

HOT TOPICS – SIN OF GAMBLING

“Is Gambling a Sin?” (Hebrews 13:5)

Gambling is one of the greatest problems around the world today. New technology, like the Internet, makes gambling accessible to more than ever before. Gambling is a particular problem in Asia where many homes are destroyed by gambling addiction. We hear much in the news about the big winners but little about the big losers. The founding father of the USA, George Washington, wisely declared, “Gambling is the child of avarice, or greed, the brother of iniquity and the father of mischief.” John Calvin made gambling illegal in the city of Geneva.

In a recently published survey, it was revealed that 47% of Singapore residents in 2011 aged 18 and above admitted that they have participated in at least one form of gambling activity in the previous 12 months. Some believe that \$5 billion is spent gambling each year in Singapore. In the USA it is said that more than a trillion US dollars is gambled in illegal and legal gambling activities.

Some professing Christians try to justify gambling as a harmless pursuit or they argue that it is no different between gambling on a sports event and investing in the stock market. There are even churches that hold raffles to raise money for their funding.

DEFINITION OF GAMBLING

A proper definition of gambling will help us to understand the distinction between stock market investments and gambling. The word “gamble” is from an old English word “gammon” that is associated with playing games. Gambling is to wager money with the hope of gaining more on the outcome of a game, contest, or other event where the outcome is dependent either wholly on chance or partly on chance and partly on skill and the winner profits at the expense of the loss of others. So there are three basic elements:

- (1) A gamble or wager of money with the hope of gaining more without effort.
- (2) An outcome based on some degree of chance often completely beyond the control of the gambler.
- (3) A winner and at least one loser – no new wealth is created in the wager.

The Bible does not deal directly with the issue of gambling. There is no commandment that says, “Thou shalt not gamble.” But we know gambling is wrong because it violates other biblical principles. There are a number of biblical principles to guide us on this matter and lead us to regard it as a sin:

PRINCIPLES OF SCRIPTURE

(1) God ordained that man should earn his living by working, “*In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground*” (Gen. 3:19). We are given six days to work (cf. Exod. 20:9). This is the same in the NT age as the OT age. The Apostle Paul also warned that man should work for a living and, “*if any would not work, neither should he eat*” (2 Thess. 3:11; cf. Eph 4:28; Prov. 19:15; 21:25). He wrote to Timothy that, “*if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own*

house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel" (1 Tim. 5:8). So we earn wealth by working for it or inheriting from those who have worked for their wealth (cf. 2 Cor. 12:14).

By contrast, the gambler hopes to make money without working at all. He desires to get something for nothing by one stroke of luck such as the roll of a dice! Often the one who wins the jackpot or lottery, quits work to spend his wealth on himself. This can and often is a curse, not a blessing (cf. Ezek. 16:49). Gambling demeans and displaces hard work as the proper means for supporting the livelihood of a family. So the hope to earn money by gambling bypasses the work ethic God has ordained for man and is an attempt to overthrow God's order. There is something especially alluring about getting something for nothing but that does not make it right.

(2) The Bible is not against us having pleasure in the things God has given us to enjoy. Rather, it is against us finding pleasure in the wrong things or in wrong ways. Competitive sports and playing games are not necessarily evil. There are medicinal benefits for the body in physical exercise and relaxation. Although Paul stated, "*For bodily exercise profiteth little*" (1 Tim. 4:8a) he did not state that there is no profit in exercising. However, using competitive sports and playing games for gambling purposes is something a Christian must avoid getting involved in.

(3) Gambling is mainly rooted in the motivation of greed, discontentment, and covetousness. Such covetousness of the wealth of others is a sin, "*Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's*" (Exod. 20:17). The Bible repeatedly warns of greed, discontentment, and covetousness,

Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for He hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. (Heb 13:5; cf. Luke 12:15; 1 Tim. 6:6-8)

The word "*content*" here has the idea of "contained." It means that we are to be satisfied with what God has given to us and not to run after alternative external substitutes. The inspired writer directs us to be content by remembering to keep our eyes on God as Sovereign in all our circumstances. Keep reminding yourself that God has promised that He is in control, that He is our Provider, that He is the all Sufficient One.

