

Gambling & Lotteries

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According to the Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, copyright 1998, Gambling is: "1 a: "to play a game for money or property, b; to bet on an uncertain outcome, 2; to stake something on a contingency: take a chance."

Gambling in North America has become so pervasive it is estimated that citizens in the USA and Canada spend more on gambling than they do for either food or clothing. Gambling not only abounds in North America, it is a vice found around the world. Gambling is almost everywhere.

Many governments, in the last decade or two, have switched from prohibiting gambling to endorsing it as a means of raising money for a variety of federal, state, or provincial agencies and programs. Las Vegas and many other gambling resorts have become family-entertainment centers where millions of people, young and old, are lured annually to a myriad of enticements that either directly or indirectly support the gambling business. In addition to these "Meccas of Chance," growing is the number of local gaming operations such as river-boat gambling businesses, reservation casinos, neighborhood gambling parlors, Internet gambling sites, lottery outlets, off-track betting establishments, dog and horse racing tracks, as well as a wide variety of other gaming means and methods. Government-run lotteries are promoted on television, radio, billboards, in gas/petrol stations, and numerous other places. Millions of dollars are freely transferred daily by hardworking people to governments and gaming businesses in

the hope those gambling will somehow strike it rich. From the government's or gambling operation's perspective, institutional gambling is not a true game of chance - the odds are clearly calculated and manipulated to always be in favor of the government or gambling establishment. The government or casinos never go broke. For the most part, gambling is a huge transfer of assets from those least able to afford the losses to entities that are hugely wealthy and powerful, with assets and resources that dwarf the gambling public. Multitudes of players lose so that a few might claim to win.

As gambling has become such a large and generally accepted part of society, the negative effect on individuals and society in general has also grown. A significant number of people are currently incarcerated in North America, either directly or indirectly, as a result of habitual gambling. Their compulsion brought financial ruin or otherwise caused them to break the law in order to cover gambling debts or to simply support their gambling addiction. Ironically, many states, in order to placate organized resistance to gambling, have chosen to also provide counseling assistance to those whom they have helped to become addicts. North Americans are increasingly developing a personal and societal tolerance for wagering as well as a psychology of dependence on lotteries and gaming, rather than working and saving to support themselves and their families. A multitude of studies implicate gambling as a catalyst causing increases in crime, divorce, family disruption, addiction, poverty, and debt.

No biblical commandment states, "Thou shalt not gamble." Therefore, should the Brethren in Christ Church simply stand by and not condemn gambling? No. Our assertions against gambling come from a position founded in Christian love and concern. We believe that gambling is a very serious concern today for people in our culture.

Gambling is a societal phenomenon that is flourishing because it appeals to base selfish instincts of greed, covetousness, thrill-seeking, entertainment dependency as a lifestyle, and the desire to get something for nothing. Gambling requires that someone lose at least a dollar for every dollar won. As a matter of fact, institutional gambling requires that losers not only pay for winners but also pay for the overhead, operating expenses, and exorbitant profit margins of the gaming organizations. A winner, therefore, is "cashing in" at the expense of the many losers.

Gambling, for some, becomes a compulsion—an addiction—that can drive them to neglect their family, disregard responsibilities, and even steal or commit other crimes to support their addiction.

The desire to "get something for nothing" is the fundamental psychological underpinning that scam artists use to perpetrate a wide variety of scams used to rob and steal. This same drive significantly undergirds gambling. Losing frequently makes one want to try again in anticipation that the next bet will provide financial redemption. Winning often becomes a whetting of one's appetite for excitement and entices one to take greater and greater chances. Ironically, both winning and losing can pull one further into individualism and a lessening of dependency on Christ. Gambling, whether one wins or loses, can become a risk to the vitality of a person's relationship with Christ. Paul's entreaty in 2 Corinthians 7:1 states, "Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates the body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God."

In addition to this call to us for holy living, Christians are also earnestly summoned to a stewardship of life—a dependency on Christ. Our call to responsible stewardship of our resources demands that we not support endeavors that may destroy the livelihood of others. On the surface, gambling can appear quite harmless—perhaps even fun, exciting, and daring. However, beneath the surface lurks a monster that feeds on selfish desires of the human heart, regardless of how small the amount or infrequent the gambling.

Personal risks of gambling may be much greater than the loss of money. Many have lost their self-respect, their freedom, their families, their jobs, etc. As is always the case, the individual involved in the errant conduct is not the only one who suffers. Children, a spouse, friends, relatives, and society in general pay a great price for the cumulative negative affects of gambling. Gambling is particularly harmful to the poor, and government-sponsored gambling is an additional tax on the people in our society who can least afford it.

As a community of faith, we therefore strongly oppose gambling, whether legal or illegal. As individual Christians, we have a certain amount of freedom in Christ to exercise our personal viewpoints and practices. In so doing, we urge caution in making a personal decision, based on one's freedom, that might cause another to stumble.

We are a "called-out" community—called to reflect the light and truth of Christ in the living of our daily lives. Any practice that keeps us from living our lives as a witness for the Lord or lessens our full reliance upon God to provide for all of our daily needs must be called into question. Gambling is such a practice.

1 - CBS; Sixty Minutes, May 2000

2 - Focus on the Family "What Payoff Can You Expect From Gambling", 1997

3 - Bible quotations are from the NIV translation