

4. Brief Overview of New Testament Texts Relating to Bribery.

The New Testament (NT) does not directly address the issue of bribery, but shows through its narratives some general principles relating to bribes.

4.1 Key NT Narratives Involving Bribes

4.1.1 Satan bribes Jesus with the kingdoms of the world in exchange for worship

^{NIB} **Matthew 4:8** Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

In this narrative, Matthew records the last of the three temptations offered by Satan to Jesus. Jesus had been in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights, and had already come through two temptations. Now Satan offered Jesus the single most serious temptation he could bring to bear: all the kingdoms of the world and all their worldly splendour.

E.G. White, commenting on this passage, notes that 'this last temptation was the most alluring of the three. Satan knew that Christ's life must be one of sorrow, hardship and conflict. And he thought he could take advantage of this fact to bribe Christ to yield His integrity. Satan brought all his strength to bear upon this last temptation; for this last effort was to decide his destiny as to who should be victor...Christ, although brought to great physical suffering, refused to yield a single point, notwithstanding the most flattering inducements that were offered to bribe and influence Him to yield His integrity. All this honour, all these riches and glory, said the deceiver, will I give Thee if Thou wilt only acknowledge my claims'³.

Whilst not ostensibly a bribe according to the definition used in this paper (see Section 1.2 above), this narrative does record an attempted bribe. Satan (supplicant) was trying to gain something (worship) from Jesus Christ (a high official in the cosmic economy and government of God) that Jesus Christ was not entitled to give, for worship alone belongs to God. Satan tried through a bribe of unimaginable human wealth and splendor to buy what the government of God could not allow: worship, and he received a divine rebuke.

The synoptic parallel in Mark (Mk. 1.12-13) is commented on by Jesus in Mk. 3.27, 'In fact, no-one can enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can rob his house.' Jesus achieved victory over Satan during the temptations in the wilderness, allowing Him to plunder Satan's followers throughout the remainder of the synoptic narratives.

In this Matthean narrative, a bribe is presented, and refused by Jesus Christ. No criminal justice system was being perverted, but the entire system of divine government was being directly undermined by the proffered bribe...and Jesus Christ's refusal was absolute, leaving a clear example for His followers.

4.1.2 The Rich Young Ruler

^{NIB} **Mark 10:19** You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honour your father and mother.'

The identity of the approaching supplicant is unimportant,⁴ his demeanour is suggestive,⁵ but the question is crucial⁶ – what must he do to gain eternal life? Rejecting the designation ἀγαθε (good)⁷ Jesus asks the man why he calls Him good?⁸ God alone is good. Jesus

³ E.G. White, Con. 52.2, 62.1.

⁴ As in 10.13, the identity of the supplicant is not expressed clearly. The use of προσδραμῶν is vague in the uttermost, and from it one may deduce that it is a adult man with wealth who runs to Jesus. The Matthean and Lucan parallels suggest that the man was young (Matt. 19.20) and a ruler (Luke 18.18), hence the synthesized designation amongst many Christians of the supplicant as the 'rich young ruler'.

⁵ To run in public was not viewed as dignified. Rather, the higher one was in the social echelons, the slower one tended to move in public.

⁶ In all the Gospel of Mark, this is the question that comes closest to the heart of Jesus' ministry, and yet no-one has yet asked Jesus this question through His entire Galilean ministry, including the disciples themselves.

⁷ Rabbis and teachers of the time were referred to by a number of respectful titles, designations and epithets, but in general they tended to avoid the designation ἀγαθε as they understood that only God is entirely good, and therefore this designation should be reserved for

points the man to God, consistent with His proclamation of the Kingdom of God, but He does not deny that He knows the answer to the ultimate question, for it is He who will judge every man concerning eternal life in His eschatological role.⁹ Without waiting for an answer, and assuming the man is Torah-observant,¹⁰ Jesus enumerates the horizontal commands of the Decalogue, including the command not to defraud, a possible hint at the source of the man's wealth.

In this narrative, Jesus' command to the rich young ruler included the commands of the Decalogue, and an additional command – not to 'defraud'. The verb used, ἀποστερέω, means to financially defraud, rob, steal; deny, refuse (μὴ ἀ. ἀλλήλους, do not deny marital relations to one another, 1 Cor 7.5). Entry into eternal life is not possible whilst one participates in corrupt or fraudulent financial practice.

Much wealth in Jesus' time was concentrated in the hands of wealthy landowners who by virtue of their land holdings had the capital to simultaneously be the main traders of the time. Wealthy landowners were often unscrupulous in their oppression of the poor, and manipulated the markets so as to squeeze out the competition from independent smallholders. The Epistle of James reflects and decries these economic practices.

