

## **What's Wrong with Gambling?**

**By David Feddes**

Almost anywhere you go nowadays, you have a chance to gamble. At work, you can put money into an office betting pool. At the store, you can buy a fistful of lottery tickets. At some restaurants, you can play the machines. In your mailbox, you can find the latest sweepstakes offer. On your computer, you can get into Internet gambling. At some churches, you can play bingo. In your spare time, you can open the newspaper and read the latest betting line on all the major sporting events. For vacation, you can visit a casino or riverboat or racetrack.

Once upon a time, government was hostile to gambling, but now many governments permit many forms of gambling and even sponsor it. The government sets up lotteries and promotes them aggressively. Why raise taxes when government can make millions simply by letting citizens try their luck? When the government itself sponsors gambling, it can't very well say no to others who want to get rich from some gambling enterprise. So gambling has gone from being a secretive, shameful activity to a respected, booming business.

What's wrong with that? Many people like to gamble and seem to have a lot of fun. Businesses that provide gambling opportunities provide jobs for their employees. Government makes money through taxes on legal gambling, and schools get some of the money from lotteries. Who could object to such things?

### **Chasing the Rabbit**

What's wrong with gambling? Well, think of it in terms of a dog race. At a dog race, a bunch of greyhounds chase a mechanical rabbit around a track. Those dogs run like crazy, but no matter how fast they run, the rabbit runs faster and they never catch it. They think they're going to catch it, but they don't. It always stays just out of their reach. But is that the dumbest thing about those dogs—that they chase something they can't catch? No, the dumbest thing is that they even *want* to catch it in the first place. Just suppose one of those greyhounds really would catch the rabbit some time? What then? The poor dog would be chewing on a fake rabbit. It would be as hungry as ever.

Those dogs chasing a fake rabbit are like gamblers chasing money. You can run around after that easy money, but you're chasing a prize that you're not likely to catch up with. The money remains out of reach. The odds are against you. A bumper sticker defines the lottery as "a tax on people who are bad at math." That's true of just about all forms of gambling: It's a way of taking money from people who are bad at math.

But just suppose you do hit the jackpot. What then? You find out that the money doesn't make you nearly as happy as you thought it would. You're like a greyhound that finally catches the mechanical rabbit, only to find that it's not very tasty and not very nourishing. Someone did a survey of lottery winners. The survey found that the jackpot winners had a burst of excitement when they first won, but they were no happier a year later than they were before they won the lottery.

So gambling is foolish for at least two reasons. First, it's foolish because you seldom get the money you're chasing. Second, it's foolish to be chasing money in the first place. Money can't satisfy your deepest needs. You may enjoy the thrill of trying to

beat the odds, but all too often, the odds beat you. Gambling makes you dream of getting rich, but instead it makes you poorer—poorer in terms of money and also poorer in your soul. Fulfillment isn't found in the excitement of easy money. Fulfillment is found in God. If we chase happiness anywhere but in God, says the Bible, we are "chasing the wind" (Ecclesiastes 2:11).

### **Get Rich Quick?**

Some time ago, a person sent me a long list of prayer requests in the mail. I noticed that most of the requests had to do with money: He wanted me to pray that his unpaid bills would be covered, that he would get a better job, that his landlord would ease up on demands for rent, and, finally, he wanted me to pray that God would help him win the lottery!

I wrote back and suggested that he might be able to pay more of his bills if he stopped throwing his money away in the lottery. I also suggested that he start praying for God's help in following Jesus, rather than asking for God's help in being a successful gambler. The Bible warns against those "who think that godliness is a means to financial gain" (1 Timothy 6:5). What more blatant way to use godliness as a means to financial gain than to use the sacred act of prayer in an effort to win a load of money that comes from other people's pockets?

The Bible gives us important insights about our relationship to money in 1 Timothy 6, saying,

But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. (1 Timothy 6:6-10)

There's no mention of gambling in this passage, but there are some powerful insights that apply to gambling and help us to see gambling for what it is. Verse 9 is especially revealing: "People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction."

The desire to get rich quick, to get something without working for it, is one of the main attractions in gambling. You hope to make yourself richer and make someone else poorer in the process. The prospect of getting rich is enticing enough, and it's even more exciting when you feel the competitive challenge of beating the odds and winning money at someone else's expense. Gambling is an intoxicating brew that mixes greed with a stiff shot of competition.

