

Does Mutual Consent Eliminate the Evil in Gambling?

Scripture: Exodus 20:15; Ephesians 4:28; Ephesians 5:3; Colossians 3:5-6; 1 Timothy 6:10; Hebrews 13:5

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We are looking at four essential characteristics in a standard definition of gambling. I have argued that each of the four characteristics involves a violation of one or more vital biblical principles.

In other words, gambling is sinful for more than one reason. It's wrong on *several* counts. When you gamble, whether you win or lose, you violate God's moral law—quite possibly on multiple levels.

My previous post began this argument by pointing out that if you merely *participate in a gambling contest with a desire to win*, you are guilty of coveting that which belongs to your neighbor. The tenth commandment expressly forbids that.

Now consider the second of gambling's four distinguishing features. Here is, I believe, the most significant evil inherent in the practice of gambling:

2. In a gambling contest, something that belongs to someone else is placed at stake as the prize. The person who collects that prize violates the eighth commandment: "Thou shalt not steal" (Exodus 20:15).

I began this series of posts by recounting an incident where a college student challenged my views on gambling. He argued that winning a wager is *not* really the same as stealing, because the winnings are put up as a stake *by mutual consent*.

But when someone commits an act that causes hurt to another person, even if he does it with the victim's full permission, the mere fact of prior consent does not necessarily absolve *either party* from guilt. Lots of crimes are carried out and sins are committed by mutual consent that are nonetheless immoral or illegal. In such cases, mutual consent usually means that the moral culpability in the wrongdoing is *shared jointly by both parties*. It does not eliminate the guilt of the perpetrator.

A duel, for example, is a contest where one opponent kills another by mutual consent. The fact of the victim's consent does not absolve the victor from the guilt of murder, either in the eyes of God or in the eyes of the state. (I realize, of course, that certain societies have sometimes permitted dueling. That does not alter the immorality of the practice. It is certainly not justifiable by any *biblical* standard.) Kill someone in a duel in a just and civilized society, and you probably *will* be charged with murder.

Gambling is to theft what dueling is to murder.

Gambling is stealing by mutual consent. *But it is still stealing*. It is the taking of that which belongs to your neighbor and to which you have no right. It is not like a gift, which is given willingly and gratuitously. It is a loss he sustains to his hurt, even though he gives his consent to the contest before the die is cast.

Gambling is therefore morally tantamount to stealing. As such, it is a violation of every biblical principle regarding the gaining and sharing of our possessions.

Ephesians 4:28 says, "Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth." *That* is the spirit of Christianity, and it is the polar opposite of the various sentiments that drive gambling.

Is there no place for a "friendly bet?"

The question of whether penny-ante gambling is a *petty* sin is quite different from the question of whether it's a sin at all. If it's a matter of *principle* that makes gambling wrong, and not a particular amount, we ought to recognize that fact and acknowledge it. I'm expressly arguing that gambling is wrong *in principle*.

But to be clear: I'm *not* arguing that all forms of gambling are *equally egregious*. I'm not suggesting that church discipline should be carried out against Christians who play penny-ante poker. It should be fairly obvious that the size and seriousness of the wrong in a gambling contest is proportional to the amount gambled (among other factors).

Just in case that is *not* clear to someone, however, let me state plainly that I am not trying to portray the guy who plays Texas Holdem for spare nickels as a miscreant on the same level as the guy who foolishly bets the family farm on the spin of a roulette wheel. Gambling, like any sin, is wrong by degrees.

So I will gladly stipulate that the wrong in betting spare change is ordinarily quite trivial. We could probably list a whole lot of similarly trivial sins. I would argue, however, that in no case is it ever wise or even morally justifiable for Christians to practice *any* sin (even at a level we might all agree is "trivial")—*especially* for entertainment purposes, or with the express purpose of perfecting one's technique.

Trivial sins are, after all, still *sins*.

The problem with trivial sins is that when they are tolerated—especially when they are *nurtured* and *defended*—they tend to become big and bold. They also breed other sins. A £5-per-week addiction to playing the lottery will feed an awful lot of covetous fantasies.

It's really no wonder crime statistics are always higher wherever gambling is freely indulged in. In a society that caters to people's covetousness by sanctioning a form of larceny, we should not be surprised when other kinds of crime increase as well.

Feed the sins of "trivial" covetousness and thievery, and they will beget more evil. That's why Paul instructed the Ephesians to get as far from the sin of covetousness as they could. Notice that he ranked it along with fornication as the kind of sin that should never be dabbled in at *any* level: "But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, *let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints*" (Ephesians 5:3).

Some people think all kinds of covetousness are "trivial," but the apostle *often* listed covetousness right alongside the most heinous of sins: "Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth;

fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and *covetousness, which is idolatry*: for which things' sake the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience" (Colossians 3:5-6).

So the sin of covetousness, which lies behind every form of gambling, is in the same category of wickedness as the sin of fornication. What do you think of gambling as a form of "entertainment" now?

Scripture says, "Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have" (Hebrews 13:5). Gambling violates that commandment. And if you should happen to win, you have to add stealing to the list of sins you have committed by your gambling.

Remember, the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and according to 1 Timothy 6:10, and those who love money tend to stray from the faith and pierce themselves through with many sorrows. The wreckage of many lives destroyed by gambling provides ample proof of that.

Phil Johnson
Executive Director

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