Omitting ἀγαθε, the man responds that he has indeed kept all the Torah from his youth. He is Torah-observant.¹¹ Looking searchingly at him,¹² Jesus loved him.¹³ Jesus does not dispute that the man has been faithful in Torah observance, yet, ἔν σε ὑπερέϊ. Jesus' command in the Jewish context is peculiar as does not require giving wealth to the Temple or a particular community such as the Essenes, rather, the wealth is to go to the poor, in exchange for which the man will gain θησαυρὸν ἐν οὐρανῷ.¹⁴ If you follow my earthly commands, I will reward you in my eschatological role.

Upon hearing the command however,¹⁵ the man departed downcast,¹⁶ ἦν γὰρ ἔχων κτήματα πολλά. As the children of vv. 13-16 come physically to Jesus and thus enter the Kingdom of God, so this man's physical turning away from Jesus excludes him from the sought-after eternal life. For this would-be disciple, the answer to his eternal questions is current action, a discipleship of obedience to the

Him alone. This attitude of circumspection concerning possible designations of or references to God was an important part of Jewish spirituality, and is seen elsewhere in 14.61.

⁸ The word order of Jesus' question emphasizes the 'me' aspect of the question, e.g. to paraphrase, 'Me? Why do you call me good?'. A literal interpretation of Jesus' question would be 'why me are you calling good?'

⁹ Jesus is not denying His divinity with this statement. Rather He is leading the man through his Jewish understanding of God and the Torah to a conclusion which actually is a command to 'follow me', i.e. Jesus.

¹⁰ Jesus does not wait for a response, and His phrase 'you know the commandments' is not a question but a statement. Jesus' assumption that the man is Torah-observant is, as the text later reveals, correct.

¹¹ The verb the man uses is interesting (ἐφυλάξιμην is indicative, aorist, middle, 1st person singular from φυλάσσω meaning to guard, keep under guard; keep, obey, follow; keep safe, protect, defend; midd. guard against, avoid; abstain from (food offered in sacrifice to idols); keep, obey). If he had kept the Torah, why was he still feeling the need to ask Jesus about eternal life? Something was missing, but he did not understand how to understand the internal dissonance between his deeds and his inner convictions.

¹² Mark records that Jesus, ἐμβλέψας αὐτῷ ἠγάπησεν αὐτόν, 'having looked (intently) at him, He loved him'. The use of ἐμβλέπω is noteworthy. It is more than just to see; it is to look straight at or to consider. Jesus loved the man having already looked intently at Him. This statement about Jesus removes doubts about the man's sincerity or good intentions.

¹³ Nowhere else in Mark is it recorded that Jesus 'loved' anyone. This man must therefore have made a strong impression upon Jesus.

¹⁴ It should be noted that Jesus' attitude towards wealth and poverty is neither as radical nor as conservative as some would hope. Jesus nowhere advocates the radical disposition of all assets by His disciples and the adoption of vows of poverty; indeed His statements of 10.29-30 imply that those in the community of His disciples will continue to hold temporal assets. However, nowhere does Jesus simply uphold the status quo and agree with the contemporary understanding that viewed wealth as a sign of God's blessing. Those who were poor under this doctrine were that way because they were out of favour with God, and there was nothing a poor man should do to mitigate the lack of blessing from God.

¹⁵ The following discussion between Jesus and the disciples in vv. 29-30 suggests that disciples of Jesus may indeed be called upon to leave family, wealth, possessions and all that is valued in this age for the sake of Jesus, but in so doing they will receive so much more, including persecutions. The man of vv. 17-22 has received a choice of wealth today or eternal wealth, and he chooses wealth today. This passage is not teaching that all disciples must give up all to follow Jesus, as this would not be consistent with the implication of the teaching in 10.29-30, but this passage is teaching that at the command of Jesus, disciples must give up and turn away from whatever is holding them back from exclusive attachment to and reliance on Jesus for their eternal life, including if necessary temporal possessions.

¹⁶ The supplicant had asked a genuine question of a teacher whom he believed could provide the right answer, and he had rejected the question. His sadness was due to the fact that he recognized that in rejecting the command of Jesus, he was indeed excluding himself from the Kingdom of God.

command of Jesus. The man's question about Torah is answered with a test of his relationship to Jesus, indeed, 'unless obedience to the law leads to discipleship with Jesus it is incomplete and futile.'¹⁷

In this narrative, Jesus meets a seeker after eternal life, and during the dialogue the main stumbling block to eternal life is revealed. The Decalogue does not include the command not to defraud, but Jesus adds this prohibition in His discourse, suggesting that the source of the seeker's wealth was not according to the will of God. During the time of Jesus, social classes were highly stratified, with a small political, religious and business elite separated by a huge economic gulf from the masses who eked out a sparse existence. Social tensions were rising to such a peak that one of the first acts of the Jewish revolutionaries against Rome in AD66 was to burn the public records in the Jerusalem temple relating to land sales, contracts of credit, and lists of debtors, thereby removing the legal documents underpinning the severe economic oppression of the rural poor by the political and business elites of Jerusalem.

