

Gambling: The Moral Antithesis of Charity

Scripture: Ephesians 4:28

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To review one more time, these are the characteristics that define "gambling":

1. Something valuable is placed at risk
2. Something belonging to someone else is staked as a prize
3. An element of chance supposedly determines the outcome

And finally—

4. In all gambling, wealth is either lost or changes hands; no new wealth or other benefit is created. Gambling violates every biblical principle of economics.

In an earlier post I cited Ephesians 4:28: "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."

There's far more in that commandment than merely a prohibition against stealing. It also suggests that the proper way to earn wealth is by some form of work. It furthermore reminds us that a wonderful use of surplus wealth is charity towards the poor. Gambling subverts all those principles.

Gambling is economic fraud. It produces nothing. It adds nothing to the larger economy. When you *invest* money in the stock market, that money goes to work in the economy. It is not like a gambling stake, which just sits there in the jackpot, waiting to be won by one of the players.

Whatever taxes and commissions are skimmed from government-regulated lotteries and actually put back into the economy are more than offset by the losses of people who purchase tickets and do not win. Statistics show clearly that the most profoundly negative economic effects of gambling are felt in the sectors of society where the poverty level is already high. So gambling's worst impact hurts the very same segments of society where charity would have done the most good.

The corollary of this is that the apparent prosperity of casinos in places like Las Vegas is gained at the direct expense of other communities, industries, and individuals. Gambling is *always* a zero-sum game.

Gambling simply transfers money from the hands of many to the hands of the few through frivolous means fraught with questionable motives—just the opposite of all sound economic principles.

The Bible does spell out some clear principles regarding economics and the exchange of money, goods, and services.

Of course, property and possessions were normally passed on within one's own family (or to one's legal heirs) by inheritance.

Beyond that, however, there are three legitimate means of exchanging wealth and transferring property to others. One is through *labor*, where money is earned by effort expended (Ephesians 4:28; 2 Thessalonians 3:11-12; Luke 10:7). Another is through *commerce* (including buying, selling, and otherwise investing—Matthew 25:14-29). The third is through *giving*—including gifts of charity (Luke 19:8; Ephesians 4:28).

Gambling has none of the elements that make those enterprises *good*. It involves no work. It contributes nothing of value to the economy. And it is the moral antithesis of charity.

Speaking of gambling's macro effects on the economy, much more could be said about the evil that surrounds the gambling industry. It breeds crime and corruption; it undermines character; it does not promote godliness; it violates private industry; it undermines the good of society; it exploits the poor; and it promotes false values.

Furthermore, when government sanctions and even participates in sponsoring gambling, it departs from (and even works against) the God-ordained role of government, which is to seek the public welfare by punishing crime, keeping order, and defending against foreign attacks. State-sanctioned gambling makes the government the oppressor of the poor and the promoter of activities that spawn all kinds of corruption and evil.

Again, every argument I have made suggests that gambling is wrong in principle.

As Christians, we are commanded to be content with what we have, and to trust God as our Provider. We are forbidden to covet what belongs to our neighbor, and we are commanded to love that neighbor as ourselves. We are commanded to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. We are commanded to shun that which is evil—abstaining from every form of evil.

That's why, although I have acknowledged that penny-ante games are often trivial (and by no means any major concern of mine), my counsel to believers who ask about the issue would be this: it's naive and potentially dangerous to toy with any kind of gambling as a form of "recreation." If gambling is indeed wrong in principle (as I believe the weight of all the biblical arguments demonstrates) then it is surely wise to avoid the practice no matter the amount or the frequency.

In closing, let me say . . .

Some readers asked me to address the question of whether raffles, door prizes, and carnival-style contests as fund-raising devices are morally equivalent to gambling. My short answer is that it depends on the circumstances. The definition of gambling I gave at the outset is my best answer to that. If the raffle prize is a donated item given to charity and not a "stake" paid for by entry fees, it wouldn't be gambling by most legal definitions.

I'm not fond of such gimmicks for fund-raising anyway—especially for churches and Christian organizations. But I would not suggest that it's always a "sin" to participate in them, especially if the bulk of the funds collected really do go to some legitimate charity. Such cases, however, wouldn't fit likely my definition of gambling, so the point is really moot, I think.

I'll leave the intricate dissection of countless hypothetical cases and counter-examples to people who love that sort of casuistry.

Speaking of which, I've gotten some messages from a few people who have claimed my biblical arguments prove nothing about whether gambling per se is wrong, because (in the words of one correspondent): "You don't know people's hearts, so you can't *prove* that everyone who gambles is really coveting his neighbor's possessions."

Well, it certainly seems obvious that the gambler is trying to *win* his neighbor's possessions, and I honestly can't think of many righteous motives for doing that. But the argument about reading another person's heart is true in exactly the same sense that I can't prove every man who fills his spare time looking at pornography on the internet is sinfully lusting. I *still* tell men they should not do that under any circumstances. In any case, the guy who gets caught doing it is probably going to have a hard sell convincing his own wife it was all so innocent. In a case like that, I'm happy to let the man answer to God and his own wife.

Similarly, to those who are so keen to justify penny-ante and "recreational" gambling, I'm quite happy to leave the issue between you, your conscience, and the Lord, who judges righteously. Don't feel obliged to try to convince me that what you're doing isn't tainted with covetousness or presumption or any of the other bad motives I have associated with the act of gambling.

To be perfectly clear: the evil motives *are* what I say is sin, not the gaming aspects of gambling. I'm *not* trying to establish a legalistic rule on issues where the Bible doesn't spell out a rule. I'm trying to give a little pastoral counsel and shed some biblical light on the complex of evils that surround gambling, so that you can give a fuller answer to the question of whether gambling is OK than the bare (and foolish) assertion that since there's no proof text that says gambling's "sin," Christians shouldn't say anything against it.

On the contrary, it is a plague on our culture (and every culture where it has been legalized) and Christians should not be silent or neutral about it.

Talk amongst yourselves.

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