

## Is Gambling OK? Don't Bet on It

Scripture: Leviticus 19:18; Zechariah 8:17

Code: B110522

*Is it a sin to gamble?* There's not an easy or instantly-obvious proof-text answer to that question. If you are looking for a "Thus saith the Lord: Thou shalt not gamble," you won't find it anywhere. Nothing *expressly* forbids gambling anywhere in Scripture.

Does that automatically put gambling into the realm of *adiaphora*, or indifferent matters? **I don't think so. I would argue that gambling is a sin, full stop.**

### **A Sin? Are you Serious? Why Would Anyone Believe that in this Enlightened Age?**

Here are three reasons that instantly come to mind:

1. **The absence of a single commandment or proof-text against gambling ultimately proves nothing.** There are lots of things that are not explicitly mentioned in the Bible that we would probably agree are clearly sinful.

There isn't anything in Scripture that forbids arson, for example. But we know arson is wrong because it violates other biblical principles. It's a violation of the commandment in [Leviticus 19:18](#): "Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."

As a matter of fact, even *thinking* about burning down your neighbor's property violates [Zechariah 8:17](#): "Let none of you imagine evil in your hearts against his neighbour . . . [for] these are things that I hate, saith the Lord." So I don't think anyone would seriously argue that arson is OK, just because it isn't named in the Bible as a sin. Ditto with recreational drug use, graffiti-vandalism, and a host of other societal evils.

2. **Gambling is inconsistent with biblical virtue.** It is fueled by—and it fuels—covetousness, greed, and materialism. It is associated with crime, vice and corruption, so that wherever gambling exists, crime rates rise. And it is contrary to the biblical work ethic, because it is an attempt to gain wealth without working for it.
3. **Our possessions are not our own to squander.** They are given to us as a stewardship, and we will be accountable to God for how we use them. To put God-given resources at risk is to fail in the faithfulness required of stewards.

I once gave that answer to a college student who asked me about gambling in a public Q&A session in GraceLife. He stayed at the microphone while I gave my answer, and I could see he was not satisfied with it. When I finished, he asked if he could respond.

"By all means," I told him. "If that doesn't answer your question, ask a follow-up, and I'll expand on my answer."

### Can't You Make a Better Case Than *That*?

"Well," he said, "I still don't think you have shown that gambling is a sin. Let me reply to your arguments one by one."

"First," he said, "take the example of arson. It is wrong to burn down your neighbor's field or his house only when there is no mutual consent. But suppose he wanted your help burning his field because he wanted to clear the land. Then it would not be a sin for you to set fire to his property."

"As a matter of fact," he continued, "My neighbors had an abandoned building they were going to demolish for a new commercial development. So they allowed some fire department trainees to set fire to the building and practice putting it out. It wasn't a sin for the rookie fireman to set fire to that house, because the owner had given his consent."

"And gambling is *always* by mutual consent," he said. So it *cannot* be wrong done against your neighbor, because you have his concurrence before the game of chance begins."

He wasn't finished.

"Second," he said, "gambling isn't necessarily motivated only by covetousness and greed. I like to gamble for recreation and sheer entertainment."

Looking at me, he asked, "What is *your* favorite form of entertainment?"

"I like to take my sons to a baseball game," I said.

"Fine," he answered. "If you take your family to a baseball game, by the time you bought tickets, paid for parking, and got some food or drinks, you would probably have spent \$100 to \$150. All that money to watch an athletic contest! You get nothing tangible for your money except maybe a Coke and a large pretzel. The whole game is over in two and a half hours, and you go back home, with nothing to show for the money you spent. It is just entertainment; sheer recreation."

"Now, the form of recreation I prefer is gambling. I can take the same \$100 and go to a casino, where I might spend the entire evening playing Blackjack. I get all the Cokes and pretzels I want for free. And if I have a good night, I can play for *four or five* hours with my \$100—twice as long as you spent at your two-and-a-half-hour ball game."

"Furthermore," he said, "I *might* win, and then I will go home with even more money than I came with. But I don't do it because of greed. I do it because that is what I enjoy, just like you enjoy baseball."

I started to respond, but he held up a finger to signal that he wasn't through yet.

"Now," he said, "Let's talk about the stewardship issue. You went to an athletic event and have nothing permanent to show for the money you spent. I might have more money coming out than I had going into the casino."

