

Appendix

WHAT ABOUT GAMBLING?

In 1993, I received a call from a distant acquaintance of mine. Though I rarely talk to her, she was calling me because her husband had just revealed to her that he had lost \$17,000 playing poker, and she didn't know where else to turn. She found out that he had been involved in this for some time without her knowledge, traveling 50 miles—sometimes weekly—to play. Though the gambling was illegal, and thus the debt couldn't legally be recovered, he was afraid of the threat of violence to his family.

They were not doing well financially, but eventually they borrowed money from a bank to pay off the debt. Though she stood with her husband through this, and it seems (as far as I know) he hasn't repeated it, the ordeal took a toll on their marriage and family. The loss affected not only their relationships, but also their housing choices and their children's college education.

I have since had a number of conversations with people whose financial circumstances have been devastated by gambling. Unlike the story above, most of it has been "legal" gambling, through state-sponsored lotteries and licensed casinos. How should we as Christians respond to this issue in society, and how should we make our personal choices about gambling?

THE GAMBLING EXPLOSION

At one time, gambling was considered an indulgence that was at best, indiscreet, and at worst, a definite sin. Though it was practiced widely in secret (as it still is in sports betting and makeshift poker games), it was considered an inappropriate subject to discuss openly. Most people thought of it as a form of entertainment for irresponsible single men. All of that has changed dramatically.

Since 1970 there has been an explosion of gambling in the United States. All but three of the states have legalized gambling of some sort. Two-thirds of the states have a state-sponsored lottery. In 1976, Americans spent 17.3 million dollars gambling; by 1995 that amount rose to over 500 *billion* dollars. Some estimate that now the figure is over one *trillion* dollars.¹

Huge political issues swirl around the topic of state-sponsored gambling. They include the massive potential income to the state, the legitimacy of government using

gambling as a form of taxation, the impact on communities, the source of school funding, and much more.

Even greater questions surround the social impact of gambling on a community. The evidence against gambling is not merely anecdotal. In fact, the conclusions of scholarly research is clear. The advent of casinos raises crime, does not provide more jobs or income in the community, and increases indebtedness, child neglect, and alcohol and drug related offenses. It devastates families, brings corruption into local and state government, and has unequal impact on the poor. Common sense would tell us that gambling is not a good bet, but the power of the gambling lobby is incredible, and the carrot of massive income for the state is too tempting for politicians to pass up.

While it would be interesting to spend time considering all of this evidence, it is more important for us to consider our response as Christians. Should Christian believers participate in gambling – whether it is in the form of playing in the Saturday night poker game with your friends, buying lottery tickets, playing slot machines in convenience stores, or going to casinos like the ones we are now building in Detroit? This is an immensely practical question because over 50% of people participate yearly in a state-sponsored lottery, and nearly 30% gamble in a casino every year. There is no evidence that the statistics are any different among Christians. Christian young people in the Detroit area commonly go to Windsor on a Friday or Saturday night to visit the casinos (you can go play in the Casinos in Windsor at age eighteen and the drinking age is nineteen). Most believers have never thought through the implications of gambling. While we can't force the people of this world to live by God's standards, we believers should always evaluate our lifestyle choices in light of them.

FOUR REASONS WHY CHRISTIANS SHOULD AVOID GAMBLING

In light of the pervasive presence and acceptance of gambling, it seems a bit unrealistic to speak against it. However, even though it is true that there is no verse of the Bible that says, "Do not gamble," gambling clearly violates some basic scriptural principles that we have looked at in these studies.

Gambling Promotes An Irresponsible Use Of The Resources God Has Entrusted To You

As we saw in the first lesson, everything that we have comes from God and belongs to God. God has entrusted these things to us so we might learn to use all things for his glory.

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10.31)

Unfortunately, gambling is connected with the absurd notion that the longer you do it the better your odds become of winning. This is why so many people continue to gamble long after they've exhausted their resources. People internally figure, "I know I've lost fifteen times today, but that just means I've got a win coming to me!" Of course, if the odds of winning the lottery are one-million-to-one, those odds never change. For the first ticket you buy or one-millionth, the odds will always be one-million-to-one. The chances of losing are enormous. You might as well let your dollars go one-by-one out of the window of your car on the highway just to watch them fly away!

