

You can't deal with God: God is a giver, not a negotiator

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [April 19, 2005](#) issue

As I was writing this piece, Good Friday was in view, and I thought of the renowned Viennese composer Antonio Salieri as portrayed in the movie *Amadeus*. In a scene from Salieri's childhood, Salieri is kneeling before a crucifix and trying 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," says Salieri, "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." Salieri is offering God a deal: I'll sacrifice for you, and in return you'll fulfill my desire for immortality and glory.

Why did Salieri think that God would consider such a proposition? Because, like many of us, he must have believed that God is a negotiator. "If I do this, God will give me that" in the mouth of a human being is the obverse of "If you do this, I'll give you that" in the mouth of God. God demands, and if we do what God demands, then God gives. We offer to do God a favor, and God rewards us with things we desire. This is the way God is, such reasoning goes. God is basically a negotiator.

If God were basically a negotiator, 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 such 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 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 God's power infinitely exceeds ours, God can break any contract—contracts are legitimately breakable—give us a bit of cash as compensation, and leave us out in the cold.

All this holds true 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 long before we thought of offering anything to God, God made demands on us, and these demands are awfully hard to fulfill. The law of Moses as expressed in the Ten Commandments was a heavy burden for the people of Israel. Even though God gave it to them for their well-being, it proved to be too difficult to fulfill.

If we see the God of Jesus Christ as a negotiator, we’ll experience the law of Christ as an even heavier burden than the law of Moses. In the Sermon on the Mount, for example, Christ intensifies Old Testament commands and interprets them to refer to inner states, not just outward acts. Prohibition against murder is intensified into the command not to be angry (Matt. 5:21-23); prohibition against adultery becomes the command not to lust (Matt. 5:27-30); the command to love one’s neighbor is expanded to include the command to love one’s enemies (Matt. 5:43-47). Even tougher than the Ten Commandments is God’s insistence that we be nothing less than “perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48)—clearly an impossibility for mere humans! And yet if God were a negotiator, we would have to be divinely perfect before we could receive anything from God.

It is true that the scripture portrays God relating to people in ways remarkably similar to the image of God the negotiator. 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” (Deut. 28:1). Yet the God of scripture is not a negotiator God. Before God gave commandments to the people of Israel, God delivered them from slavery in Egypt. Why? To get something out of them? No. God delivered them for the simple reason that God had heard their cry of affliction, kept the promises made to their ancestor Abraham and, through deliverance and faithfulness, wanted to manifest divine glory in the world. Why did God give the commandments to the people he delivered? To gain their obedience so as to be able to reward them in return? The commandments themselves are rewards, given not for God’s sake but for the sake of people’s well-being (see Deut. 10:13).

In *Amadeus*, Salieri ends up as a bitter old man, angry at God, angry at the world, angry at himself—to the point of attempting to take his own life. The entire course of his life rested on the deal he thought he’d made with God. God proved to be, as he put it, “wicked,” in giving him “32 years of meaningless fame” only to thrust him into permanent oblivion. But in fact no deal had been made between them. Salieri

had made a proposition to God as he was kneeling under the cross, but God didn't take him up on it. Why? Because God hanging on the cross for the salvation of the world is not a negotiating God. On the cross, God is not setting up terms of a contract that humanity needs to fulfill. God isn't saying: "I died for you, now you've got to do what I tell you to do." Instead, God is giving God's own self for the sins of humanity. God is a giver, not a negotiator.