Discontentment and covetousness with what God has sovereignly given us is rooted in pride that we can do a better job than Him. It assumes that God has not given us what we ought to have and that there is somehow more wealth that will finally make us happy. Discontentment will always arise when we live for self and seek fulfillment in the things of the world. Gambling promotes a fantasy world that entices people to give up their money in the hope that they will become rich beyond their wildest dreams in just a moment of time.

(4) The Christian is to have a life of fulfillment in God. The Psalmist had the right attitude when he said, "*Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever*" (Psa. 73:25-26). However, that does not mean that a believer cannot have ambition to improve his or her life. We are not called to be passive in our contentment of our current circumstances. Ambition is not necessarily the enemy of biblical contentment. If you can improve your circumstances by God's Sovereign

provision without compromising the Scriptures such as by hard work then you can legitimately do so. But continually guard your heart's motivation and pray, "Lord, give me a heart that is always contented with the present circumstances that you have appointed for me."

(5) Although we "*knowest not what a day may bring forth*" (Prov. 27:1), the Lord does as He sovereignly controls the future. Because the believer builds on his life on that premise, he rejects the notion of luck or fate or chance. That is why Job declared, "*Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD*" (Job 1:21). The idea of luck is against all the truth of the Scripture that God is in sovereign control over all of His creation, "*He ruleth by His power for ever; His eyes behold the nations: let not the rebellious exalt themselves*" (Psa. 66:7). The concept of luck or fate or chance is a lie of the devil to undermine the truth of the sovereignty of God. As God is in control of everything in heaven above and on earth below, there is no such thing as luck or fate or chance.

The gambler, by contrast, is not trusting in a sovereign God but in "lady luck" smiling on him. Gambling is an appeal to sheer chance and thus denies the reality of God's sovereignty over our material gains or losses. Indeed, it is because the gambler is not willing to trust in God's sovereign provision for his life that he tries luck to improve it! For if we walk by faith in God's promises to supply our needs, we do not need to gamble to bypass God's sovereign work or to help Him out!

Now, it is true that all our actions and plans in life are not guaranteed to succeed. All of life is fragile, as the Bible makes clear our life is like a vapour that comes and goes. But the fragility of our lives is only from our perspective as God knows and controls our futures. We can invest in studies, savings, real estate, shares etc. based on sound logical reason of potential future circumstances while trusting in God's absolute sovereignty as to the future. John MacArthur explains,

People say, "Well is putting money in the stock market gambling?" No, because what you're doing is investing and if you do it well and wisely you're going to look at a company and all you're doing is taking a part ownership in a company, a company that is large enough to have gone public, successful enough to produce at a level to produce that kind of income that it could go public and you're saying, "I think it's a wise use of my money to invest in that company." It may go up, it may not, but that's the way life goes. That can happen at any point in time.

Hence gambling is very different than investing in stocks and shares. For gambling is wagering money completely beyond a person's control and subjecting it to forces of chance without any rational thought or rational expectation. Gambling also requires others to lose whereas investing in stocks and shares does not require the gains of one investor to be financed by the losses of others. Real wealth has been created in such legitimate investments.

The act of gambling differs from the practice by believers in the Bible of casting lots. (Josh. 14:2; 1 Chron. 25:7; Acts 1:26) as these lots were to determine God's will by His providential leading. They were not an appeal to "lady luck" nor were they an attempt to make financial gain and exploit others.

(6) God is the true owner of everything and everyone (cf. 1 Cor. 4:7). We are commanded to handle all our financial resources for the glory of God, "*Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or*

whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). All of us will ultimately give an account to God in how we use the resources He has given to us (cf. 2 Cor. 5:10). Gambling is predicated on irresponsible stewardship of these resources as it is tempting people to throw away their money. Indeed, most people do lose or the bookmakers and casinos would close down! Many gamblers lose everything in their covetous addiction to acquire money. They destroy their reputations by their irresponsibility. The believer is to carefully manage his resources to provide for the needs of his family, *“if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel”* (1 Tim. 5:8) and even for his grandchildren, *“A good man leaveth an inheritance to his children's children”* (Prov. 13:22).