"But even if I *lose*," he said, "I am a disciplined loser, and I always set a specific amount I am willing to lose—never more than about 100 dollars. And if I lose that much, I quit and walk away. That is still less money than you spent on your baseball outing, and it usually buys me several hours of exciting entertainment. Sometimes I even win, so I can even *make* money through my form of entertainment. Now I ask you, which is better stewardship?"

I took a deep breath and pondered the best way to reply.

But before I could answer, he continued. "There are risks involved in gambling," he said. "But the farmer who spends money to buy seed and plant a field also takes a huge gamble every year. If the weather destroys his crop, he will lose far more than I ever risk. Risk is a normal part of all our lives."

And then he asked me, "Do you have any of your retirement savings in mutual funds?" As a matter of fact, I do, so I acknowledged that fact.

"Well," he said, "you are taking a risk with that money. You yourself are *gambling* that the market will rise. What if it goes down? You will lose money. So you are gambling that it will go up. Meanwhile, you have put your savings at risk. How in the world can you tell me you think gambling is sinful? You aren't even practicing what you preach. If it is wrong to gamble, it is wrong for you to put your retirement savings in the stock market. And if it is unwise stewardship for me to gamble at cards, then it is also bad stewardship for you to invest money in mutual funds.

"And finally," he said, "My enjoyment of gambling has got nothing to do with my *work ethic*. In addition to my student class load, I work a full time job during the week and make good money. For me to spend \$100 on Friday night at the casino is no more a reflection on my work ethic than for you to spend \$150 on Friday evening at a baseball game.

"Gambling is just entertainment for me, and unless you are prepared to argue that all forms of entertainment are sinful, give me better arguments to show that gambling violates the Bible's moral standards, or show me *where* the Bible says gambling is a sin, I am going to keep visiting the casino."

That's a pretty thorough off-the-cuff reply to my off the-cuff answer to his original question, isn't it? It was obvious that he had spent a great deal of time thinking through these issues. He had heard the standard arguments, and he believed he could answer them all.

**Well, OK. Let's Think This Through More Carefully . . .**

By then, unfortunately, we were running short on time, and I only had enough time left to give him a quick reply.

I told him first of all that I still believe a sinister principle underlies all gambling, and it is this: for every winner, there are losers. And the winners' gains come at the losers' expense. There is no other way to gain money through gambling. When you win, you are taking that which belongs to another. The winners' profit always comes directly from the losers' pocket. There's something more sinister about that than merely winning an athletic competition, which involves no material loss for the loser.

In other words, gambling is the moral equivalent of stealing. His argument about mutual consent

between the players didn't seem to make it OK, because in real life many gambling losses lead to ruin for the loser. Prior consent doesn't eliminate the evil in that.

I also told him I did not completely buy his rationale that gambling might be just a form of pure entertainment—something better by which to pass the time than watching television. While the argument has some appeal at first glance, I pointed out that *if* there is an immoral principle that underlies all gambling—if gambling per se violates any clear principle of Scripture—then it is wrong on *any* grounds. To say that you gamble only for entertainment is not really a good defense against the argument that gambling is rooted in greed and covetousness.

For example, what if someone tried to claim it was OK to fornicate because he was doing it only as a form of entertainment? My point was this: if it's wrong to gamble on matters of biblical principle, then it is wrong to gamble in *any* circumstance, and it is wrong to gamble in any *amount*. If there are principles that make gambling a sinful activity, then it is wrong to gamble for "entertainment," and it is wrong whether you are gambling 50 cents or gambling your whole paycheck.

I regretted that we had to end our Q&A session at that point. He went away unsatisfied with my reply, and so did I.

While I still felt all my arguments were biblically sound, I didn't feel I had done enough to highlight the real heart of the matter. And that prompted me to give more thought to the issue of gambling so that I would be better prepared to give an answer if the question ever came up again.

Since then, I have thought through the issues more carefully than ever. I've considered the arguments further. I've taken an even closer look at the biblical data. And I hasten to say that I am even more convinced than ever that gambling is a sinful activity. It is not a valid form of entertainment, and it is not a harmless matter of indifference. It violates a number of biblical principles and therefore ought to be avoided in all its forms.

### **Hold on; I'm Not Finished Yet**

A blog is a great medium for exploring such a questions in careful detail. So in a couple of follow-up posts, I plan to give you a series of biblical arguments showing in further detail *exactly* why I still believe gambling is a sin.

Stay tuned for more . . .

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