

Gambling: Dealing with its Impact on our Members

By Paul E. Huebner

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According to a Policy Research Institute report printed in April, 1995, gambling at Native American, gaming centers did a \$1.4 billion dollar business if you include the food, shopping and entertainment that goes along with the games. What is not well-known is the cost of gambling.

After costs and salaries the report added other items including the cost caused by problem gamblers. The profits were then estimated at -\$129.7 million dollar worst case, a \$5.8 million medium case, or a \$166.29 million best case scenario.

The average attendee of such an establishment is between 50-70 years old and is either retired or has a blue-collar job. The average income of the gambler is \$20,000 to \$30,000. 15% of those in attendance make \$60,000 or above, while 30% of those who visit such places makes less than \$20,000. Statistics can mean a lot of things depending upon how you use them. It is interesting to note the authors of this research suggest that Ho Chunk establishments are not an asset to our state. More importantly to us pastors are the members who may be visiting these place or places of some similar ilk. Let us spend some time considering how to deal with the impact of gambling on our members.

A definition of gambling

A good number of years ago Prof. John Brug presented a paper entitled, *Is All Gambling A Sin?* In it he discussed the difficulty of defining the term, gambling,

Sometimes we define it as "taking risks" which I would use to describe the sky-diving that some of my members do. Having driven with certain unmentionable drivers, it is often said that we are "gambling with our lives". Marriage has a certain risk to it. Finally, so much of life does. While we use the word, gamble, in these circumstances, we must be careful to realize that we are not suggesting anyone who does the above is necessarily guilty of sin.

Gambling, on the other hand, might be better defined as "unnecessarily risking the possessions which God has entrusted to us in games of chance or skill in the hope of gaining something from our neighbor without giving him a fair service or product in return whether for the sake of profit or thrills." Prof. Brug quotes Eph. 4:28: "Let him who steals steal no longer, but rather let him labor, performing with his own hands at is good, in order that he may have something to share with him who has need." If we define gambling in this way, then we can say that gambling is sinful.

The basic Christian objection to gambling is that it is an attempt to gain something from our neighbor without giving him a fair service in return. Coupled with that is the question of motivation. Is this an act of love toward our neighbor or is it motivated by greed? Getting something for nothing at the expense of another is clearly rejected as stealing. But then we must question whether or not every form of "gambling" includes such a selfish hope of improper gain.

We must remember that Scripture does not speak directly on gambling. Therefore we must be careful that we do not imprecate every form of "gambling" for we must ask ourselves whether or not this or that always involves greed or hope of unearned gains. Gambling is a word that means many things. It is important for us to use the word carefully in order to help our members see the temptations and questions that surround the issue without confusing them or turning them off by misdirected, blanket pronouncements. Now having said all that, let us consider the impact "gambling" that is, games of chance, has upon our members.

Gambling does have an impact upon our members

The gas-station attendant checks her computer for the cost of the gas you have put in the car and then asks, “Will there be anything else?” With all the various sweepstakes tickets hanging over your head, cluttering up the counter, one must wonder how the “anything else” could be anything else but a lottery ticket?

TV channels bring us up-to-date information about plane crashes and double homicides interrupting the presentation so that the network can give us the power-ball numbers. I cannot bear the tension as I wait with bated breath for the ping-gong balls to fall.

The Falls’ Little League charges \$90 per child to play softball. Of that \$50 is for raffle tickets used to purchase land to build ball diamonds. If you want your money back, you have to sell the tickets to others.

During my summer jobs I learned that payday meant using the check numbers to form a poker hand. The football pool was a seasonal necessity it seemed. Bets were even placed on surgeries and lengths of recoveries.

The mass media blitz as it is used by the gaming industries is, of course, tremendous. The glitz of Ho Chunk commercials is outrageous. Special rates for flying to Vegas or Reno are available. All of it carefully done to part a fool of his/her money. The sad thing is: it works. Of course, it impacts people. But what is the impact?

Whether or not anyone actually plays bingo or the slots as a result is not the main impact. Gambling does impact our members. While you and I might view it as a waste of time and money, others see it as helping their churches pay their bills and making schools affordable and lowering taxes. The pressure to participate is certainly present and it is causing people to act without necessarily asking what their Lord would have them do.

The biggest impact gambling has upon members is really an erosion of faithfulness to God in terms of stewardship, contentment and trust. Gambling offers the easy, quick return for little even though it really is the opposite. It uses up time, energy and money that could be better used to serve the Lord either in direct work in and among the congregation or in and among the community. The big high that gambling supposedly offers and the excitement of the win replaces the contentment with God’s gifts to us and joy of being a part of God’s redeemed people and apart of His work.

Nor does it help when the governments endorse such things, giving the people a sense of getting something, when in reality they are only losing. When churches turn to such games for funding, when it becomes the “third sacrament” if not the only “means of grace”, people are going to be affected. Col. 3:2-5 reminds us: “Set your minds of things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God... Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature:... evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.” Gambling tends to bring our minds to things below as it presents the temptation of greed to us.

