

Is Playing the Lottery Gambling, and is Gambling a Sin?

By Terry Moore and Art Braidic

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All Scriptures are from the New King James translation unless otherwise noted.

Many people wonder if playing the lottery is considered gambling and if so, is gambling a sin? Some consider lottery tickets to be nothing more than a game in which money happens to be involved. Other excuses claim that we gamble in everyday life by driving our cars, crossing the street, or flying on an airplane where we risk bringing harm to ourselves and/or our family. When we pay to see a movie we take a chance that it will be either good entertainment or offensive to Christian principles. These things are really not considered gambling, but fall into the category of chance. Even so, when making the right choices, our odds of loss or offense are extremely low. In fact, these are merely examples of living life which is sometimes out of our control.

Some also claim that gambling does not transgress the law because there is no “Thus says the LORD” on this matter. Nobody would consider playing a friendly game of cards a transgression. If the players decided to play for peanuts, or pay a penny a point as a means of entertainment, would that make it a sin? Would the fact that the game was elevated to a few dollars make it evil? Most would think not.

Nonetheless, just because the Bible does not directly say that we cannot engage in some activities does not mean that there are no moral principles found in the Scriptures to guide us in making a righteous decision about a questionable subject. After all, the Bible was written for the purpose of addressing moral behavior. Every question of ethics can be found in its law, history, or by what biblical ethics imply.

When it comes to gambling, a similar point can be made regarding drinking alcohol. While the Bible plainly demonstrates that drinking is not a sin, it makes it clear that drunkenness is wrong (Pro. 23:21, 1Cor. 5:11, 1Pet. 4:3). The Scriptures do not say how many ounces a person may consume, but it does set limits on personal alcohol consumption (Eph. 5:18, 1Tim. 3:3-8). The same is true for food consumption. By this we see that the Bible does address various behaviors that might otherwise not be a sin when enjoyed in moderation. This is also true for gambling.

For example, if our gambling offends someone that we love, then we should not do it (Rom. 14:15-21). If it takes money away from the ability to pay our bills, purchase food, clothing, or other necessities, then the behavior is irresponsible. Thus, there are guidelines regarding certain activities to the degree in which we do them. Although a particular act, such as playing the lottery or gambling, may not be directly addressed in the Scriptures, God does show us that such behavior can result in sin.

In some other examples, we can see additional principles that apply to gambling. Flipping a coin to see who gets the ball first is merely a way to allow chance to dictate who can start the game. This is not a sin. Certainly a measure of time and chance happen to us all (Ecc. 9:11). However, if a person gambles to the point where it hinders their

ability to take care of their responsibilities, it becomes wrong. If it is addictive, it is wrong. If it is spending money that others we care for need, it is wrong. If the individual has the urge to do it continually, or cannot stop doing it, they are addicted and it is wrong. If they hope to win money in order to solve their problems rather than looking for real solutions, it is a sin.

These forms of gambling lead people away from their duty toward others, and their reasonable service toward Christ (Luke 17:10; Rom. 12:1), They can be a form of idolatry by looking to be blessed by mammon and not through our faithful behavior before God. This is unquestionably a sin! As Christ stated:

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon (Matthew 6:24).

In addition to Christ's statement regarding who we are to serve, God actually tells us how we are to make our money. We are to generate it by working toward accomplishing our goals. The Apostle Paul said:

If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies. Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread (2 Thessalonians 3:10-12).

There is enormous value in having good work ethics. Consider the example of Christ. Would He gamble with the world, or the plan of salvation? Would He hope to win enough money to make people happy? Obviously the answer is no. Jesus tirelessly worked to build something of immeasurable value. He did the work that His Father commissioned Him to do, and He continues to work right now in heaven (John 5:36; 14:2).

Within that context, Paul makes it clear that we are to work in like manner. We are to generate our increase by working to produce something of value:

But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more; that you also aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you, that you may walk properly toward those who are outside, and *that* you may lack nothing (1 Thessalonians 4:10-12)

In addition to this vital advice, there is another important point to consider. Whose money is it anyway? Although people may feel that the money they earn is entirely theirs, God makes it clear that this is not the case. He reminds us:

The silver *is* Mine, and the gold *is* Mine, says the LORD of hosts (Haggai 2:8).

Everything on earth belongs to God. The food, water, land, animals, plants, trees, and even the money we make—it is all His! We are only stewards of what He allows us to use. This principle is clearly stated by the Apostle Peter who wrote:

As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God (1 Peter 4:10).

When we consider that we are pilgrims and strangers in a world that is not our own, we should thoughtfully consider what we do with what God has given each of us. This includes how we spend money.

When it comes to playing the lottery and gambling, it should be obvious that the odds are against the gambler. While people may be enticed by the hope of an effortless way to make a lot of money fast, the casinos and state run lotteries have already geared the odds so that most players lose. It is not much different than a modern day ponzi-scheme. Only a percentage of the money put into the stratagem comes back. Relatively few win in the end. Even those who win, if they continue to play, will eventually lose everything that they have gained and more if they do not stop.

Gambling is certainly a way to waste God's money. It is not putting it to good use as He intended. Thus, gambling can be considered throwing away what belongs to God—a gift that should not be squandered.

In Christ's parable of the prodigal son, a young man came to understand this truth the hard way. He took all that he was given and left home with the intent of squandering the funds:

And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living (Luke 15:13).

After losing everything, this young man came to his senses. He realized that he was foolish and sinned against his family and God:

“Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you” (Luke 15:18).

Playing the lottery and gambling may be considered following the example of the prodigal son—wasting what God has given us. Clearly, this can become a sin against those individuals who love us, and a sin before God.