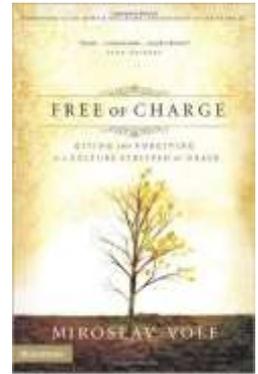


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Free of charge – giving and forgiving in a culture stripped of grace

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Foreword

'I cannot remember having read a better account of what it means to say that Jesus suffered for us, 'in our place'. And his analysis of the challenges Christian forgiveness faces in a society that is both sentimental and profoundly unforgiving is something that ought to be required reading for anyone seeking to understand the Western world in this sour and anxious age' – Rowan Williams.

Prelude - The Rose

He begins with the story of the adoption of his first son, and the giving of him by his birth mother; and contrasts it with a gruff traffic encounter with the US police on the same day. His conclusion: 'we live in a culture in which, yes, extraordinary generosity does happen. But at the same time, that culture is largely stripped of grace. It's not a gracelessness that's necessarily apparent at first glance, but it nonetheless underlies so many of our interactions.'

Today everything is sold and nothing is given. To give is to lose.

We seek power, self-gratification, follow our own interests. Sex is a good example; not a lifelong gift to a treasured lover, but a craving, a revenge, a reward, a tool. Without generosity everything in our culture declines – economics, democracy, education. Jesus taught it is more blessed to give than to receive; part of growing up is learning the art of giving. If we fail, we will live unfulfilled lives, lives of bondage.

1. God the giver

Intrinsic to the human condition is a great gap between self-centredness and generosity. We can bridge it, if we can show that what we crave is love. But only God can make such a bridge. Who is God? Our images of him are rather different from the reality.

Our hearts become factories of idols in which we fashion and refashion God to fit our needs and desires.

Pred

ominant images include

- God the negotiator – we think we need to negotiate: I'll give you this if you give me that. But the God on the cross isn't a negotiating God – we aren't up to keeping our part of the bargain.
- God the Santa Claus – we appeal for gifts. But to live well is to live in sync with who God is and how God acts, not as children wanting consumer benefits.

God is not these. He is primarily Creator. Nothing is owed us by God; everything is given. Even a sting can be a gift – as his own experience of infertility leading to the adoption of two sons. Our part is not just to receive, but to cooperate, to work alongside God in the work of creation. Refusing to receive is sin (independence). If we fail to acknowledge our dependence we will become proud, asserting our right to dispose of our goods as we please – denying we have received, we refuse to give.

So God's gifts oblige us, receiving, to give in return. Gifts flow between the Trinity, out to us, through us to others. Our gifts are:

- Faith
- Gratitude
- Availability
- Participation

The secret of generosity is the recognition that God made the self to be indwelled by Christ, to draw the living water from the wellspring of love and pass it on. Self-love brings unfulfilment. Love is a paradox.

2. How should we give?

We give gifts for many purposes, and many of them aren't gifts at all – they are designed for getting something. We relate to other in 3 basic modes:

- The coercive mode – we take
- The sales mode – we give in order to receive
- The gift mode – we give favours we don't owe

Why give? Because, Eph 4, we have put off the old self, put on the new. Because, Eph 5, we live as imitators of God. We are channels of his gifts. Giving is an art to be learned. We must give as God gives – freely, voluntarily.

Imagine your life as a piece of music, a Bach cello suite. You've heard it played by a virtuoso. You love it and would like to play it well. But try as you might, you fail — not so much because you've had a bad teacher or haven't practiced enough, but because your left hand has a defect. You make music, but it's nothing like it's supposed to sound. Then you have surgery performed by a magician with a scalpel. Your hand heals. You return to your lessons with new vigour. And then one day, you play the piece nearly perfectly. Full of joy, you exclaim, "Yes! I love it! This is the way the music of my life should sound!" Constrained by the score because you have to follow its notation? Well, yes. But loving every moment of that constraint — and not feeling it as constraint at all — because the very constraint is what makes for the beauty and delight.

Something like this is what it means to be a free giver. God obliges us to give. But it is precisely when we act in accordance with the obligation that we have a sense of unspoiled authenticity and freedom. So in our best moments, we forget the command and just give the way we are supposed to give. We are like a motor powered sailboat when it's "running", as sailors say: With the wind at the back of a powered boat, all resistance is gone; the boat is always where the wind would push it to be. The same is true of us when we give freely. Living out of our new selves, we are always already where the command would want us to be.

We give rightly when we delight in someone; when others are in need; when we give to help others give. In all three situations we give because we seek the good of another. Gifts are not material, but relational. A gift is an event between people. Gifts bind people together, forge communities. We are like a body, sharing gifts, nourishing love.

3. How can we give?

How to win friends and influence people – a book which has sold over 15m copies, and is fundamentally about giving in order to benefit ourselves. Gifts are investments. This is giving in sales mode.

Even in giving for the sake of others we are often seeking our own interest – to extract goods in return; to win praise for magnanimity; to cover our own moral nakedness; to feed our own untamed passions. Our gifts are impure because stained by sin and death.