In this narrative, the acquisition of wealth through unjust means reflects an inner attitude of greed and self-centeredness that prevented the supplicant from entering eternal life. Being a 'ruler', the supplicant was in a position of authority, and obviously had misused his official role for personal enrichment. As the synoptic image is of a young man, it is unlikely he was in the Sanhedrin, the ultimate court of appeal in the Jewish criminal justice system, so the supplicant was most probably a functionary of the civil administration.

Should this be the case, and the evidence points in this direction, then the personal enrichment that that this young man pursued whilst serving in an official capacity ultimately led to his eternal damnation. For Christians, who are commanded to 'love thy neighbour as thyself' the message is clear: if you care about the eternal outcome for an official functionary (as you should!), do not participate in the functionary's desire for personal enrichment.

4.1.3 Zaccheus – The Redeemed Official

^{NIB} **Luke 19:8** But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

In this narrative, the climax of the Lucan approach to the passion week, we meet Zaccheus. A tax collector, Zaccheus was in a profession notorious for taking an extra 'cut' over and above the official taxes for personal use. Officials in the Roman Empire would have regular income targets that they had to meet for their overseers, and as long as these targets were met, the officials could keep whatever else had been extracted from the general populace. It is not surprising then that tax collectors were the recipients of much hostility, and indeed were often the targets for attacks by the Zealots and Sicarii.

Tax collectors earned their income through two primary mechanisms: through accepting personal gifts from individuals in order to write down their tax obligations (a bribe according to the definition of Section 1.2 above), or through private extortion, demanding additional personal payments before official receipts could be supplied confirming that the required formal taxation had indeed been paid.

Zaccheus was a 'chief tax collector and was rich' (v.2), and therefore we can assume that he was a man who was engaged in corrupt business practices (something confirmed by his statement in the above narrative about cheating others financially). A social outcast, he had thrown his lot in with Rome, and was considered a traitor by many. Upon meeting Jesus though, Zaccheus found a way out of his personal moral and social dilemmas. His restored relationship with God was demonstrated in precisely the area where he had been sinning before he met Jesus – in his financial practices. Not only repaying those whom he had defrauded, Zaccheus pledged to repay them four times more than the original amount defrauded.

For Zaccheus, righteousness was demonstrated in not only ordinary financial honesty, in balancing credits against debits, but in self-denying financial honesty and integrity. Zaccheus demonstrated the 'extraordinariness' of the Christian life, a living example of the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount. Zaccheus was a tax-collector and not a judge, and the source of his wealth came through bribes / extorted fees paid in the civil rather than criminal spheres of government, so therefore bribery cannot be exclusively understood in terms of perverting criminal justice, but in terms of perverting the civil sphere also.

As with the case of the rich young ruler above, so with Zaccheus: for Christians to make payments to official functionaries other than that which is officially mandated, and which goes into the pockets of the functionaries, is to contribute to the functionary's exclusion from the Kingdom of God, something no Christian should ever do, and for Christians to refuse to make such demanded payments based out of a loving and self-sacrificial concern for the eternal well-being for the functionary may be the most effective testimony the functionary can respond to.

¹⁷ See James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, p. 313.

4.1.4 Chief Priests Bribe Jesus to Betray Jesus (parallels in Mk. 14.11, Luke 22.5)

^{NIB} **Matthew 26:15** Then one of the Twelve--the one called Judas Iscariot--went to the chief priests and asked, "What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?" So they counted out for him thirty silver coins. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

In this narrative, we have a clear NT example of bribery in the narrowest sense of the term (perversion of the criminal justice system), with the use of the Greek word παραδίωμι meaning to 'hand over, to betray'. Judas offers to betray Jesus, with both himself and the priests knowing that the one who is being handed over had 'innocent blood' (Matt. 27.4).

Jesus Himself offers the divine perspective on such activity in Matt. 26.24, where He plays on the verb παραδίωμι in His denunciation of the one who would betray Him (The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! [παραδίδοται, a verb, indicative, present, passive, 3rd person singular, meaning 'is handed over' or 'is betrayed', often understood in other passages as a divine passive] It would be better for him if he had not been born.)

