

Don't Play the Lottery for Me!

By Pastor John Piper

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The West Virginia pastors who accepted Jack Whittaker's tithe on his \$170 million Powerball booty should be ashamed of themselves. One of them said, "That's a blessing to have that kind of backing." I don't think so.

Christ does not build his church on the backs of the poor. The engine that delivers his righteousness in the world is not driven by the desire to get rich. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not advanced by undermining civic virtue. Let the pastors take their silver and throw it back into the temple of greed.

In 2001 Americans wagered \$57 billion dollars on lotteries, \$18 billion on horses and dogs, \$592 billion in casinos, and \$150 billion on other gambling. This is a blot on American life. Break it down to individuals. Massachusetts sells more than \$500 worth of lottery tickets each year for every man, woman, and child. Think how many do not gamble, and you will begin to imagine what thousands are throwing away to have a 1-to-135,145,920 chance for the jackpot.

The American exploitation of the poor with lotteries muddies the conscience of many legislators. Statistics abound that "the government-sponsored lottery continues its shameless exploitation of the poor" (James Dobson, April, 1999 Newsletter). This exploitation is explicit in some of the advertising bought by the \$400 million spent annually by states to promote lotteries. For example, in Chicago one sign read: "This could be your ticket out." That is shameless. Other promotions mock the virtues of hard work and serious study as a way to make a living. Plan A: Study hard, save money, get old. Plan B: Play the lottery.

Only a few, it seems, are willing to say how far and how manifold are the corrupting effects of the lottery. How many have pondered this insight from Richard Neuhaus, "In a democracy, the need for popular consent to tax is a powerful check on government growth and irresponsibility. A government that raises money by encouraging and exploiting the weaknesses of its citizens escapes that democratic mechanism of accountability. As important, state-sponsored gambling undercuts the civic virtue upon which democratic governance depends" (First Things, Sept., 1991, p. 12).

Is it a "blessing" for the church of Jesus Christ to have the backing of a social sickness that "destroys marriages, undermines the work ethic, increases crime, motivates suicide, destroys the financial security of families . . . and dupes people into believing [it] will benefit the children" (Dobson)?

Don't play Powerball for me. And don't play it for Bethlehem. I go on record now that I will not knowingly take any money won from gambling. And I will do my best to lead the elders of our church from accepting any money offered to this church from the proceeds of gambling.

We are followers of Jesus. He had no place to lay his head and did not accept the demonic temptation to jump off the temple for the jackpot of instant recognition. The Calvary road is not paved with Powerball tickets, but with blood. The Church was bought once by One who refused the short cut of instant triumph. It will never be bought by those who dream of riches.

The lottery is another opportunity to pierce your soul with many pangs, and lead your children into ruin. The Bible says, "Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. . . . Some by longing for it . . . and pierced themselves with many a pang (1 Timothy 6:9-10). In other words, the desire to be rich is suicidal. And endorsing it is cruel.

It is wrong to wager with a trust fund. And all we have, as humans, is a trust fund. Everything we have is a trust from God, to be used for his glory. "[God] himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything" (Acts 17:25). Faithful trustees may not gamble with a trust fund. They work and trade: value for value, just and fair. This is the pattern again and again in Scripture. And when you are handling the funds of another, how much more irresponsible it is to wager!

Don't play the Lottery for Bethlehem Baptist Church. We will not, I pray, salve your conscience by taking one dime of your plunder, or supporting even the thought of your spiritual suicide. Let the widow give her penny and the laborer his wage. And keep your life free from the love of money.

By John Piper. ©Desiring God Ministries. Website: www.desiringGOD.org. Email: mail@desiringGOD.org. Toll Free: 888-346-4700.