The desire to get rich, according to the Bible, gives rise to "many foolish and harmful desires." This is true of greed in general, but it's especially true of gambling—it's foolish and harmful. Ironically, gambling often starts with a love of money, and yet the end result is almost always a loss of money. A friend of mine says that sometimes when he's at a convenience store, he is asked whether he wants to buy some lotto tickets. Usually he just says he doesn't want any, but once in awhile he'll say, "No, I'd rather just light a match to my money."

Gambling is a bad bet. You have a better chance of being struck by lightning than of winning big in the lottery. The games are rigged and the odds are calculated so that almost everybody who gambles will lose money. Losers outnumber winners. How else could the lottery be a big moneymaker for the government? How else could the casinos and racetracks be so lucrative? The sad irony of gambling is that you start out wanting to make some easy money, but you end up losing hard-earned money. You'd like to win something for nothing, but instead you get nothing for something.

Gambling is foolish and harmful, and the tighter its grip, the more harmful it becomes. I remember talking with a distressed woman who told me that her family was having financial problems. She then told me her husband's salary. It was huge! Whatever problem he had with money, it wasn't because his income wasn't high enough. But for some reason, his high income didn't seem high enough to him, and his steady paycheck wasn't exciting enough. This man wanted some thrills. He wanted to hit it big and be *really* rich. And so he spent several hundred dollars every week on the lottery. He didn't win anything, but he did manage to get hopelessly behind on paying his bills. His gambling hurt him, and even worse, it hurt his wife and children. As the Bible says, "A greedy man brings trouble to his family (Proverbs 15:27)."

One former gambler told me he ran up debts of over \$300,000. He had an excellent business income, but his income couldn't keep up with his gambling. It almost wrecked his marriage. He knew it was out of control when he started getting threats from loan sharks and mobsters. At that point, gambling wasn't fun anymore. The man broke free from gambling, got connected with God, and recovered his relationship with his wife and children. But he came very close to losing his family, and even his life, before he finally wised up. Such situations are becoming awfully common. More and more people are enslaved to gambling and are endangering their own wellbeing.

### **A Pimp For Sin**

Even the government is addicted to gambling—or at least to the money that comes from it. Governments balance budgets using lottery dollars and taxes on gaming companies. Election campaigns are financed by piles of contributions from megabucks gambling enterprises.

Despite wrecked homes and ruined lives, government still treats gambling as something great. Officials brag about the good things lottery dollars accomplish. Some trumpet the economic benefits that casinos bring to a community. How ridiculous! A government that tries to solve problems by promoting gambling is like a fire department that tries to put out a blaze by spraying it with gasoline. One journalist put it this way:

Gambling exploits a human weakness. Gambling parallels its constant companion, prostitution, in suggesting that one can buy happiness. When gambling is not only condoned but also officially supported by city and state officials through lotteries and licensed parlors, then government has become a pimp for sin.

"A pimp for sin." That's tough talk—but it's true, and it happens every time the government urges people to gamble.

Government-sponsored gambling is really just a tax on foolishness and weakness, a way of harming people in the name of helping them. A great deal of lottery

money is taken from people who have a low income, who live in poverty, and who vainly hope that they can buy a ticket out of their situation. Most people who stand in line for lottery tickets at local stores would be better off spending the money on a new pair of jeans or on some groceries. But they gamble instead, and their desperate situation becomes even more desperate.

Of course, not everyone who gambles has a low income. Some, as we've seen, make lots of money. But even many who have a large income can't really afford to gamble. What begins as an amusing game that nibbles away a few dollars turns into an obsession that devours their lives. So, even if the government uses the money from gambling for some good causes, it will never make up for the damage it is doing.

It's time to face the fact that gambling has become a powerful force that pervades our entire society. It has taken over the lives of many individuals, turning them into compulsive gamblers. Maybe that's happened to someone you know, or even to you. And not only has gambling taken control of many individuals, but it has infiltrated our major institutions as well. It's a big part of the marketing strategy for many different companies, from scratch-and-win cards to sweepstakes to drawings. It is closely connected with nearly every sporting event: No sports report is complete without mentioning the odds or the point spread. Cities, states, and provinces are growing more and more dependent on gambling revenue. Even many charities and churches rely on bingo parlors and raffles as part of their fund-raising strategy.

For some people, this may seem like gambler's heaven, but any individual or society that falls under the power of gambling is in big trouble. As the Bible says, "People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction." Notice the progression: First you're tempted; then you're trapped; and then you find yourself plunging headlong toward destruction, unable to help yourself or halt the plunge. The final result is not just financial ruin but spiritual ruin.