Gambling is irresponsible because it disregards the ways God has commanded us to use his resources—earning, saving, spending, or giving.

Gambling Cultivates Covetousness Rather Than Contentment

One of the ten commandments is "Do not covet" (Exodus 20.17; Deuteronomy 5.21). To covet means to feel excessive desire to possess something that belongs to another. In simple terms, it means to want more when you have enough. Paul tells us that, as a Pharisee, this was the one commandment that told him he was a sinner. He could keep all of the other commandments outwardly and congratulate himself on his obedience. But coveting involved his desires, which he sometimes felt so unable to control (Romans 7.7–12).

The whole basis of gambling is the innate desire people have to get rich quick. It is based on the hope that I can gain a large amount of resources with little effort. This is an attitude the Bible condemns, as we saw in chapter five (Proverbs 28.20). In addition, gambling involves a constant appeal to coveting. This is diametrically opposed to the unselfishness and others-centered love that God seeks to instill in us, as seen, for example, in John 15.12; Ephesians 5.2; and 1 Peter 4.8.

Contentment is a great gift. It is based on the assurance of God's presence and grace. Note this command and promise:

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."
(Hebrews 13.5)

This enjoyment is completely unconnected with our financial state. An improper emphasis on gaining money is a sign that the soul is not satisfied with God. The solution is to passionately pursue God not money.

Gambling Undermines the Self-Discipline of Hard Work, Budgeting, and Saving

If there is anything that is underscored in the Bible, it is the value of hard work. From the day God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden to “work it and take care of it,” the importance and value of labor became an indispensable part of life (Genesis 2.15). The Bible tells us God intends human beings to support themselves only by hard work and the managing and saving of the fruits of their labor (Genesis 3.19). There is no doubt that it requires effort and self-restraint to use our money wisely, but the proverb is true, “He who gathers money little by little makes it grow” (Proverbs 13.11).

Gambling undermines this discipline by tempting us to circumvent God’s financial principles in an attempt to get a large amount of money for little expense and little effort.

Gambling Is Driven By A Desire For Immediate Gratification

The basic story of Jesus is that he was willing to sacrifice his comfort, his reputation, and his life for our redemption. His focus was on the kingdom, not on the temporary gratification of pleasure in this world. His willingness to forego present comfort for eternal gain is to be the pattern of our lives (Philippians 2.5–11; Hebrews 12.1–3).

Every parent knows that one of the chief responsibilities they have is to teach their children to control their desires. Immediate gratification is what we feel our urges require, but we learn as life goes on that we often need to delay the satisfaction of some desire. Whether it is the desire for food, sex, or money, immediate gratification can be dangerous and destructive.

Gambling is focused on immediate gratification. It is a desire to take a shortcut from the path God has arranged for us to earn our keep. The Bible condemns this, “You can have it now!” attitude that is so prevalent in our culture (Proverbs 21.17, 25–26). We shouldn’t buy into that lie. God wants us to focus our attention and energy on what is lasting and really important.

CONCLUSION

Some form of gambling is legal in 47 out of 50 states. But the fact that it is legal shouldn’t blind us to the fact that it is dangerous and wrong. We Christians don’t make our behavior choices based on the shifting rules of our culture, but on the unchanging principles of God’s word. Regardless of what many people think is right, we should choose to live in a way that fosters our self-discipline, financial self-reliance, submission

to God, and generous spirit. Gambling undermines all of those virtues. Regardless of how popular or prevalent gambling is, Christians should refrain from it.

¹ The statistical and research information in this appendix is taken from the “1999 Report to the National Gambling Impact Study Commission” by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago. This report, and other information from the NORC, may be accessed at <http://www.norc.uchicago.edu>. See also the website *Gambling & More*, January 19, 1999, <http://www.addiction.net>.