

# When does a “gift” become a “bribe?” (17:23)

*A wicked man receives a bribe from the bosom to pervert the ways of justice.*

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## THE TEXT (NASB)

*A wicked man receives a bribe from the bosom to pervert the ways of justice.*

*A wicked man taketh a gift out of the bosom to pervert the ways of judgement. KJV - Proverbs 17:23*

## INTRODUCTION



Gifts and bribes are different.

A bribe is anything of value, offered as an enticement to do wrong, and given with the deliberate purpose of encouraging vicious behaviour. A gift, tip, or gratuity is given with the personal intention of expressing appreciation for past performance.

When the lines between good and evil become fuzzy, then the essential difference between bribes and gifts also become fuzzy; so we need to dig deeper.



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## COMMENTARY

This proverb defines a bribe as having the purpose of corrupting right procedures and just outcomes. Sadly, in many times and places (especially those lacking strong Judeo-Christian culture or harsh legal system), bribery is standard business practice. The expression, “from the bosom,” expresses its secrecy. Bribery is done in private. The briber and the bribed both know their exchange cannot endure the light of day.

## Right or Wrong



The primary purpose of bribes is to “pervert the ways of justice,” which means both the briber and bribed are guilty. I once heard mother say that she wouldn’t bribe her children to do home chores, or wouldn’t pay them for basic domestic responsibilities. While this may be valid character formation, she confused bribes and rewards. A payment becomes a bribe if it’s offered to tempt some future vicious action. A payment for virtuous actions or services rendered is not a bribe, but a reward or wage.

## Clarifying Terms

The lines are often blurred between some words, so for a little more clarity:

- Gift: A benefit given voluntarily and without any expected return;
- Payment: A benefit given in exchange for defined goods or services;
- Reward: A benefit given in recognition of some service freely done;
- Gratuity: A reward given for excellent performance of contractual service;
- Wage: Money owed and paid for work done;
- Salary: Money owed and paid at regular intervals for work owed;
- Bribe: Anything offered and given as an enticement to do wrong.

When we can’t distinguish a bribe from a gratuity, it shows that we really can’t distinguish wrong from right. That’s a bigger problem we need to resolve for ourselves. We might, for example, give an appreciative gratuity to a waiter who poured free coffee refills at a breakfast meeting,



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but the waiter’s generosity reasonably assumes the owner’s willingness to absorb the minor cost of the coffee for the sake of a pleasant atmosphere and regular customers.

The issue may seem more obscure when it comes to the “necessity” of bribing a corporate officer or government official to actually perform their legal duty. Western firms working in Russia, for example, report facing demands from local officials there for gifts, simply to perform their legal regulatory duties. Is it a bribe, an enticement to do wrong, if we pay someone to do the right thing? But the issue isn’t really obscure. We’re enticing them to do wrong, because we’re enticing them to accept the bribe.

## OUR CREATOR, REDEEMER, AND FRIEND

Bribes bracketed the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Judas was bribed to betray Jesus (Matthew 26:15). The religious leaders, envious of Jesus’s popularity, bribed Judas with thirty pieces of silver—the price of a slave. A few days later, these same religious leaders bribed the Roman soldiers to deny Christ’s physical resurrection, and to say that his disciples stole his body out of the tomb (Matthew 28:11-15). Those who hate the truth purchase lies.

Until Jesus Christ physically returns to planet earth, bribery will continue to be commonplace among those who hate God.

## APPLICATION

- Memorize the text in your favourite Bible translation and think about it often.
- Sharpen your skills in distinguishing right from wrong.
- Think about various types of payments—be “unbuyable.”
- Beware of payments in excess of local commercial standards.

Which of these steps, if any, does Jesus want you to take now? Ask Him.



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## KEY WORDS

bribe, wisdom, dishonesty, honesty, justice, wicked, worse life (quality)

## ILLUSTRATION

Who is Quick Buck Betty?



Quick Buck Betty wants to make money fast, and is always looking for “hot tips.” Researching and understanding investments takes too long; she just cares about the returns—especially the short-term returns.

It doesn't matter how the money is earned—in fact she'd rather not know at all! Betty is just eager to “make it” or, even better, have someone else make it for her. She has little time for Steady Eddy and Diligent Daniel—their methods take too long.

Betty views the stock and bond markets like the lottery and casino. She doesn't invest; she gambles. She likes to “play” the markets. Day trading is one of her passions.

