



I Gamble Responsibly

To be responsible means to be answerable to another for something. The word 'responsible' indicates that some one is response-able, able to respond to a set of rules or values. Therefore, to gamble responsibly is a meaningless exhortation if it is not contextualized, if it is not connected to a particular plumb line of morality or to a higher authority. For example, we are also exhorted to drive responsibly, that is we are to drive in response to the traffic rules set before us and which we are to obey. For gambling, no such benchmark is being provided by those who tell us to gamble responsibly. What is being provided is sponsorship through casinos to come to the aid of those who gamble irresponsibly (whatever that means, since the same absolute plumb line is still absent, wherefore the measure of irresponsibility is reduced to a purely subjective opinion). What we do know is that gambling stands firmly planted, firstly, as a passionate national pastime and secondly, as a pastime which causes much grief to families, since gambling opportunities are prone to lead to devastating and addictive social circumstances for both the gambler and those affected by his (or her) passion. Statistics can be found on the internet to bear this out in super-abundance.

What the Bible Says

The Christian would say that the Bible probably has the answer. However, upon scrutinizing Scripture no clear prohibition of gambling is being found. There is no dictum that declares, "*Thou shalt not gamble*," or words to such effect. The following treatise will try to show from Scripture that, from the viewpoint of Scriptural ethics, much can be said to condemn this national pastime.

Gambling is essentially playing a game of chance for stakes. Each player places at risk something of material value *without the guarantee of fair recompense*. Some people will retort that 'all of life is a gamble.' Such people, however, confuse 'risk' with 'gambling'. There are many risky occasions, but they do not and that is the crucial difference, involve taking other people's property without compensation (e.g. as in the risk of driving a car or flying in a plane). Some argue that running a farm or a business is gambling. Again however, no agreement is entered to take other people's goods without compensation. Others again say that investing in stock is gambling. Not so, because what is stock really? Is it not effectively resulting in becoming part owner of a business? Further, when stock is sold, both seller and purchaser agree on a price. Neither is insurance a form of gambling, as some people may suggest, because money is laid out and a product is acquired. In short, none of the above is about gambling, since no party aims to create a situation in which uncompensated losses occur. But gamblers always want financial loss to occur, because all parties involved (yes, on both sides of the table) hope to profit from those losses.

It may help to look at the etymology, the origin, of the word 'to gamble'. It comes from the old English word 'gamenian', which means 'to play, to jest, be merry', all with the connotational loading of frivolous pursuit, which means 'following after something which is inappropriately silly'. When considering gambling in such a realm, it becomes quite evident that it is an activity upon which our Lord frowns for His people, as not fitting man's cultural mandate, which is entirely about responsible (by God's plumb line) stewardship of and on God's real estate. John Calvin comments on the idolatrous practice to which the Israelites resorted, as recorded in Exodus 32:6 and reiterated by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 10, verses 6 and 7, quoted here:

Now these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted. And do not become idolaters as were some of them. As it is written, "THE PEOPLE SAT DOWN TO EAT AND DRINK, AND ROSE UP TO PLAY."

Says John Calvin, "Moses here designates the sacred banquet and sports engaged in, in honor of the idols; for, as we have seen elsewhere, the faithful feasted before God at their sacrifices, and so also heathen nations celebrated sacred feasts, whilst they worshipped their idols in games.

Of this point Paul is the surest interpreter, who quotes this passage in condemnation of the idolatry of the ancient people, and ably accommodates it to the purpose he had in hand; for the Corinthians had not gone to such an excess as to bow their knees to idols, but **were boon-companions of unbelievers in their polluted sacrifices**. Hence feasting and play were two appendages of idolatry. For it was customary, both among the people of Israel and among the rotaries of superstition, to have a feast in connection with a sacrifice, as a part of divine worship, at which no profane or unclean persons were allowed to be present. The Gentiles, in addition to this, appointed sacred games in honor of their idols, in conformity with which the Israelites doubtless on that occasion worshipped their calf, **for such is the presumption of the human mind, that it ascribes to God whatever pleases itself.**"