(7) The Bible repeatedly condemns the exploitation of others and encourages the saint to help the poor. Gain obtained through exploitation of other people is wrong (James 5:1-4). The believer is called to *“love thy neighbour as thyself”* (Mark 12:31; cf. Eph. 4:28; Philp. 2:4) and to give rather than take from others (cf. Acts 20:35). In particular we are forbidden from stealing from others (cf. Exod. 20:15). Gambling requires for every winner that at least one other person must lose (sometimes it is everything they have). It is a subtle form of legalised stealing the hard earned money of others, as by winning the gambler receives the wages that another person has earned without giving anything in exchange. Often the consequences are that those who can least afford are taken advantage of and lose out. The gambler's motives are utterly self-centred. He does not care about the effect on others or he would not enter a contest where they could lose. MacArthur explains the devastating consequences of gambling,

Gambling is a violation of the eighth commandment because gambling in the end steals. You might as well break into the house and take what they have. It steals from the losers. It is fundamentally a violation of the command to love your neighbor. It takes money from others. It strips families of resources. It increases debt. It leads to poverty. It leads to suicide. Twenty percent of addictive gamblers have attempted suicide and the suicide rate of the spouses of compulsive gamblers is 150 times the national average. Gambling is pursuing prosperity at another's expense, exploiting the poor and the undisciplined. Teaches greed, covetousness, and attacks the ethics of hard work, saving, self-denial, capital accumulation, exalt Hedonism, and on demand gratification.

Many gamblers also hurt themselves and their families by their gambling. Many men have reduced their families to poverty by gambling. Some have lost their employment and broken up their homes because of this sinful addiction. Children and spouses are neglected as the gambler puts all his time and energy into satisfying his cravings. When a believer participates in gambling he is involved in a business that has those direct consequences on the lives of others.

CONCLUSION

The temptation to get rich quickly by gambling is a powerful one. It is a seductive and destructive fantasy world in the mind of the exploited gambler. The gambler assumes that God has not given him what he needs to satisfy him and promises that more wealth will *finally* make him happy. The addictive buzz of the game that is fueled by covetousness and a lust for money

controls the actions of the gambler. If that were not so, we would not have such a huge problem with gambling around the world.

Mark Twain shrewdly advised gamblers, “the best throw at dice is to throw them away.” The underlying sins of gambling are: greed, discontentment, laziness, indifference to others, rejection of God’s sovereign provision, irresponsible management of our resources, and exploitation of others. It is no wonder that other related sins are seen where there is a concentration of gambling such as marital breakdown, prostitution, theft, racketeering, fraud etc.

There is an abundance of biblical teaching to guide every believer to make the right choice on this matter of gambling. The vice of gambling is based on a set of ungodly presuppositions. However, life is not based on luck but the purposeful choices of a sovereign God. No professing Christian should act in a manner inconsistent with his Christian faith in a sovereign God by gambling. Faith in luck and faith in God are mutually exclusive ways of life.

In Philippians 4:11, the Apostle Paul gave us a good example of biblical contentment, “*for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.*” The verb “*to be*” is in the present continuous tense, as this was Paul’s consistent manner of life. God promises to take care of us. He has proved Himself faithful to every saint down the centuries and we can trust Him also. You can eat from golden plates but the food won’t taste any better! You can buy a bigger house with more bedrooms but you can only sleep in one bed per night! We must be content to live in plenty or in poverty. Then you will see and agree with Paul that, “*Godliness with contentment is great gain*” (1 Tim. 6:6).

Every believer is responsible for his time, talent, and treasure. We are also called to “*Abstain from all appearance of evil*” (1 Thess. 5:22). Work is God’s gift and role for us. Reason is an essential part of who we are so we must use it in determining how we spend our resources. Solomon warns, “*Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues without right*” (Prov. 16:8). Wasting our God-given resources on wagers that bring the Lord no glory should never interest a child of God.

To those who have indulged in the sin of gambling, we say repent and seek God’s forgiveness, “*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*” (1 John 1:9). Repentance involves a separation from the sin of gambling and gamblers, “*He that tilleth his land shall be satisfied with bread: but he that followeth vain persons is void of understanding*” (Prov. 12:11).

The Bible equates greed with idolatry (cf. Col. 3:5). The gambler is *seeking pleasure apart from God*. Don’t worship at the false gods of “fate” or “chance.” Don’t put your trust in “lady luck” to provide for your needs but the God who controls the future. Let God be God in all of your life this day. Give chance a chance – no chance!