

Is All Gambling A Sin?

[Essay presented for the WELS Ohio Conference in 1974]

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Games of chance have been common in every society and have always intrigued people. The idea of taking a chance and getting something for nothing has a universal appeal. Today in our country gambling in many forms is once again becoming more popular, yes, even more respectable. Both legal and illegal gambling are flourishing. Christians are being more forcefully confronted with the question of their own involvement in gambling. Christian citizens sometimes have an opportunity to vote on their government's involvement in gambling. Problems concerning gambling will probably appear more often in pastoral counseling. For all of these reasons we add careful, Scriptural consideration of the question, "Is all gambling a sin?"

Before we can begin to answer this question, we must first answer the question "What is gambling?" The dictionary gives the following definition of "gamble": 1. play any game of chance for stakes, 2. stake or risk anything of value on the result of something involving chance, 3. lose or squander by betting, 6. make a wager, 5. any matter or thing involving risk or uncertainty. None of these definitions is adequate for a study of the moral and ethical questions involved in gambling, but they do point us to two factors we will have to consider in our evaluation of gambling: 1) the element of risk or chance involved, 2) the motivation or purpose which is involved.

RISK AND CHANCE

People often try to justify the element of risk involved in gambling by saying that all of life is risky. It certainly is true that every venture in life involves a type of risk — doing business, investing in the stock market, crossing the street, riding in an airplane, falling in love, getting married, even doing church work. But just as there is a legitimate and necessary distinction between the kind of risk which Satan asked Jesus to take by jumping off the Temple and the necessary "risks" which Jesus took in entrusting His life to His Father, so we may legitimately distinguish between the risks and hazards which we face in the course of a life entrusted to God and the risks and hazards to which we unnecessarily expose ourselves for thrills or profit. Strictly speaking, we should not say that the "risks" we face in our daily business and travels or the dangers we face due to faithfulness to God are risks at all, for when we trust our entire life into God's hands and are willing to accept His will, no matter what it may be, we can never suffer true loss.

People occasionally try to justify gambling by claiming that the element of chance was involved in the Old Testament use of lots or the Urim and Thummim and in the method of choosing Judas' successor. However, there is no legitimate point of comparison between the type of chance involved in these Scriptural practices and the type of chance involved in gambling. the Old Testament lots were specifically sanctioned and commanded by God (Lv 1 :8, Jos 14:2, Ex 28:30, Nu 27:21, Dt 33:8). Let gamblers produce such commands of God for the lots they cast! Likewise, in the choice of Matthias to succeed Judas no real risk was involved. Both candidates, Justus and Matthias, were fully qualified for the position, so the final choice was entrusted to the Lord in prayer.

We would conclude then that risk and chance are not wrong when they are only the normal uncertainties which God expects us to face in life. They, however, become wrong when we expose ourselves and what God has given us to unnecessary, uncalled-for risks. "Taking risks" with our possessions must be determined on the basis of good Christian stewardship.

However, the real crux of the problem of gambling is not the element of risk or chance, but the question of motivation. This is the real heart of the problem, for if the motivation involved is wrong, gambling is wrong even when the element of skill predominates over simple chance.

MOTIVATION AND PURPOSE

The basic purpose of gambling is not to help and serve others, but to help ourselves at their expense. Does anyone gamble to “help his neighbor to improve and protect his property and business?” Does one gamble to “help and be of service to him in keeping it?” Luther observed:

No one gambles with another in order to give away to the other what is his own (for he could do that without gambling), nor in order to lose what is his own, nor in order to seek the gain of the other man as though it were his own. This is why gambling is always contrary to love and is motivated by greed because a man seeks, to the harm of another, what does not belong to him. (*What Luther Says* p.1343.)

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. If we really love our neighbor, will we wish to win at his expense? In gambling are we heeding the admonition of Scripture, “Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.” (Php 2:4 NASV). A Christian must keep two facts in mind when seeking gain or profit from his activities. He must give fair labor or exchange for what he is receiving. He seeks to earn for himself, not from selfish motivation, but in order to be of service to others. “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.” (Eph 4:28)

A Christian’s life is to be devoted to serving others, not to being served. In gambling part of the enjoyment is taking advantage of someone else’s loss. Gambling is non-productive, and can be justified only by arguing its entertainment value or the good use made of a portion of the revenue. Since the end never justifies the means, gambling cannot be justified on these grounds if greed is involved. The fact that dishonesty and selfish motivation can be practiced in any form of business cannot be used as an excuse to justify gambling, if gain at the expense of another is part of the very nature of gambling. The common consent involved in gambling does not excuse the stealing involved in gambling anymore than common consent excuses the murder involved in dueling.