In support, Jamieson, Fausset and Brown declare, "As the Israelites sat down (a deliberate act), ate, and drank at the idol feast to the calves in Horeb, so the Corinthians were in danger of idolatry by a like act." Calvin well understands how the human mind works and how people are past masters at justifying their actions — even to the point that they manage to ennoble their actions to levels of piety, or at least to a level where they proclaim 'that God is okay with this. "

The warning of one minister is worth noting at this point, where he said, "For man to get into trouble and into destructive modes of operation, all that God has to do is nothing." Indeed, a fair amount of money spent on gamenian (I want you to continue to remember the origin of the practice under study) is allocated to help problem gamblers to overcome their addiction, as people fall prey to the lure of the illusionary pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

Activities which do fit the bill of 'gamenian', gambling, are casino activities, lotteries, raffles (even if they are for 'a good cause' — in which case people could of course just give a donation, but that would remove the thrill), charity and church bingo games.

Wherever There's Chance Biblical Principles Are Being Violated

No matter how small the amount, certain Biblical principles are still being violated, as will be demonstrated in what follows. It must be noted that, whereas gambling is not addressed directly in the Bible, yet Biblical principles are set forth **which legitimize the passing of either money or possession from one person to another**. The person desirous to follow Biblical guidelines for life will therefore do what God commands and understand that what God has not commanded is therefore forbidden. In other words, when God lays down the economy for honest dealings, deviation from this economy lands one automatically in the quagmire of unethical meanderings (as the havoc in society confirms with sickening regularity). It is true, the Bible does not forbid gambling directly, but good and necessary *inference* is a well-established practice of Biblical analysis, one which Jesus uses on many occasions and which He expected His followers to apply, for instance when speaking in parables.

The three dictates of God in this matter involve work ethic, trading, and giving. Let us briefly consider these three approaches that come from the Lord of the universe Himself.

1 Timothy 5:18 informs us that a labourer is worthy of his wages. Ephesians 4:28 declares: "Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth." The Biblical work ethic involves effort on the part of the worker in return for reward. Gamenian, gambling, undermines the Christian work ethic because it aims at taking from others what they, those others, have earned. Some may argue that a gambler does actually work. So does a thief. Neither of the two produces anything that benefits the other party, however. If gambling were really Biblical, then the gambler should receive wages, because he works to win. It runs counter to Biblical work ethic, because it leads people to seek

profit *at the expense* of others. If a thief were really working as per Biblical ethics, he ought to receive just recompense in monetary or material value from those he robs.

Trading is also an economically just practice. In Genesis 23:1-18 Abraham bought a field and a cave for money. There are other examples of purchasing items in the Bible (e.g. Solomon buying material from Hiram for the building of the Temple — 1 Kings 5:10-11). Trading is an approved Biblical practice therefore.

Giving goods or money to another person voluntarily as an act of love or compassion is urgently recommended in the Bible (cf. Ephesians 4:8; Acts 20:35). Gambling is not about giving voluntarily, as an act of love, or as an act of compassion. The Biblical paradigm in terms of parting with goods or money without recompense could not stand in starker contrast to gambling. Giving freely to those in need is a small way of following in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus, Who gave all for those in need.

These are the three ways in which God authorizes people to part with goods or money. Gambling does not fit any of these. The category in which gambling fits is under the heading of covetousness and greed. This is authoritatively condemned in the Scriptures (cf. Romans 1:29-32).

Is the practice of gambling fitting for godly stewardship of what the Lord of the earth has entrusted to mankind? A gambler is an unfaithful steward who wastes his Master's money.

Prov.13:11: Wealth gotten by vanity shall be diminished: but he that gathereth by labour shall increase.

"Every young man would do well to remember that all successful business stands on the foundation of morality." Henry Ward Beecher (prominent clergyman and social reformer, 1813-1887

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