In this narrative, we see that bribery with the intent to pervert a criminal justice system, leading to the condemnation of the innocent, has fearful consequences for those who participate in the bribery.

4.1.5 Chief Priests Bribe Roman Soldiers to Deny the Resurrection

Matthew 28:12 When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.

As with the previous narrative, we have a clear NT example of bribery in the narrowest sense of the term (perversion of the criminal justice system). The detrimental results of this bribe to the soldiers are commented upon by Matthew, who reflects that the story of the soldiers, denying the resurrection of Jesus, was widely circulated amongst the Jews to his own time.

As with the bribes taken by Samuel's sons, which were the excuse the elders of Israel needed to justify their demand for a king, a demand that led ultimately to spiritual apostasy in the wake of and exacerbated by evil kings, foreign subjugation and exile, so with this bribe of the Roman soldiers: the story the soldiers circulated once they had the bribe enabled many who may otherwise have believed in the apostolic preaching the excuse they needed not to accept Jesus Christ as Saviour. It is unknown how many souls have been lost through history due to this bribe, but the vast 'Jesus industry' evident in many bookshops today indicates that what the soldiers were bribed to say remains influential.

Soldiers in the Roman Empire were executed if they lost their prisoners (e.g. the Roman soldiers in the shipwreck off Malta planned to kill the prisoners rather than let them escape – Acts 27.42, Herod executed the guards of Peter when he escaped from custody – Acts 12.19, and the jailor in Philippi actively contemplated suicide on believing that his prisoners had escaped in the earthquake – Acts 16.27), so the bribe must have been a substantial amount (literally, 'considerable silver') to persuade the Roman guards to admit to their superiors and talk in the ale-houses about their alleged dereliction of duty in allowing the disciples to steal the body whilst they slept.

The final comment of the priests to the soldiers, 'If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble' shows the ripple effect of such bribery – additional bribes are required if an initial bribe becomes commonly known, and ever more persons are drawn into the web of bribery in order for the purpose of the original bribe to remain in effect. As the ripple effect gets larger, and more are drawn into the conspiracy of silence, so the pressure on any individual to conform to the bribery increases, often placing an intolerable strain on the conscience, and implicating ever more innocent persons in the original bribe.

This narrative shows clearly both the corrupting influence of a single bribe can have on a widening circle of individuals who may have been totally unrelated to the occasion of the initial bribe, and also that bribes can have unforeseen consequences way beyond the magnitude of the persons giving the initial bribe – in this case the result of that single bribe to the soldiers is eternal damnation for untold precious souls who believed the soldiers' witness over the apostolic witness.

4.1.6 Felix Seeks a Bribe from Paul

Acts 24:24-27 Several days later Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was a Jewess. He sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. As Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, "That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you." At the same time he was hoping that

Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him. When two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, but because Felix wanted to grant a favour to the Jews, he left Paul in prison.

At its height, the Roman Empire was the most sophisticated and far-reaching human administration the world had ever known. Imperial code law was so effective that it remains the basis of many legal codes in use in the 21st century. Yet beneath the surface was one enemy the legions could not conquer: corruption, and it was rampant internal corruption, coupled with external pressures, that eventually caused Rome's downfall.

Paul was a prisoner of Felix, whose brother was Pallas, one of the richest men in the post-Augustus imperial era. Pallas had gained his wealth primarily through extortion and bribery, and it appears his brother Felix had also determined to gain wealth the same way. From the narrative, it seems that Felix not only understood 'The Way' as early Christianity was called, but his relaxed custodial treatment of Paul in v. 23 and willingness to engage in discussions with Paul indicates that Felix recognized the innocence of Paul.

Being a highly sophisticated man of letters and learning, and having already been through judicial processes, Paul most likely understood over the course of the 2 years wrongful imprisonment what was required: a little grease payment, nobody need know about it, and then he would be free. Instead, Paul discoursed freely and frankly to his corrupt captor about 'justice, self-control and the coming judgement'...discourses delivered to a highly corrupt administrator who wished for nothing more than a payment to be made and the matter settled.

Paul preached a message of truth and honesty, and he lived out his message. Reflecting later in life on his conduct, Paul wrote in Hebrews 13.18, that the readers should 'Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honourably in every way' (NIB), or 'Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly' (KJV). The Greek used is remarkably simple, 'ἐν πᾶσιν καλῶς θέλοντες ἀναστρέφεσθαι', 'in all things well desiring to live / desiring to conduct oneself'.