Bringing together the main points which we have discussed, I would define gambling 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”. So defined, we must say that all gambling is a sin.

We must, however, still consider the question whether everything which is popularly considered can be categorically include in the definition just given. Can we say that every form and instance of “gambling” does indeed involve selfish hope of improper gain?

TYPES OF GAMBLING

We can divide gambling into three general categories: social, professional, and governmental. Social and professional gambling can further be divided into legal and illegal gambling.

We can immediately dispose of all forms of illegal gambling. They are off-limits for a Christian because the Scriptural command, “Submit yourself to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake” (I Pe 2:13) certainly includes obedience to laws restricting gambling.

The real problem is that more and more forms of gambling are not only being legalized, but they are being sponsored by governments, charities, and even churches. People are being offered an ever-growing number of choices when it comes to gambling: card and dice games, various kinds of racing, all kinds of lotteries and raffles, bingo, sports betting, personal wagers, and more.

Since Scripture does not speak directly on gambling, I believe we must beware of blanket condemnations and sweeping generalizations. We must beware of making ourselves judges of the motives of the heart. Can we make the judgment, "Such and such always involves greed and hope of unearned gain. If you do it, you must be greedy". We also must beware of letting ourselves become judges or courts of appeal to whom people come for our ruling on every specific problem that arises. We must also beware of judging by a double standard so that we can be accused of inconsistency. For example, if we oppose all gambling on the grounds that it provides strong temptations to sin, we must oppose drinking on the same grounds. If we oppose all gambling on the grounds that it is poor stewardship, don't we have to oppose smoking and many forms of luxurious entertainment on the same grounds? I think the whole history of the church's view of insurance warns us of the danger of making sweeping generalizations and judging motives, even on the basis of general Scriptural principles. In spite of these cautions, we as pastors do have a definite responsibility to our people in the matter of gambling. We have a responsibility not only in advising and guiding in particular cases, but in our regular teaching of sanctification, particularly the 7th, 9th, and 10th commandments. However, I do not believe our responsibility is to be arbiters who are called upon to make a definitive ruling in every case of casuistry, but to be shepherds of the soul who provide our members with solid Scriptural guidelines on the basis of which they as Christians can reach God-pleasing decisions with regard to gambling and any involvement in it.

We can flatly say that any gambling which is illegal, which is based on greed or a desire to profit at another's expense, or which is against one's own conscience is wrong and must be avoided. But what if a person objects that none of these applies to his particular case? There are still very serious questions which a Christian must raise about participation in gambling. He must ask himself the following questions.

1. Am I unnecessarily exposing myself to temptations to sin? Am I underestimating or toying with Satan's power to tempt me? Am I forgetting that I too still have a sinful nature subject to greed and selfishness? Am I underestimating the compulsive hold which gambling can gain over a person?
2. Am I tempting someone else with temptations which may be too strong for him? Am I offending souls for whom Christ died by leading them to sin? Will I be able to stand before the Lord of all and say that I served all in love?
3. Does my gambling diminish my effectiveness as a Christian witness in my community by raising doubt in the minds of the "weak" about the sincerity of my Christian faith and life?
4. Will I be able to stand before God, the giver of all, and say that I have used His gifts wisely if I have used even a portion of the time, abilities, and possessions He has given me in gambling? Is it good stewardship to pour money down the drain in games which you know have the odds stacked against you?
5. Can a responsible Christian citizen support activities which time after time have led to increased support for organized crime, corruption and bribery of public officials, and have created an atmosphere for more and more gambling and polluted the moral climate? Can churches and governments justify using gambling as a substitute for responsible stewardship

and responsible taxation?

Unless a Christian's activities can pass all the tests above, he will certainly want to reconsider his involvement and avoid activities which compromise his Christian stewardship and his service of love to God and his neighbor. When Christian's discuss the problems raised by gambling, they will not want to approach the discussion with a Pharisaical attitude which delight in legalistic judging, nor will they want to be in with a belligerent attitude which says, "I dare you to try to prove to me that there is anything wrong with gambling." A Christian will begin by asking, "What would the Lord want me, his servant, to do? How can I serve Him best?" He will say, "Speak, O Lord, Thy servant heareth." He will then genuinely seek the Lord's answer in His Word and through prayer. He will then think about passages of Scripture like Colossians 3:3ff.

You have died and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life, appears then you will also appear with Him in glory...Put to death, therefore, what is earthly in you: immorality, impurity, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry ... Whatever you do, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

As he seeks to deal honestly with the question, he will pray:

Create in me a new heart Lord
That gladly I obey Thy Word
And naught but what Thou wilt, desire.
With such new life my soul inspire.

Grant that I only Thee may love.
And seek those things which are above.
O grant me power and strength, my God,
To strive against my flesh and blood.