



Bribing Jesus

Every friendship is the result of a bribe.

You come to realize that when you're a man like Zacchaeus.

Oh, sure, some people will bribe with friendly acts or with time. Well, Zacchaeus, he bribed with money. It was the only way that people would spend time with him, that they would even pretend to enjoy his presence. If he threw lavish parties, if he promised not to take as much money from them – because, you see, Zacchaeus was a professional thief.

Now, they called him the chief tax collector. It meant it was legal; you couldn't really fight him. But he loved taking people's money. Which meant the only way someone would even pretend to be a friend was if Zacchaeus would bribe them. Zacchaeus knew that, and he was okay with it.

Most days.

But then, the friendships would wear thin. He'd want something real – something that wasn't the result of a bribe – but that wasn't going to happen, because every friendship is the result of a bribe.

Well, one day, there was this traveling rabbi passing through Jericho – through Zacchaeus's city – a guy by the name of Jesus. Zacchaeus was as curious as anyone else, and he figured, "Well, I can bribe Jesus. I'll offer him some money to come and talk to me, and well, that will raise my prestige, and I can bribe more people to be my friends. And well, let's see what this is all about!"

So Zacchaeus went out to the street, and a crowd, of course, had already gathered. Zacchaeus tried elbowing his way through, until he took an elbow to the nose.

A man turned. "Oh, sorry, Zacchaeus, didn't see you there! Ha!" And turned back into the crowd, disappearing.

Zacchaeus moved ahead in the crowd, trying to get ahead of Jesus. He pushed through again until someone stomped on his foot. "Oh, sorry, Zacchaeus, didn't see you there." He turned around again.

Oh, the bribery would do no good if he couldn't get to Jesus. He wanted to get to this Jesus! How could he do it?

Oh. What's that?

A sycamore-fig tree? Really?

With gnarled branches. Even a man like Zacchaeus might be able to climb that. Let's give it a try.

So the bark bit into his soft palms as Zacchaeus climbed the tree and perched on one of the thicker branches waiting for Jesus to pass by.

Who was it? Was it that man? That man?

And as an ordinary-looking man passed under the tree, he stopped, and he looked up. "Zacchaeus!" – it was Jesus! And Jesus said to Zacchaeus, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."

What?

What the – what? That made no sense! Zacchaeus hadn't bribed him! He hadn't done anything! Why would Jesus want to spend time with him? ...you can't have a friend without a bribe.

And this Jesus, he was supposed to be a holy man! Of course he wouldn't spend time with Zacchaeus unless there was something in it for him! How does this work?

Well, Zacchaeus wasn't going to let this opportunity go to waste. He scrambled down the tree, stumbled over to Jesus smiling, and they walked to Zacchaeus's house.

As they talked, something happened. Zacchaeus realized that this Jesus, no, he wasn't interested in money. And he wasn't interested in prestige – at least not in any way that Zacchaeus understood it. And he did condemn Zacchaeus's theft, and even his bribery.

But he still wanted to be Zacchaeus's friend.

How does that work?

Well, Zacchaeus, of course, threw a lavish party, welcoming Jesus into his home. But he wasn't throwing the party to try to make Jesus his friend, because Jesus had already claimed Zacchaeus as his friend.

Well, there were some people in the town not exactly happy with that. They began to grumble.

And something clicked inside of Zacchaeus: he didn't have to bribe Jesus to be a friend. Not with money, not with good works, not with anything. And that's the kind of person that Zacchaeus wanted to serve. And so he stood up, and he called out, "Look Lord! Here and now I give half my possessions to the poor! And if I have cheated anybody out of anything – I'll pay back four times the amount!"

And Jesus smiled and said, "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."

Now brother, sister, you who are listening:

You do not have to bribe Jesus with your good works or your money or your church attendance or anything else. He is not interested in what you do to get on his good side, because there's nothing you can *do* to earn that.

But he chooses to be your friend.

Now this is love: not that we loved Jesus, but that he loved us and gave himself to die for us.

That is friendship.

Luke 19:1-10

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