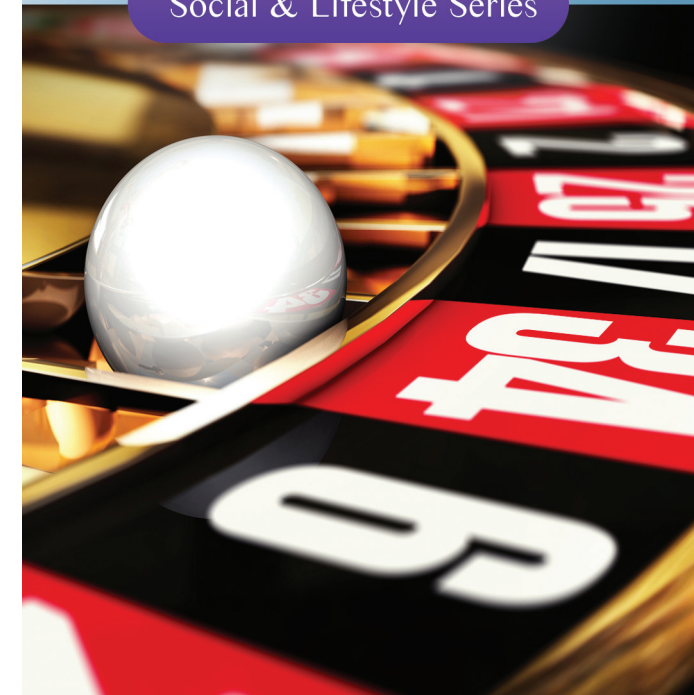


Gambling

A Short-Range Substitute for Faith

Social & Lifestyle Series



The Belief That There is Never Enough

Another spiritual dimension of the issue of gambling is the problem of insatiability – the ongoing belief that there is never enough, no matter how much there actually is. It's difficult for many of us to imagine that a multi-million dollar lottery win would not be enough. Yet the instant winning or accumulation of wealth does not magically carry with it contentment, generosity, and a renewed focus on the kingdom of God. Great wealth does anything but produce deep satisfaction in life and fulfillment of the deep desires of the heart and soul. Instead of providing a sense of having enough, having much may well generate an ongoing and even increased sense of not having enough, of never having enough. An ongoing sense of unsatisfied and ultimately insatiable desires opposes the message of the Gospel, where we are taught that we have been given all that we need.

What is the Solution

The solution to the problems of gambling is the reordering of our desires, which begins to happen when we participate in worship, both personal and corporate (Romans 12:1-2). As Stanley Hauerwas suggests in a meditation on greed, "there is an alternative to a world that is based on greed. The alternative to the world of greed is a people capable of participating through worship in the love of the Father for the Son through the Spirit." Through worshipping God our desires begin to be ordered and shaped in ways that take into account the truth that our lives, the world in which we find ourselves, and the body of Christ are gifts given graciously by God, the giver of good and perfect gifts. It is in personal and corporate worship that we begin to come face to face with our disordered desires. We see our pursuits for what they are, and as God grants us grace, we can break through the seductive

illusions which surround us – illusions which seek to convince us that the kinds of goods produced by gambling can replace those which only come to us through faith. ■

For additional reading, see Stanley Hauerwas, "More, or, a Taxonomy of Greed," in *Working With Words: On Learning to Speak Christian* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2011).

Endnotes

1. Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy, *I am an impure thinker* (Norwich, Vermont: Argo Books, 1970), 99.
2. Brian Rosner, *Greed and Idolatry: The Origin and Meaning of a Pauline Metaphor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 177.

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Faith and Life

Gambling: A short-range substitute for faith

Most of us know that gambling addictions are a sad social reality. But isn't it easy to think that gambling is basically harmless? Can't it provide a source of funding for social programs?

Indeed, who hasn't thought gleefully about what they would do and buy if they won some huge lottery, hastening to add of course that they would be generous with family and church. It's hard to see gambling as deeply problematic for the church. Nonetheless, the practice of gambling is a spiritual problem centred on disordered desire. Much of Christian faithfulness has to do with learning how to order our desires in relation to God. Some of our desires ought to be cultivated, others relativized, still others denied. It is when we do the wrong thing with our desires that we can be said to have disordered desires.