### **King Money, Lady Luck**

King Money and Lady Luck may seem attractive and friendly at first, but before you know it, they've got you trapped and are dominating and ruining your life. The love of money, the desire to be rich, can take on a power all its own. King Money and Lady Luck are more than just figures of speech. The Bible talks about mysterious spiritual powers which can control individuals and dominate social structures (Ephesians 6:12; Romans 8:38). These powers gain a terrible grip on many people. They warp the values and priorities of entire societies. Ultimately, they compete with God himself for our loyalty and trust.

That's why greed is such a serious matter. It isn't just a small mistake or a minor weakness. Greed, according to the Bible, is surrender to a spiritual power. It is idolatry (Ephesians 5:5; Colossians 3:5). It's trusting and worshipping something besides God. Jesus himself said, "You cannot serve both God and Money" (Matthew 6:24). That's Money with a capital 'M'--Money no longer as a useful commodity but as a dominant power. Gambling is just one of several ways that we can fall under the deadly power of King Money, and when we do, it makes us disloyal to God and ruins our relationship to

him. What's more, when Money is king, it spoils our relationship with other people. God created us to love people and use money, but we love money and use people.

Money can be a useful servant, but it is a deadly master. When money rules your life, it takes on a deadly power that it was never meant to have. "People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction." "For," as the Bible says, "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." What gambling does to your bank account is only part of the problem. The worst part is this: You can become so obsessed with money that it blocks you from seeking treasure in heaven. Gambling can be a pit stop on the way to hell. And what does it profit if you hit the jackpot but lose your soul?

Money is one false god. Another false god of the gambler is Lady Luck, or chance. Some people gamble not just because of the money itself but because they want to feel that Lady Luck is on their side. The Bible speaks of God's providence, the way God controls all things and provides for his people. But all too often, we'd rather think about luck than about God. After all, if luck is good to us, we don't have to be thankful or accountable. We can do as we please. But if a personal and living God is good to us, then we must live a life of gratitude and answer to him.

Gambling, then, tends to involve the worship of at least two different idols: King Money and Lady Luck. Many of us would rather be rich than holy. We'd rather be lucky than good. So we turn away from the holy and good God and devote ourselves to Money and Luck.

### **Contentment in Christ**

The Bible shows us a better way. If gambling or the love of money has become a dominant power in your life, you need to be set free, and it's going to take a power greater than yourself to do that. You need to turn your life over to the care of Jesus Christ. If you want to enjoy real contentment, you need to get out of the realm where Money is King and Lady Luck is queen, and you need to be part of the domain where Jesus is Lord, where he's the one in charge of your life.

In I Timothy 6, after warning about how foolish, harmful, and destructive it is to worship money, the Bible says, "But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called..." (6:11-12). These are Jesus' priorities for us. This is what it's like to live in his power. We need to realize that the grand prize in life isn't some lottery jackpot. The greatest prize is nothing less than eternal life in the presence of God. God calls us to take hold of that prize. And that prize isn't a gamble. It's a gift—a gift that comes only through faith in Jesus Christ.

When Jesus died on the cross, he overcame the deadly powers that lure us into disaster. The Bible says, "Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Colossians 2:15). You don't have to be dominated by gambling or love of money or trust in luck. You don't have to be dominated by any of the demonic powers that seek to corrupt you and destroy your soul. Jesus has overcome the powers. And when the Holy Spirit of Jesus enters your heart, he makes you a part of Jesus' victory. When you belong to God, you

can't lose. "Godliness with contentment is great gain," says the Bible. When Jesus controls your life, godliness replaces greed, and contentment replaces covetousness. In Philippians 4:19, the Bible says, "And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus." The Lord meets *all* our needs, material as well as spiritual. Don't forget, though: God meets our needs, not our greed. Jesus taught us to pray for our daily bread; he didn't teach us to pray for the weekly jackpot!

In summary, we need to be alert to the fact that in our society, gambling isn't just a harmless pastime. It has become a menacing spiritual power, a force that awakens foolish and harmful desires, that grips individuals and institutions, that tempts and traps and plunges people into ruin. It competes with God himself for control of people's lives.

But when your faith is in Jesus, you are no longer dominated by King Money or Lady Luck. When your heart is full of Christ, there's no room for any competitors. When you are yielded to Christ and under his control, you will have treasure in heaven, and you will also experience contentment here on earth. So if you must make a wager, then wager everything on Jesus. Pray to him and ask him to forgive you and rule your life. That's not a gamble. It's a sure thing.

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