers resonate with how our culture talks about God?
- Second, Volf challenges our notion of entitlement and the ideas that (1) we are owed anything, including from God and (2) that we have *earned* that which is actually gift. He posits that when we assert our independence and desert/deservingness of gifts, we *wrong* God as giver. How would your perceptions change if you thought of **everything** as a gift from God? What in your own life have you claimed as yours which was actually God's gift?
- Volf reframes faith, not as a gift back to God, but as a posture of receptivity: "[f]aith is the way we as receivers relate appropriately to God as the giver." p.43. How would your behavior change in order to adopt a posture of receptivity?

Chapter 2: How Should We Give?

In chapter 2, Volf breaks down our motives for giving. He acknowledges that "it's a tall order to give as God gives," (p. 61) and invites us to consider three main modes of gifts/giving:

1. Coercion: we take what is not ours or is not offered to us.
2. Sales: we give in order to force or require an exchange/to get something in return.

¹ Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005.

3. Generosity : we give without expectation, what is not owed or even deserved.
4. Being a channel: we give as a way to ensure the well-being of others and our community, based on the idea that what is in our hands is not even for us, but is for the good of all.

How do you see these modes at work in our culture? In your own life?

By contrast, Volf explores the model of God's mode of giving, reminding us that God is (1) the *first* giver and a *non-receiving* giver, (2) an *infinite* and *free* giver, and (3) the only *utterly loving* giver. How do you see these modes of God's giving in your own life?

Acknowledging that we will never be able to model ourselves fully after God's way of giving, Volf suggests three situations in which we can rightly give by seeking the good of another and thereby imitating God:

- Delighting in someone;
- Giving when others are in need;
- Giving to help others give. (pp. 68-69)

In this season of Lent, when we give up some practices and take others on, how do those three suggestions inspire you to give up or take on new habits?

Chapter 3: How Can We Give?

In chapter 3, Volf questions our capacity to give at all, in light of both our sinful nature and the culture around us. He writes: “[w]hether we give in order to extract goods from others, win praise for magnanimity, put a fig leaf over our moral nakedness, or feed some raging beast inside, in one way or another our generosity often proves either counterfeit or impure. We give to ourselves, in whole or in part.” (p. 92)

- As you think about the dynamics of giving in your life (your giving or your receiving) is there anything giving that does not involve some element of self-benefit or self-interest?
- What forces make it hard for us to actually give? Volf names selfishness, pride, and sloth...are there other realities for you? Busy-ness? Attentiveness? Comfort? Cynicism? Fear of scarcity?

Volf talks about the necessity of understanding giving as inseparable from and through God: “Untethered from God, self-giving love cannot stand on its own for long. If it excludes God, it will destroy us, for we will then deliver ourselves to the mercy of the finite, and therefore inherently unreliable, objects of our love. The only way to ensure that we will not lose our very selves if we give ourselves to others is if our love for the other passes first through God.” (p. 103) How do you pass your giving “through God?”

Interlude: Daniel's Death

In a short chapter Volf calls an interlude, he frames forgiveness as gift. He talks about the tragic death of his brother as a five year-old child and how his parents managed to forgive the two people who could have prevented his brother's death. They were able to forgive, he writes, because “God forgave them.” (p. 123).

Volf acknowledges that, much like its sibling giving, “[f]orgiveness is difficult, even painful, and sometimes it feels impossible. Why should we give a gift of forgiveness when every atom of our wounded bodies screams for justice or even revenge? What would it mean for us to forgive and forgive wisely? And maybe above all, how do we muster enough strength to overcome resistance to forgiving?” (p. 126).

Chapter 4: God the Forgiver

Volf begins this chapter with a story from Hemingway that captures the truth that we all need and long for forgiveness. “We desire forgiveness because we value relationships, and we know that relationships cannot be mended without forgiveness.” (p. 127).

He defines forgiveness as (1) naming the wrongdoing and condemning it, and (2) giving the wrongdoer the gift of not counting the wrongdoing against them. (pp. 129-130). He finds both steps essential in order for forgiveness to be

real and effective for the good of another. For Christians, this forgiveness happens in a triangle of a wrongdoer, a wronged person, and God. How does that definition of forgiveness resonate with you?

Volf also names the incomplete identities we ascribe to God when we think of forgiveness. Much as we think of God as negotiator or Santa when it comes to giving, when it comes to forgiving, we think God is only an *implacable judge* or a *doting grandparent*. How is each of those identities flawed and unhelpful?

For the remainder of the chapter, Volf discusses Christ's death and resurrection as the enactment of our death and the release of our wrongdoing, as well as repentance as our grateful response. How do God's forgiveness and ours go hand in hand?

Chapter 5: How Should We Forgive?

Turning to our forgiveness of one another (or lack thereof), Volf defines three modes that mirror those he outlined in the earlier giving chapters:

- 1) Revenge corresponds to illicit taking
- 2) The demand for justice corresponds to legitimate acquiring, and
- 3) Forgiving corresponds to generous giving. (p. 138)

How does Volf's distinction between revenge and justice illuminate the practices of our culture? And the practices of your own life?

How does justice inform forgiveness?

Volf acknowledges that it is difficult to forgive well, but offers some concrete suggestions for imitating Christ:

- Not shrugging off offenses, but condemning them
- Condemning offenses without seeking retribution
- Releasing a wrongdoer from the ongoing pain of guilt
- Forgetting the offense

He does also note the importance of repentance in the process of forgiveness. Have you experienced this cycle of forgiveness in your own life? As forgiver? As wrongdoer? Where did you most clearly practice repentance? And how did you experience forgiveness?

Chapter 6: How Can We Forgive?

Volf asserts that forgiving is harder than giving. He says the "greatest obstacle to forgiving comes from the deeds that need to be forgiven." (P. 194) What is the thing you find it most difficult to forgive?

Volf names our persistent fear that forgiveness might actually be impossible for us. His discussion eventually comes to our identity as forgiven forgivers. How does that identity change your view on the thing that is hardest for you to forgive?

One barrier he names is that of repentance and whether we will forgive even when a wrongdoer is unrepentant. Another is our tendency to weigh the "work," expecting that the effort necessary for mending relationships should be equally shared. When we remember that we forgive as imitators of Christ, do we see these barriers differently?

Volf finally talks about our unforgiving culture, our pride, and the need for communities of forgiveness. Where have you experienced forgiveness in community?

Postlude: A Conversation with a Skeptic

In the postlude to this work, Volf recounts a conversation with someone who found these ideas lovely but unrealistic, a "beautiful lie," even. How about you?