But even if all of us are sinners from head to toe, none of us is a sinner through and through, with nothing good remaining in us. As sinners, we are still God's good creatures. To illustrate the relationship between being a good creature and being a sinner, Reformation theologians used the analogy of water and ink. Water is the good creation, ink is sin, and the sinner is a glass of water with a few drops of ink. All the water in the glass is tainted, but it's still mostly water, not ink. Analogously, all our good deeds are marred by sin, but they are still mostly good deeds, not crimes masquerading as merits. Now apply this to gifts. We give gifts. None of them are pure. Yet with all their impurities, many of them are still genuine gifts, not just hidden ways of loving ourselves.

The purity of our giving is tainted by selfishness (gift as investment), pride (gift motivated by the desire to congratulate ourselves), and sloth (it costs to give). 'One of the things a gift's skeleton has to have to come alive is the willingness of givers to impart more to recipients than they expect to receive'. We can only do this if we realise we will indeed receive – from God. We need to understand our limited resources are backed by God's abundance. We need to adopt Paul's understanding of wealth not as having but as being.

God works against these things in us by teaching us to give secretly, to measure by intention not by size, to realise that when we give it's him who is giving, and gratitude is due to him not to us.

Interlude: Daniel's death

He tells the story of the death of his brother, aged 5, fault of a soldier who allowed him to play dangerously; and how his parents forgave. We live in a sentimental but unforgiving culture; we are more likely to sue than to forgive, with motives of either revenge or of sheer profit. But to live humanly we must learn to forgive.

4. God the forgiver

Ernest Hemingway began one of his memorable short stories entitled “The Capital of the World” with the following lines:
Madrid is full of boys named Paco, which is diminutive of the name Francisco, and there is a Madrid joke about a father who came to Madrid and inserted an advertisement in the personal columns of *El Liberal* which said: PACO MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTANA NOON TUESDAY ALL IS FORGIVEN PAPA and how a squadron of Guardia Civil had to be called out to disperse the eight hundred young men who answered the advertisement.

The joke is about the ubiquity of the name “Paco” in Spain. But it works only because of the underlying longing of many to be forgiven, whether they are sons or daughters, mothers or fathers, friends or colleagues. We desire forgiveness because we value relationships, and we know that relationships cannot be mended without forgiveness. Forgiveness involves 2 things:

- To forgive is to name the wrongdoing and to condemn it
- To forgive is to give wrongdoers the gift of not counting the wrongdoing against them. We forgive because God forgives; this is a gift we have ourselves received

There are 2 misconceptions of God which prevent us from doing this:

- God as implacable judge who deals with wrongdoing by punishment; but God could only create because he had already decided to forgive. This view stems from the image of God as negotiator.
- God as doting grandparent, who sees no evil, who doesn't mind what we do. This is the Santa Claus God. But God is a wrathful God who hates evil. He condemns it before he forgives it.

The solution is in Christ, who separates us from our sin. His death doesn't replace ours; it enacts it (2 Cor 5.14); it's inclusive substitution, not exclusive substitution. And then we live in him and he in us. Our union with him transforms our inner self; we become like an iron that's been heated in the fire, hot only because it has the fire's heat. And it means we are held righteous because we have Christ's righteousness. We receive forgiveness as a gift, when we confess our sin – that's how we accept the gift. And then we pass it on to others.

How do we summon the courage to walk into the land of freedom through the gate of shame?

5. How should we forgive?

If there are 3 modes of relationships, there are also 3 modes of forgiving:

- Revenge – corresponding to taking (coercive mode)
- Demand for justice – corresponding to acquiring (sales mode)
- Forgiving – corresponds to generous giving (gift mode)

The desire for revenge is natural; but Paul urges us not to (Rom.12). Revenge just multiplies evil. We forgive because recalling offenders from sin matters more to us than avenging wrongs we've suffered.

God can forgive sin only because he's first condemned it. We forgive it in the same way:

- To forgive is to condemn; in saying there's something to forgive you are condemning it
- To forgive isn't to shrug off – it isn't about overcoming feelings of anger and resentment, or about freeing ourselves from the feeling of being diminished by the offence; it's for others' sake, not ours

To forgive means not to press charges; to forgo the demand for retribution; to release the wrongdoer not just from punishment but also from guilt; to let the offence slip eventually into oblivion. That doesn't mean forgetting – memory is a shield that protects from future harm.

There are no unforgiveable people.

What about repentance? Well, forgiveness is a social relationship, not a means of personal healing. If the gift of forgiveness is not received, it is stuck somewhere in the middle between parties – as with God's gift of forgiveness. Often offenders need help from victims in order to repent and receive forgiveness; forgiveness is a kind of love which makes repentance possible. We hope our gift will be received; it may or may not be.

6. How can we forgive?

If giving takes effort, forgiving is much harder. We have the right to do it, because God has given it to us. But we aren't wired up for it – tit for tat seems more natural. Only Christ in us can do it.

Closing points:

- To forgive is to blame, not to exonerate
- Forgiving the unrepentant is the heart of the Christian faith, not an optional extra; through forgiving we are restored to our full human splendour.
- It may turn out that what we thought was an offence against us is one for which we need to receive forgiveness more than we need to give it
- Forgiveness is a social relationship.

Often we don't forgive because we live in an unforgiving culture, one in which it doesn't make sense to forgive. The modern US is a culture of litigation. The culture of the Pentecostal church in 1950s Yugoslavia, where his parents forgave the man responsible for their son's death, was one of forgiveness. Often we do forgive, but for the wrong reasons – to take the moral high ground, to feel good about ourselves.

Postlude – a conversation with a skeptic.

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