Gambling is a sort of sacred cow

Gambling, it seems, has always been part of our country. The card sharks and shell games of our early history is part of the mystique that surrounds the growth and development of our nation. The gold rushes to the Black Hills, California and the Yukon were in a sense a form of gambling as people left their jobs, farms, family and churches and went to strike it rich. When they arrived in the gold country, they found plenty of people offering them all kinds of ways to lose their money gambling.

The 1920’s saw an upswing in gambling as the post World War I crowd celebrated the end of war. The car was available, new wealth and modern conveniences, such as radio, left our nation feeling carefree. The mob used that to offer people chances to “enjoy” their wealth. The 30’s saw gambling take on a more serious tone. With the Depression in full swing, the poor and unemployed grasped at a chance to “make it big.” The rich, on the other hand, or formerly rich, saw it as an escape from the dread of loss and a source of excitement. Finally, what brought this Depression about was form of “gambling” in which futures were bought and sold on the stock market without sufficient collateral. It was dishonest. It was stupid. It was greed.

The post-Depression still had its gambling. WWII saw many a crap game or poker hands during the idle times of the war. Bugsy Siegel’s dream of a casino in the Nevada desert cost him his life, but has developed into part of the American life. Though post-war veterans spent the 1950’s pursuing the American dream of home,

family, good living, while they remembered the lessons of the Depression, they failed to pass them on to their “spoiled and selfish hippy” kids who gambled away with the use of marijuana and LSD. Gambling has remained a part of the American life.

Today the scene is set for another strong rush to gamble. Wealth is there. So is poverty. The dream to hit it big looms high as people are convinced that they will be lucky. Others who have so much time on their hands are seeking excitement, meaning and purpose in life. Bingo fulfills their needs?

A society that no longer has a future because it has listened to the nihilistic philosophers, a society that needs to feel good because life is the pits and no one seems to know why, a society that has grown lazy, greedy, and is bored, a society that is lonely and seeks excitement, a society that spurns honesty seeks a new source of peace, life, challenge. It is already gambling on drugs, alcohol and gambling. It is also losing.

God’s people also live in this world and are also confronted with the constant war against sin. 1 Ti. 6:10 reads: “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.” The get-rich schemes to skirt hard and faithful work and the lack of contentment is once again affecting our people. While buying a lottery ticket once in awhile may not be wasteful or motivated by greed in most cases, it is to some. While we cannot condemn every act of “gambling” as sinfully misusing God’s possession, the explosion of gambling in our country bespeaks an emptiness within people and a challenge to the mind-set of our members. Considering the “love affair” our nation has had with gambling, with gambling part of the folklore of our history, it becomes even more apparent that we must speak clearly, but also carefully.

Pastors deal with their members

God calls us to sound a clear trumpet and yet speak in love. That means we do need to be careful how we address the issue of the various games. Perhaps one of you might choose to hold a series of Bible Studies on the issue. Fine. I wouldn’t personally, nor would I foresee my preaching a specific sermon on it either. My approach would be more of emphasizing what God wants us to do as stewards and use the examples of gambling as illustrations in the application that describes the concern of misusing God’s gifts. The sermon studies in *All for One... Each for Another*, the 96-97 stewardship series has several places where the matter can be brought up either in terms of gifts to God’s work or in terms of using our time to serve others. The matter can be brought into the accompanying Bible studies quite easily.

You may choose another course. Perhaps your congregation is made up of different people to whom the temptation to waste resources in gambling is more apparent than mine. I have yet to find one member in 21 years that has had a gambling problem. There are those who have played “penny ante” and those who have played a slot machine while touring the west. But I believe we must distinguish the approach we use on the occasional lottery ticket buyer and the approach used on a problem or compulsive gambler. You need to tailor your approach to the needs and faith of your members.

Preaching on the topic of gambling might appeal to some of the guys on TV, but they also have a habit of preaching at the people about the Law and not preaching the Law to the people. Preaching that condemns the greed or the waste the members express in their life leads them to seek the Savior’s forgiveness and leads them to amend their life. That’s preaching the Law as the mirror. Warnings against the temptation of greed and waste that can be found in gambling are educational in a sermon that is more instructional on stewardship. That’s the Law used as a guide and curb. But then the tone of the sermon ought not be outrage and anger, but meditational and thought-provoking. The same would be true of presenting the matter in confirmation classes. It seems to me that it would be better to emphasize the way God wants us to live and then help the students “debate” the value or purpose of various kinds of games of chance than merely denounce all “gambling” as evil, leaving questions in students’ minds as to whether or not their father or mother are Christians or not.

A sermon that attacks a problem that the members aren’t committing is a waste of time. A sermon that talks about all those sinners out there who are doing this isn’t helpful since, on the one hand, members have unbelieving friends who are not doing this, which makes the pastor’s ranting and raving unrealistic, and

secondly, since it really doesn't affect the member himself or herself, then they leave church feeling empty, because the pastor has wasted their time talking about something they really can't take home and apply.

