

Jesus said: “I tell you, make friends for yourselves with dishonest wealth, so that when it fails, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.” This saying is a bit confusing unless we understand the cultural context in which Jesus offered the advice. So, let’s back up a little bit to put things in perspective.

Jesus tells a parable about a dishonest steward who has been given his two-week notice. He is being let go because he has squandered the master’s property. The steward then calls in debtors and asks them to lower their promissory notes. “To the first he said, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He replied, ‘One hundred measures of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Here is your promissory note. Sit down and quickly write one for fifty.’” (Luke 16:5-6). The steward is not doing anything to further harm the master. Rather, he is taking his own customary charge and reducing it to zero. He reasons, he will have more good will with the debtors than if he tries to collect a debt when he is no longer working for the master. And the master commends the steward for his decision to give away his own property that he may find a sympathetic debtor willing to cut him a break when he is unemployed. “The parable, then, teaches the prudent use of one’s material goods in light of an imminent crisis” (Note 16:1-8).

So back to the saying of Jesus, “make friends for yourselves with dishonest wealth” refers to the outrageous commission that the steward was charging. He made friends by having the debtors pay the master’s wholesale price for the olive oil and wheat with no markup for himself. We see this in practice when a store is going out of business. They will slash prices by 40% or 50 % in order to pay for the goods they purchased from another...thus reducing their debt to their masters.

So how might this apply to our circumstances. When we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we pray “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Sometimes the word ‘trespasses’ can be translated as ‘sins’ or ‘debts.’ So we can understand the saying of Jesus to mean, ‘I tell you, make friends for yourselves with those who have harmed you by forgiving their sins, so that when your health fails and you die, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.’

Another way to understand the saying is in terms of dishonest wealth. Let us take the example of a business that has made their money on the sale of tobacco. Nicotine is a drug found in cigarettes that causes cancer. What might a company do to make amends for the harm they have caused by profiting on a drug that has killed many and caused ill health to many others? After protracted legal battles, the tobacco companies admitted to making cigarettes more addictive and targeting youth so that they would have customers for life. Because of the combined legal efforts of many state’s attorney generals, cigarette manufacturers were forced to set aside money to fund programs to help stop smoking. This is a partial solution. Those who died cannot be brought back to life. Those who have lung disease suffer and even if awarded some financial compensation, money does not really undo the damage. And the continued sale of tobacco continues to do harm.

A better solution to dishonest wealth is restorative justice. Let’s take a different example, that of a bootlegger or a drug dealer who has made their wealth at the expense of the health of the community. With restorative justice the offender must try to make amends to all the people that have been harmed. Apologizing to victims, performing community service, and forfeiting any ill-gotten gain are all appropriate. The seriousness of a crime may also necessitate time in jail. This time can be used wisely if it is accompanied by some soul searching. Honest introspection can help a person to turn over a new leaf so that when they return to the community, they can work at building it up rather than tearing it down. “I tell you, make friends for yourselves with dishonest wealth, so that when it fails, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.”