The Spiritual Dangers of Gambling

Gambling can be described as a short-range substitute for faith.¹ It's a practice that seeks to find wealth instantly, without thought for the social and moral implications for the individual or broader society. Gambling minimizes the value of

good work, and bypasses the positive connection between our life's work and the stewardship of the resources earned by our work. However, the fundamental problem with gambling is not only a misplaced desire to be rich; gambling is part of a spiritual problem rooted in greed and idolatry.

The Bible doesn't speak directly about the practice of gambling, but it does identify the dangers that surround the acquisition and accumulation of wealth and possessions. The temptations of Jesus in the wilderness at the beginning of his public ministry point to the perverse spirituality of the desire for illegitimate economic, political and religious power (Luke 4:1-13.) In Matthew 6:24ff, part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns listeners of the impossibility of serving two masters. He shows that the pursuit of material things as the primary focus of life causes us to miss the pursuit of the kingdom of God. In the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:16-21), Jesus speaks about the danger of piling up material treasure without proper attention to spiritual truth, including the possibility of death and judgment. In other words, storing up treasures only on earth hinders the possibility of having a rich relationship with God.

Obsessive Pursuit

The epistle of James is also clear about the spiritual dangers connected to an obsessive pursuit of wealth which often carries certain fantasies along with it (James 4:13-5:5). People who desire to be rich often dream about what they would do if they were to come into wealth. In fact, advertising which promotes buying lottery tickets often relies on this idea by asking, "What would you do if you won this week's jackpot?" What *couldn't* you do if you won? There's no limit to how good your life would be,

the advertising claims. But James warns against such fantasizing, because none of us knows what tomorrow brings. It's easy to forget God when we begin to boast about what we would do if only we had a lot of money. James also shows that very often the fantasies of what we would do with personal wealth can lead us to forget not only God but also those around us in need.

The Temptation of Riches

The Apostle Paul's personal letter to Timothy (I Timothy 6: 3-10) teaches us about the temptations of pursuing and possessing riches. Paul seeks to guide Timothy in the pastoral task of teaching godliness and contentment, two dimensions of the life of faith that are closely linked in this passage. Paul's positive teachings are shared with the following warning: "But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich, some have wandered away from the faith and have pierced themselves with many pains" (I Timothy 6:9, 10).

The issue of gambling cannot be addressed by focusing only on social issues. An analysis of various kinds of gambling and its social implications cannot do the difficult work of exposing the real problems that the Bible raises. The issues here are related to a perverse spirituality, a focus on having things, a grasping which goes beyond the legitimate acquisition, use, and sharing of material goods. Put another way, a focus on having things seems to include the existence and expression of disordered

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desires displayed as greed. When we realize that gambling and greed are related parts of the same spiritual problem of disordered desire, we must also be aware that the apostle Paul thinks greed is idolatrous. In his epistle to the Ephesians, Paul writes about the differences between the old life of darkness, futility and alienation from God and the new life of reconciliation and righteousness. Paul lists many practices he hopes the Ephesians will renounce and includes the warning that no "one who is greedy (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God" (Ephesians 5:5). It is this connection of gambling to greed, and then to idolatry, that gives us a sense of the seriousness of the issue of gambling. Once it is understood as a spiritual issue of disordered desire; idolatrous greed as a disordered desire is at the heart of these matters.²

The Desire to Acquire

A further spiritual danger inherent in gambling is the temptation of smug self-sufficiency that may accompany the desire for the acquisition of riches. An overly strong desire to acquire and to own is an attack on God and on a faithful recognition that whatever the appearances, we will always rely on God's good and gracious gifts to us. It is in God that we live and move and have our being. The pursuit and acquisition of great riches can erode the Christian's recognition of God's role in this life – instead of being possessed by God, the tendency to be possessed by possessions can arise quickly and powerfully.