Finally, you and I must explain and teach the importance of keeping our minds on things above. We are to keep warning people about the love of money and its effects on life. But we also need to train people to think for themselves and judge whether or not their actions are acts of service to God and His people or not and whether or not their actions are motivated by love or by greed. Train the people. Warn them about temptation. Show the excellence of serving God. Help them experience the joy of working for the Lord. Lead them into the Word so the Lord can teach them contentment in all circumstances. Then the temptations of greed et al. will be lessened.

There is an old saying, "Take away the desire and the problem goes with it." My approach to the matter remains what it has been for other issues. Talk about it, but talk about the excellence of being a content, hard-working, generous giving, faithfully serving Lutheran as being far superior. The approach the writer of Hebrews took as he wrote to believing Jews who were wavering in their faithfulness to Jesus was to compare it to the superior love of Jesus, the Great High Priest. I used that approach out west when the Moonies became a new "issue" that threatened to panic people. I used it when the "New Age Movement" disturbed many of our members. I intend to keep using that approach whenever any "new" temptation of Satan threatens to enslave the hearts and minds of my members. Teach, explain, encourage and comfort. Let the Word work in hearts. But help the people see the superior excellence of following Jesus.

Dealing with the problem gambler

There were no state lotteries in 1964, but today 22 states have them, and the legislatures of 15 other states are considering the idea. Forty-eight states now have some form of legal gambling. All this is bound to make the problem of compulsive gambling worse. It is suggested that 1 out of forty gamblers is a compulsive gambler. It is suggested that 1 out of every ten people is an alcoholic.

Robert L Custer, MD, chief of treatment services at the Mental Health and Behavioral Sciences Service, Veterans Administration in Washington, D.C. describes a typical compulsive better as intelligent, hard-working, restless, extremely competitive people who equate money with success. They begin betting in adolescence and have many wins early in their careers. Some of these are big wins which lead these people to believe a false notion that they can beat the odds.

Custer separates "social" gamblers from compulsive gamblers stating that social gamblers consider winning to be a matter of chance or luck; their pride is not at stake; and they rarely had a big win. Gambling is not their main source of gratification. Compulsive gamblers depend upon gambling to the exclusion of everything else in life. They run up debts, become indifferent to food, people, work. They are always thinking about the next bet and the big win.

I suppose you have attended a number of workshops on treating alcohol and I drug abusers. But I wonder if any of you have attended anything connected to GA, that's Gambler's Anonymous (which has nothing to do with the Sem). I checked in the phone book and found that there is only one number in the Milwaukee phone book listed for Gambling Anonymous. It is an answering device, apparently not manned round the clock. I asked for information and assistance to deal with members who had problem with gambling in order to see if they would respond. They did not.

There are Gambler's Anonymous meetings at the Milwaukee Psychiatric Hospital and a Compulsive Gambling Support Group held at Community Memorial Hospital, Menomonee Falls. You might check your nearest hospital to see if they have such a group. Reading the information from CMH I suspect it is very similar to AA.

Dealing with such people is similar to dealing with the alcoholic. These people are con artists who boast about how they can manipulate well-meaning people into helping them keep doing what they are doing. The family and the congregation are encouraged NOT to ball these people out. Such a move only enables the

compulsive gambler to continue. A pastor, together with the family and elders, need to be good listeners, but also tough speakers.

It is the sin against the 7th and 9th commandments that this person has committed. They have rebelled against God and are in danger of losing their faith. They have hurt their family and as Scripture reminds us: “If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” (1 Ti. 5:8) The Law must be proclaimed to lead a sinner to repentance before the Gospel may be applied. But then, the fruits of repentance, the amending of ways, must follow. That will take time and assistance, just as it does with an abuser of drugs.

There is one other suggestion I gleaned from my research. “Work is the most effective substitute for gambling. It provides money, occupies time and energy and gives the patient hope for recovery.” That brings us back to Ep. 4:28: “Let him who steals steal no longer, but rather let him labor, performing with his own hands what is good, in order that he may have something to share with him who has need.” Get the priorities straight. Get the mind doing the things the Lord Jesus wants us to do and not thinking only of ourselves.

There are some other verses of Scripture that are useful when talking to such compulsive people. Mt. 9:9-13 has Jesus telling the impenitent Pharisees that He heals the sick not those who think they are healthy. With these verse we want to point out the Pharisees, like compulsive gamblers, did not think that they had a problem. Ps. 130 reminds such people that repentance and forgiveness are the key to life with God through Jesus.

2 Co. 11:14 describes Satan as “masquerading as an angel of light”. When you consider the temptations Satan placed before Jesus in Mt. 4, you see how he twists “thrills” and “easy money” into a real temptation upon us. Finally, there are all the wonderful passages that proclaim the joy of serving the Savior.

But be careful. The compulsive gambler is real smooth. He or she must be treated firmly. But also remember that he must be treated separately from those members who merely dabble in a game of bingo once in awhile or who buy a lottery ticket or two. When does one cross over the line and become the other? I don't think there is such a distinctive line that can be drawn that allows such a nice and neat view. We simply need to deal with each member on an individual level. Keep training the people of God to serve and honor Him and in so doing reduce the effect gambling will have upon them. You and I might wish that gambling would just go away. But don't bet on it.