International Online Teachers Society

American Expression E2793 Rob Peter to pay Paul

IOTS Publishing Team
International Online Teachers Society
Since 2011

"Rob Peter to pay Paul" is a traditional English idiom meaning to solve one financial problem by creating another, usually by taking money or resources intended for one purpose and using them for something else. For example, if someone uses money reserved for rent to pay a credit card bill, they may be robbing Peter to pay Paul. The immediate debt is paid, but another important obligation remains.

The names Peter and Paul are traditionally associated with the Christian apostles Saint Peter and Saint Paul. Various stories have been offered to explain the exact historical origin of the expression, but its origin is not completely certain. The phrase has existed in different forms for centuries. Whatever its precise history, the modern meaning is clear: resources are taken from one obligation to satisfy another obligation of comparable importance.

The verb "rob" makes the expression particularly vivid. It does not usually mean that someone is literally committing robbery. Instead, it suggests depriving one person, account, responsibility, or purpose in order to benefit another. Imagine having only enough money to pay either an electricity bill or a telephone bill. Using the electricity money for the telephone may temporarily solve one problem while leaving the other unpaid and troublesome.

The idiom is frequently used when discussing personal finances. Someone who continually moves money between bills without having enough income to cover all expenses may feel trapped in a cycle of robbing Peter to pay Paul. Borrowing from one credit card to make payments on another can be another example. Such actions may provide short-term relief, but they generally do not address the underlying shortage of available money.

The expression can also apply to governments, companies, and organizations. A business might reduce its maintenance budget to cover unexpectedly high operating expenses. A government might redirect resources from one public program to finance another urgent program. A manager could move employees from one understaffed department to another, solving the second department's immediate problem while making the first department weaker. These situations can all resemble robbing Peter to pay Paul.

However, not every transfer of money or resources deserves this description. Organizations regularly move funds according to changing priorities, and careful reallocation can be sensible management. The idiom is most appropriate when solving one problem leaves another equally serious problem behind. It therefore usually carries a negative tone. The speaker suggests that the action is temporary, unsustainable, or ineffective because the fundamental problem has merely been moved somewhere else.

In conclusion, "rob Peter to pay Paul" means taking money, resources, time, or support from one necessary purpose to satisfy another, without truly improving the overall situation. It describes a solution that may appear helpful in the short term but creates or worsens another problem. The idiom is especially useful when discussing debt, limited budgets, competing responsibilities, or shortages. A person who borrows money to pay another debt, a company that neglects maintenance to cover current expenses, or an organization that weakens one department to strengthen another may all be robbing Peter to pay Paul. The expression reminds us that moving a problem from one place to another is not the same as solving it. A lasting solution usually requires addressing the underlying shortage, balancing priorities carefully, and ensuring that one important responsibility is not continually sacrificed simply to satisfy another.

Questions for Discussion

1. Have you ever had to "rob Peter to pay Paul" when managing money or other resources?
2. Why can robbing Peter to pay Paul become a serious financial problem over time?
3. Can you give an example of a company or government robbing Peter to pay Paul?
4. What are some better alternatives to robbing Peter to pay Paul when money is limited?
5. Do you think borrowing money to pay another debt is always an example of robbing Peter to pay Paul? Why or why not?