E.G. White comments on this time of Paul's life that 'Paul might secure his release. The apostle, however, was of too noble a nature to free himself by a bribe. He was not guilty of any crime, and he would not stoop to commit a wrong in order to gain freedom. Furthermore, he was himself too poor to pay such a ransom, had he been disposed to do so, and he would not, in his own behalf, appeal to the sympathy and generosity of his converts. He also felt that he was in the hands of God, and he would not interfere with the divine purposes respecting himself.'¹⁸

Paul was not asked for a payment to pervert the course of criminal justice – he was innocent, and both prisoner and captor knew this. Rather, Paul was asked for a payment simply to be released, i.e. extortion. No justice would have been perverted had Paul made the required payment, so Paul could have reasoned to himself that he could pay and not be accused of bribery in the sense of perverting criminal justice, yet he steadfastly refused to commit, in the words of E.G. White, a 'wrong', determining instead in all things to live 'καλῶς', well.

From this narrative, we see that even to make a payment to an official functionary when one is entirely in the right and has no reason to pay is a 'wrong' (according to the terminology of E.G. White). Paul refused to participate in the greed and desire for personal enrichment of Felix, thereby showing true concern for Felix's eternal salvation. He refused to allow it to be known in the highest echelons of the Roman administration of Palestine that the followers of 'The Way' paid grease payments / bribes. He refused to compromise or associate the name of Jesus Christ with corrupt practice, even though entirely innocent.

Should the reader at this stage be wondering whether this fancy theology is too fancy, the reader should know that an immediate family member of the author is at the time of writing these words sitting in a prison following conviction on trumped up charges of murder. The judicial authorities have let it be known quite openly that for 15,000USD the young man will walk free with a full acquittal and medical discharge. The parents of the young man, recently baptized Adventists, have steadfastly refused to pay, and the young man, who went to prison an atheist, is experiencing a Christian awakening. The family has collectively refused to make any payment, even though the payment could be made within days, primarily because they do wish it to be known amongst the judicial authorities concerned that, as with Paul in the 1st century AD, followers of 'The Way' still live a costly 'καλῶς' as Paul wrote, and will not participate in corrupt practices, even if it means costly self-sacrifice (in this case, the freedom of the young man for many years).

Paul's integrity was costly and self-denying, but his integrity remained. As then, so today: Christian integrity without personal cost and self-denial ceases to be Christian integrity.

4.2 Summary of NT Narratives Involving Bribes

¹⁸ E.G. White, AA 426.3.

The NT opens with the birth narrative of Jesus, and then rapidly moves on to the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness before any formal 'ministry' had occurred. In the temptations, we see the clear example of Jesus when faced with temptation in the form of bribery (in this case understood to be the perversion of the divinely instituted order of governance): it is to be summarily rejected. Christians are to neither proffer a bribe, nor receive, for bribes do not merely pervert criminal justice, but in the perversion of civil authorities they pervert the divinely ordained order, transferring worship from God to mammon (directly) and to Satan (indirectly).

In the case of the rich young ruler and of Zaccheus, we see that the personal enrichment that that this young man pursued whilst serving in an official capacity ultimately led to his eternal damnation. For Christians, who are commanded to 'love thy neighbour as thyself' the message is clear: if you care about the eternal outcome for an official functionary (as you should!), do not participate in the functionary's desire for personal enrichment. Furthermore, in the redemption of Zaccheus we see the need for self-denying integrity in financial affairs as a fundamental component of the 'extraordinariness' (as Bonhoeffer coined the term) of the Christian experience, the path of discipleship that involves taking up (oh, horror of horrors!) a financial cross.

In the narratives relating to the betrayal of Jesus and the bribing of the Roman soldiers, we see both the corrupting influence that a single bribe can have on a widening circle of individuals who may have been totally unrelated to the occasion of the initial bribe, and also that bribes can have unforeseen consequences way beyond the magnitude of the persons giving the initial bribe – in this case the result of that single bribe to the soldiers is eternal damnation for untold precious souls who believed the soldiers' witness over the apostolic witness.

Once initiated, like a nuclear reaction, the chain of bribery can expand ever wider, causing unforeseen and eternal consequences. The warning of Jesus is apt: 'and if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck' (Mark 9.42, NIB).

Finally, in the experience of Paul with Felix, we see that to be a true witness before the civil authorities to the absolute purity, incorruptibility and truth that is in Christ Jesus, followers of Jesus are called to a life of integrity, integrity that may come with a huge personal cost, but which emerges to proclaim triumphantly with Paul that I have lived life 'καλῶς'. Such integrity precludes the payment of anything on a personal level to a functionary other than that which is officially required, whether it be called a bribe, grease payment, gift, baksheesh or door-opener.