

A Necessary Bribe?

I had several businesses going in my home country in Africa. One of them was transportation. My ethical dilemma involved one of my bus drivers who was stopped by the military who were patrolling the streets. The military men asked that we give them a substantial bribe, equivalent to hundreds of US dollars. I knew that it was illegal to bribe a government official but if I refused they would arrest my driver and impound my bus. It would probably cost more to bail the driver out than the cost of the bribe --- and it might take another two months to clear the bus. Trying to fight the case would be time consuming and would definitely affect my business. Considering all these difficulties, I just decided to give the bribe. But was this the right thing for me to do, especially as a Christian?

-E.

Dear E

A bribe is something valuable such as money that is given in order to influence the conduct of someone else, usually someone in authority. It is unfair because you are buying favors that will not be given to others. In addition to being against the law in most places, bribery is prohibited by biblical teaching. The Exodus law says "You shall take no bribe for a bribe blinds the clear-sighted and subverts the cause of those who are in the right" (Ex 23:8). Proverbs says "Whoever is greedy for unjust gain troubles his own household, but he who hates bribes will live" (15:27) and "the wicked accepts a bribe in secret to pervert the ways of justice" (17:23). The authorities bribed people to lie and say that Jesus' body had been stolen from the tomb (instead of resurrected) (Matthew 28). Bribery undermines communities and markets and nations and corrupts individuals.

If you had taken the initiative to bribe the police to favor your transportation company, we would have to immediately say it is wrong. But this case is a little different: this is better summarized as *extortion* or as a *ransom* payment demanded not for special favors but for ordinary, lawful conduct on public roads. So my inclination is to say you did the best you could under the circumstances.

Now the broader question is how can you help to change that horrible system and improve a culture of off-the-books payments, dishonesty, graft, and corruption. I think we start by preaching and teaching honesty and justice in our churches. Undoubtedly there are political and military and business leaders in the booming churches of Africa. Get to them with biblical truth and standards first and pray for them and urge them to stand up and use their influence to improve things.

Second, at all levels and in all spheres we need to educate people about the benefits of fairness and honesty and the downside of corruption (and bribery). Companies will not invest in areas where they suffer theft and bribery regularly. Third, organize other businesses to join you in a public protest of these practices. Call out the corrupt publically.

Of course, my advice from afar is cheap. Most important is for you to form a small group of fellow-Christian business leaders in your community and get together regularly to pray and brainstorm and discern how best and most faithfully to proceed.

-DWG