

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS ON GAMBLING

(Taken from a pamphlet by The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the SBC)

The Bible upholds changeless moral values. It proclaims everlasting principles. It outlines the importance of loving God with our whole hearts and our neighbors as ourselves. And it gives practical help in enabling us to reject wrong and choose right. The moral ideals of the Bible and the bible's insistence on obedience to the will of God are crucial for our examination and assessment of any issue involving human behavior, including the issue of gambling. Although the bible does not have a direct commandment, which explicitly prohibits gambling, it does contain some very relevant teachings, which inform the Christian who seeks moral guidance on the matter. These teachings, when looked at collectively, make a powerful case against gambling and against any view which regards gambling as a trivial matter. Here are some of the ways in which gambling violates the biblical principles that God has provided to guide us in our relationship with Him and with each other.

GAMBLING VIOLATES THE PRINCIPLE OF LORDSHIP

Obedience to the will of God who is our sovereign authority allows no room for subservience to false gods such as chance, fate or "Lady Luck." Life's issues for Christians are settled by reference to the God who rules over all persons, all time and all events. The great issues of life cannot be appropriately settled by the roll of the dice or the turn of a card.

God spoke against dependence on luck or chance more than 2,500 years ago. Through the prophet Isaiah he spoke against those "who forsake the Lord and forget my holy mountain, who spread a table for Fortune and fill bowls of mixed wine for Destiny." (Isaiah 65:11, NIV)

The deities mentioned here, Fortune and Destiny, were the pagan gods of fate who served as symbols of good luck and bad luck. The prophet's protest was against those Israelites who trusted in the false gods of chance rather than in God. God makes it clear that His people are to "have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3)

GAMBLING VIOLATES THE PRINCIPLE OF SPIRITUAL PRIORITIES

Gambling elevates materialistic gain to a dominant place in a person's life. Hence it runs counter to Jesus; insistence that we cannot at the same time love God and money (Matthew 6:24) Preoccupation with material gain ignores the biblical warnings against greed and an unreasonably strong desire to obtain money. "The love of money is the root of all evil" (1 Timothy 6:10) Even the small-time gambler and the occasional bettor contribute a pattern of greed and the exaltation of the false god of mammon. "Beware of covetousness," said Jesus, "for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth" (Luke 12:15) the insatiable desire for gain, all too common in modern American culture, often wrecks lives. The essence of life consists in the love of God and neighbor (Matthew 22:34-40), in friendships (John 15:13), in contentment and gratitude (Philippians 4:11), in peace (1 Corinthians 14:33) and in enriching family relationships (Matthew 19:4-5)

Supporters of gambling may argue that gambling is recreation and entertainment. However, behind these arguments lies the economic self-interest of the pro-gambling

groups. Their main motive is materialistic gain, with little regard for moral and social consequences. The so-called economic benefits that allegedly follow a policy of legalized gambling come only to an infinitesimally few persons. A few commercial interests may profit from increased tourism related to gambling. Some low-income jobs may be created. But the costs for these are high. Gambling syndicates weave a web of influence and control over a city's life. Society as a whole actually suffers great losses in wrecked lives, misappropriated funds, wasted paychecks, and undermined family life.

The one clear instance of gambling in the bible illustrates the compassionless nature of gambling. This illustration appears at a time of severe personal pain and loss. As Jesus hung dying on a cross, the Roman soldiers cared only for who would benefit from His loss. The Bible tells us that they cast lots to see who would get His clothing (Matthew 27:35)

We must keep in mind that what these soldiers were doing was not the same as the activity of casting lots that was practiced by the Jews and the early Christians. According to the biblical accounts, the practice of casting lots was used to discern God's will in significant issues or courses of action (Numbers 26:52-56, Acts 1:26)

Two facts must be kept in mind when one considers the biblical use of "lots." First when this method was used by God's people, the purpose was to determine God's will in a matter. Israel's religion, with its disdain for witchcraft, communication with the dead, astrology, and related magical arts, allowed no room for blind submission to fate or dependence upon chance. Second, the settlement of issues through recourse to lots was eventually discarded by the people of God. Matters thereafter were referred more directly to the Spirit of truth who guided the affairs of the churches.

GAMBLING VIOLATES THE PRINCIPLE OF LOVE

The central moral imperative of the Bible is love of God and love of neighbor (Matthew 22:37-40 and Mar 12:28-34). Love imposes strong demands upon us every day of our lives. Any tendency to limit love should be checked by Jesus' admonition for us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. The word "neighbor," of course, includes all the men and women and children in the entire human family. Love leads us to seek the welfare or interests of the other. It never allows us the luxury of self-interest to the exclusion of the other person's interest and needs (Philippians 2:3-4; Romans 12:10, 13:10). Love is the royal law (James 2:8), the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2), and the principle by which our lives are to be regulated (Romans 14:13-21).

Love refuses to engage in actions that mistreat or exploit others. Love results in a life of self-giving to others. What does gambling do, for example, to compassion and the concern for others which are the foundation of Christian brotherhood? Love is surely violated when personal pleasure and profit are gained at another's pain and loss. The tenth commandment states, **"Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbor's"** (Exodus 20:17)

Love requires that we recognize and attempt to meet the needs of others. Gambling, with its exploitation of others, ignores the nobler qualities of humanity, among which are reason, justice, compassion, and a sense of responsibility. Gambling weakens the foundations of a responsible community life. Love's work, on the other hand, is always to build up, never to tear down.

GAMBLING VIOLATES THE PRINCIPLE OF STEWARDSHIP

Property and goods are provided in trust by a gracious God. Wealth and economic goods are not in themselves evil but may be the occasion of sin if the owner acquires them in covetousness and uses them without reference to God's intention. Ultimately all things belong to God (Psalms 24:1,50:10-12, 1 Corinthians 10:26). This must under gird our attitude toward and our use of the possessions for which we are responsible. The recognition that God owns all the things in this world is the beginning of a right relationship to things. Out of this awareness there arises a fitting response: we give ourselves to Him (2 Corinthians 8:5). Thus the discharge of stewardship begins in the surrender of self to the sovereign will of God. From that inward dedication we move to the sober and grateful handling of our stewardship in economic matters (Luke 12:42-48; Matthew 25:14-46).

The Bible indicates certain uses of money or property which are in accord with the intention of God. Money may be used to provide for our basic needs (2 Thessalonians 3:10), support one's family (1 Timothy 5:8), contribute to the Lord's work (1 Corinthians 16:1-3), meet human needs (Ephesians 4:28; 2 Corinthians 9:6-15), give to the poor (John 13:29), and pay taxes (Matthew 25:22:21; Romans 13:7).

Such conscientious handling of one's resources precludes gambling. There is ground for wise investment of one's wealth with a hope for a sensible return (Matthew 25:14-30), but this can hardly be used to sanction gambling risks. The injunction to "**lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven**" invites the most careful attitude toward expenditures of any kind (Matthew 6:19-21).

Particularly reprehensible are those attempts to gain property through dishonest or exploitative practices. In the Bible, stealing is condemned (Exodus 20:15; Matthew 19:18; Ephesians 4:28). Equally condemned is the accumulation of wealth through the exploitation of others (James 5:1-4). Honest work and honest wages goes together, for "**the laborer is worthy of his hire**" (Luke 10:7). The Lord of the harvest will deal sharply with those who deviate from this basic norm.

GAMBLING VIOLATES THE PRINCIPLE OF WORK

The divine command rings clear that one should labor and do one's work (Exodus 20:9; Ephesians 4:28; 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12). Work has a functional value; it is rooted in necessity. It is also rooted in creation. Each person is obligated under God to work. This work must be in keeping with God's intention. The curse pronounced upon the ground, following the Fall, is not a curse upon work itself but recognition of the frustration and hardship that attend humanity's quest for bread in this fallen world. (Genesis 3:17-19)

Work affords the means of sustaining one's life and supporting one's dependents. Work is related to the use of the earth's resources. The able person who refuses to work has no right to eat. No one is to "sponge" off others. Idleness, so Paul reasoned, is a form of impiety because it repudiates work which is the divinely appointed way of caring for one's household (2 Thessalonians 3:6-12; 1 Timothy 5:8).

Work is related to creativity. It is sharing in God's activity in the world. Thus the type of employment whereby a living is gained must agree with the purpose of God and must form a part of the world's needed work. Some forms of work may be socially and

morally degrading and, therefore, inconsistent with the divine intention or with human good.

It is through work that humans also express their essential being. God is a worker, and we are to work (John 5:17). Work is an unfolding of the inner self. Work adds to personal fulfillment and self-respect.

GAMBLING VIOLATES THE PRINCIPLE OF WITNESS

Biblical teachings urge that individuals wisely use both their freedom and their influence. We are enjoined to “**abstain from all appearance of evil**” (1 Thessalonians 5:22), to “**hate what is evil**” (Romans 12:9), and to work faithfully as our Lord Himself who “**went about doing good**” (Acts 10:38). Paul’s view that freedom must be exercised responsibly is particularly relevant. The actions of the individual Christian are to be disciplined toward the moral and spiritual welfare of others for whom Christ died (Romans 14:13-21; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13). All forms of conduct need to be subjected to a controlling motive: “Do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Accordingly, our influence as Christians is to be exerted in a positive and aggressive fashion for the build of community life in which the young and the weak and the aging and the needy are protected. Influence and power are not something to be hidden or hoarded. They are to be used for the furthering of Christian values in public affairs. Influence and power refer to the impact of one person upon others. Power and influence may be exercised through moral persuasion, appeals to moral law, and through attempts to establish the common good. Influence at its best is a moral force at work to overcome evil and work diligently for good.

GAMBLING VIOLATES THE PRINCIPLE OF THE CIVIL MAGISTRATE

Civil government is ordained by God to promote good behavior. The purpose of civil government is to assure the protection of the citizens it serves (Romans 13:1-4). By promoting gambling the civil authority becomes the equivalent of a bookie, encouraging sinful and damaging behavior by the populace in order to get its cut. This perversion of the civil magistrate’s god-ordained purpose is realized in any form of gambling. By taxing casino and pari-mutuel gambling, the civil magistrate benefits from the pain of its own citizens who have lost the money that others have won. By promoting lottery gambling the civil magistrate become the predator, seeking gain at the expense of those it is entrusted to protect. Many of those people from whom the government wins its money are the weakest and most vulnerable among its populace. Such activity violates the principle of rewarding good and punishing evil that god has specifically entrusted to the civil magistrate (Jeremiah 22:1-3)

CONCLUSION

Biblical faith, with its stress on loyalty to God and its call to a life of trust, tolerates no bowing of the knee to luck, no dependence on chance, no encouragement to try to get something for nothing. Such idolatrous practices introduce grossly unspiritual and painfully unethical factors into a person life and outlook. In addition, gambling contributes nothing to the common good. It undermines values, mocks work, finances crime, robs children, enslaves its addicts, subverts governments, and poisons whatever it touches. Biblical insights lead us to reject false promises and say “**NO**” to gambling.