

GAMBLING – NO MORAL QUESTION?

By Forrest Claunch

Many would say, “I can control my spending, and it is, after all, only entertainment.”

If one is willing to set aside the component of greed in gambling, or the trust in luck or money instead of God, or the abuse of the poorest among us by gambling promoters, or even the responsibility to do good, not harm, I suppose one could rationalize their desire to gamble.

If it is true, and it is, that compulsive and pathological behavior will increase with the availability of gambling, and theft and embezzlement, divorce and abuse of family, financial problems, and even murders documented in association with problem gamblers, should moral people promote, approve or participate in gambling?

The idea my actions have no relevance for others in society and I can act and be unharmed is wrong.

The Scripture speaks to several problem attitudes associated with gambling. Paul addressed a problem of his day, whether or not to eat meat sacrificed to idols, in I Corinthians chapter 8, and made it very plain we have liberty, but a greater responsibility. It is not acceptable for me to condone or participate in that which causes a brother to stumble. In fact, Paul says it is not whether or not I have knowledge and will be unaffected, but the impact upon the brother’s life that is to determine my actions.

When “every man did that which was right in his own eyes,” (Judges 21:25) it was not the plan of God or the producer of good.

The state knows it will have to deal with gambling addictions; most state lotteries provide that some of the revenue from lottery ticket sales must be used for addressing problem gamblers. What is good or even common about the state government promoting a program that will knowingly create addicts?

“But the state is a secular institution,” some would say, “and the church is not implicated in what the state does.” Really? Is the church to be silent? Where is the Christian relieved of the obligation to work for good and bear an influence in every part of life?

Consider the following points as you reflect upon what Christ would have us do on the issue of gambling:

1. Problem and pathological gamblers impact society and cost taxpayers through unemployment benefit costs, welfare benefits, physical and mental health problems, theft, embezzlement, higher bankruptcy, suicide, domestic violence, and child abuse and neglect.¹
2. Pathological gamblers have higher imprisonment rates than non-pathological gamblers. A third of problem and pathological gamblers have been arrested, compared to 4% of non-gamblers.¹
3. Based on projections of existing research, there may already be as many as 9.3 million adults and 1.3 million teenagers with some form of problem gambling behavior in the United States. State gambling revenues come disproportionately from lower income residents. Problem gambling behaviors are highest among the poor and minorities.²
4. Researchers now call gambling the fastest growing teen age addiction, with the rate of pathological gambling among high school and college-age youth about twice that of adults.³ According to Howard J. Shaffer, Director of the Harvard Medical School Center for Addiction

¹ *Final Report*, The National Gambling Impact Study Commission, June 1999, p.7-14

² *Legalized Gambling As A Strategy For Economic Development*, United States Gambling Study, Robert Goodman, March 1994, p.17

³ *Christian Science Monitor*, April 25, 1990

Studies, “We will face in the next decade or so more problems with youth gambling than we’ll face with drug use.”⁴

5. MURDER in Oklahoma because of gambling problems? Yes, Ronald Dunaway Fluke was executed in Oklahoma March 27, 2001 for the murder of his family. He pleaded guilty in 1998 for the murders in Tulsa of his wife, Ginger Lou Fluke, 44, and their daughters, Kathryn Lee Fluke, 11, and Susanne Michelle Fluke, 13. A compulsive gambler, Fluke had said he wanted to spare his wife and daughters the embarrassment of what he viewed as his impending financial doom.⁵
6. THEFT IN OKLAHOMA because of problem gambling happens now. A complaint by a customer of the McCurtain County National Bank opened an investigation of bank President Donald Wyrick. By the time bank officials and FBI agents had finished, they found that Wrick had stolen \$2.8 million to feed a gambling addiction. The conviction of Wrick led to a more than 6 year sentence in federal prison.⁶ “Kiefer’s Loss Blamed On Ex-Clerk’s Bingo Habit,” is the headline of a story about the embezzlement of \$250,000 from a small Oklahoma town. “Much of the \$250,000 missing from Kiefer’s town coffers was used to support the former town clerk’s bingo habit, state Auditor and Inspector Clifton Scott said Monday.”⁷
7. CORRUPTION IN OFFICE and the impact upon lives can surely be seen in the conviction and imprisonment of the former Deputy Director of the Oklahoma Health Department. He took money from at least one nursing home owner to advise him in advance when inspections were to be held, and he used the money to feed his gambling habit. Was the compulsion to gamble worth a long-term career, the impact upon his family and prison now, disgrace forever? Equally as important, were any nursing home patients lacking in care or abused because inspectors would never be able to inspect day-to-day operations as they existed without prior warning?

Problems increase with the convenience of gambling, so how is it possible to support an activity we know will bring increased addiction, abuse, neglect, suicide, divorce and societal costs to Oklahomans?

In all other forms of gambling, the state approves of the particular activity, but with a lottery, the state also promotes aggressively the activity, knowing the more people lose, the more the state receives; an immoral position at the very least.

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⁴ New York Times, April 28, 1992

⁵ The Daily Oklahoman, March 28, 2001

⁶ The Daily Oklahoman, Saturday, May 26, 2001

⁷ The Daily Oklahoman, Tuesday, October 14, 1997