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When the Accounts Are Called: A Christian Understanding of Gambling

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The nationwide explosion of legal gambling may well be the most underrated dimension of America's moral crisis. With the expansion of state lotteries, casino gambling, and new technologies, the gambling industry is poised to grow even further in the next decade.



According to some estimates, as much as one-third of the nation's money supply now moves through the gambling industry each year. Looking at a recent annual economic report, management consultant Eugene M. Christiansen determined that "Americans spent more on gambling than they did on health insurance, dentists, shoes, foreign travel, or household appliances."

The Bible is clear on this issue. The entire enterprise of gambling is opposed to the moral worldview revealed in God's Word. The basic impulse behind gambling is greed—a basic sin that is the father of many other evils. Greed, covetousness, and avarice are repeatedly addressed by Scripture—always presented as a sin against God, and often

accompanied by a graphic warning of the destruction which is greed's result. The burning desire for earthly riches leads to frustration and spiritual death.

As the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, "the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil." [1 Timothy 6:10] Greed was involved in Judas' decision to betray Christ, in the deceit of Ananias and Sapphira, and was the root moral issue in the Rich Young Ruler's refusal to follow Christ's command.

In the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, greed is presented as foolishness, and Jesus amplifies this teaching in His parable of the rich man [Luke 12:16-21]. Trusting in his economic prosperity, and planning to build even bigger barns to hoard his wealth, the man is called to account by God, who said to him, "You fool! This very night your soul is required of you." This is not likely to be found as a popular inspirational text at the local casino.

The Bible presents the stewardship of material possessions as a crucial issue of discipleship. The Christian understands that his possessions and money are not his own, but God's. We are trustees who will be judged for the quality of our stewardship. Those lottery tickets and trips to Atlantic City are going to be hard to explain when God calls stewards to account.

Added to this is the dependence of the entire gambling system on chance. The worldview of the gambler assumes a world of indeterminate and random chance, for which the chief virtue is luck. The worldview of the Bible affirms the active sovereignty of God over all events, persons, and time—and thus there is no place for luck. The Christian trusts in God, not in the vain hope of a winning lottery number or a favorable roll of the dice.

Furthermore, gambling is a direct attack on the work ethic presented in Scripture. One of the constant threads through the Old and New Testaments is the dignity of honorable work, and the proper reward for labor and industriousness. The worker worthy of hire is rewarded. Lazy, slothful, and unproductive persons are undeserving of financial rewards, and were a scandal to the early Church. Gambling severs the dignity of work from the hope of financial gain, offering the hope of riches without labor, and reward without dignity.

Finally, one of the most significant sins of the gambling industry is its treatment of the poor. Rather than offering genuine hope and a way out of poverty, gambling operators prey on those who are most desperate. The Old Testament prophets proclaimed God's devastating judgment against those who "devour" the poor, and yet gambling proponents entice those at the bottom of the economic ladder to risk everything, though they end up with nothing. The concentration of lottery ticket outlets in lower-income neighborhoods is no accident.

Why are Christians so silent on this issue? Though some denominations have adopted strongly worded resolutions opposed to gambling, the issue is virtually off the moral map of most churches. There is little evidence of any sustained theological consideration of the issue. A review of major textbooks on Christian ethics used in evangelical seminaries reveals not a single chapter on gambling. The issue does not even make the tables of contents!

In all likelihood, most Christians have no conception of the problem's scope. Once confined to Nevada (and later, New Jersey), casinos now operate in states ranging from heartland Missouri to deep-south Louisiana. In many states slot machines and electronic games are found in gas stations and grocery stores, and lottery tickets are sold in a myriad of outlets. The tentacles of the gambling industry reach deeply into the nation's economy—and the national psyche.

The most insidious dimension of the problem is the role of government in legitimizing and promoting the gambling enterprise. Though outlawed until 1964, state lotteries now represent the most popular form of legal gambling. Turning vice into an economic virtue, these states take advantage of their most gullible citizens, while touting benefits the gambling revenues supposedly make possible.

Gambling corrupts the culture, polluting everything it touches. Recent scandals in college basketball are proof positive that gambling is not a problem limited to casinos and horse tracks. Ominously, industry executives see great promise in the development of on-line gambling over the Internet, bringing gambling to every computer terminal and overcoming state regulation.

The silence and complacency of the Christian church must end. As the late pulpiteer R. G. Lee used to remind us, there will be a "payday, someday." The Church had better not bet on this problem just going away.

This week will feature a special focus on the problem of gambling. This essay was originally published on July 16, 2009. Tomorrow: "Casino Culture and the Death of Character."

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler

