

Is Gambling Really Unscriptural?

By Pastor Bud Talbert

Gambling provides huge amounts of money for education and social programs every year. This varied form of recreation provides thrill and excitement for an estimated 80% of the adult population of Canada, and a growing percentage of the under-aged population. The industry created over 200,000 jobs in 2002 and the number is growing. Some people complain about the damage the gambling industry creates, but only 4-5% of the adult population of Canada can justly be called “problem gamblers.” That’s not even 2 million people nation wide (the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse puts the figure at about half that). Most people don’t lose that much on gambling. Besides, it’s fun to win money. You even have the chance of winning millions of dollars. Think how that money could be used for good, and help the Lord’s work!

Such might be the reasoning of those promoting gambling as harmless fun. In 1892 the Criminal Code of Canada, following Great Britain, placed a ban on all forms of gambling except horse racing. In 1969 it was amended “*to use lotteries to fund worthwhile activities.*” In 1985 it was further amended to allow VLTs and slot machines, and to give the provinces exclusive control over gambling. Since that time gambling has grown into an annual \$13 billion industry (Alberta’s share was just under \$2 billion last year). That’s about a third as large as the entire annual agriculture industry in the country. Internet gambling, the “new kid on the block”, accounted for \$5 billion in 2003 revenues, and a significant number of internet gamblers are youth.

Before we can address the morality of gambling, we must first define it. The dictionary defines it as *playing a game of chance for stakes*. The Salvation Army defines it as “*an act of risking property that gives material advantage based on chance and at the expense of others.*” (*Faith Today*, March/April 2007, p. 29) Gambling does involve chance, but it is far more than chance. In the only Biblical example of gambling, casting lots for the Lord’s clothing at the cross was not gambling only because it involved chance, but because it involved one soldier’s gain at the expense of others. Henlee Barnette says: “*Three basic factors appear in the process of gambling: the payoff, the element of pure chance, and the agreement to pay by the bettors.*” (*Baker’s Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, p. 257) Lotteries, bingos, betting pools, casino games are examples of common forms of gambling. However, things like buying stock or insurance are not normally forms of gambling because (1) the element of chance is largely removed, and (2) the practice is not at the expense of others but rather it promotes industry.

Is playing a game of chance for stakes really wrong? No less a man than John Newton played the lottery in hopes of avoiding a career at sea (it didn’t work). But regardless of who does it, or what good the proceeds may be used for, there are sound Biblical reasons for avoiding it. First, there is no question that gambling promotes greed and covetousness. Simply remove the hope of material gain, and gambling falls to the floor like an empty sheet. The anticipation of winning money or property does not simply make the game “more interesting”. That anticipation is inherent in gambling. God’s commandment is absolute: *Thou shalt not covet.*

Paul admitted that all things were lawful for him, but he determined not to be brought under the power of anything (1 Corinthians 6:12). Just as drinking alcohol poses some threat of addiction, so does gambling. Barnette says of the problem gambler: “*He habitually takes chances; gambling absorbs all of his interests; he is optimistic and never learns from losing; he never stops while winning; he risks too much; he enjoys a strange tension between pleasure and pain.*” (Barnette) Again, statistics prohibit us from thinking that gambling is benign enjoyment. Millions of Canadians are affected by its problems every year. Obsession with gambling leads to loss of income and debt, loss of jobs and family, theft and deception.

Romans 12:10 commands believers to “*Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another.*” In order to sustain the business of gambling, numbers of losers must far exceed the number of winners. Every winner does so, by design, at the expense of the

many losers. It is simply impossible to *prefer others* and seek winnings at their expense. The happiness of the winner implies the misery of the loser. (J. L. Paton, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol 6, p. 166). Some hold that gambling is a form of stealing. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that every winner takes advantage of someone who is an obsessive gambler. To gamble at all takes advantage of that person. That is not being *kindly affectionate* toward him. Some studies have even documented that seeing others defeated, humiliated and pained is part of the enjoyment of gambling.

Finally, there really is a guilt by association, as Jehoshaphat discovered. The same holds true of the gambling industry. There is a great deal associated with the gambling industry that is corrupt. Phil Johnson (“Gambling: The Moral Antithesis of Charity” in *Pulpit Live*, April 12, 2007) says that gambling “*breeds crime and corruption; it undermines character; it does not promote godliness; it violates private industry; it undermines the good of society; it exploits the poor; and it promotes false values.*” There is a reason why organized crime and gambling get along so well. The two make perfect bedfellows because they are cut from the same cloth. If we are to *avoid every appearance* (i.e. form) *of evil* (1 Thessalonians 5:22), then the real question is not *Why shouldn't I gamble?* but *Why should I gamble?*

So, in view of the Bible's teaching about stewardship, about work, and about love to one's neighbor, it is clear that gambling is something a Christian should have no part of – for any reason.