

“At a pace that seems almost epidemic, gambling fever is sweeping the U.S.,” *Business Week* magazine observed. Gambling has indeed entered the mainstream of American society. It is now touching the lives of nearly everyone, even the person who does not gamble.

Many families have tragic stories to tell about the toll gambling has taken on their lives. Marriages are broken. Children are abused and neglected. Fathers and mothers gamble away their pay checks. They lose their jobs. Studies show that lower income persons, in the hope of getting rich, are especially hard hit by gambling fever. Compulsive gambling is now commonly regarded as a disease to be treated.

Nearly everyone agrees, many gamblers included, that the effects of gambling can be devastating. But how are Christians to regard gambling itself? Is it a sin? Are all forms of gambling—bingo, “office pools,” and raffles included—to be labeled morally wrong? Opinions differ. Some Christians quickly label **all** gambling, including bingo, pools, and raffles, as intrinsically sinful. Others believe that it is a morally neutral matter, just like many other forms of entertainment.

While the Scriptures do not specifically condemn gambling, they do address basic concerns that gambling raises for Christians. Some of the Scriptural truths that ought to guide us:

1. God entrusts us with possessions in order to honor him and help others. Out of his great goodness, God gives us all that we have and need to support this body and life. He also holds us accountable for how we use our possessions. We honor the Lord not by hoarding our money or possessions, but by using them to help others. God, through St. Paul, tells the thief to give up stealing and work with his hands so “he may have something to share with those in need” (Ephesians 4:28).

2. Giving to others, not getting for oneself, is to be a distinctive characteristic of the Christian life. Jesus taught, “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (Luke 6:38). Jesus’ own love for us is to be the model for our life: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?” (1 John 3:16–17)

3. Love for our possessions can separate us from God. Jesus spoke bluntly about our relationship to money: “You cannot serve both God and money” (Matthew 6:24). In fact, greed can lead to separation from God and exclusion from his kingdom! (Ephesians 5:5; 1 Corinthians 6:9–10) It should not surprise us that the love of money can make shambles out of people’s lives. St. Paul told Timothy, “Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (1 Timothy 6:10).

4. God is concerned not only with external actions but also with internal motives. The Ninth and Tenth Commandments forbid coveting (Exodus 20:17; Deuteronomy 5:21). Coveting is the “grasping selfishness” of the human heart which is corrupted by sin. It is the desire to have what belongs to someone else (often at that person’s expense).

On the basis of these truths, what should our attitude be toward gambling?

- Gambling very easily can become a form of idolatry, since gambling may, and most generally does, proceed from and lead to the love of money and what it can buy. By its very nature, gambling feeds on human greed.

- Gambling is a threat to the welfare of others, since it requires that any gain which comes my way will be at the expense of my neighbor. Someone always loses in the process, and that someone is always a neighbor whom God calls us to love in word and in deed.
- Since the potential for the loss of possessions entrusted to me by God far exceeds the likelihood of gain, the Christian asks, “Is gambling responsible management of what God has given to me?”
- To say “I only gamble a limited amount of money for recreation” is a rationalization. Am I catering to greed? Is this the best kind of recreation for me? Am I exposing myself to temptation?
- To say “everyone does it” does not excuse me from making a definite decision based on the above Christian principles.

Since gambling can enslave people and bring upon them personal and family tragedy, Christians need to provide spiritual care to one another in this area. Only the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, whose love sets us free, will enable us to overcome such a burden (Romans 8:1–17). God loves us deeply, forgives the sins of those who trust in him, and helps us to resist the temptation



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to “lay up treasures” for ourselves. “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners Christ died for us,” St. Paul wrote (Romans 5:8). Our sins are therefore forgiven in Christ, including the sins of greed and lovelessness toward others. At the same time, God helps us to open our hearts in love and kindness, for He is at work in us both “to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:13).

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