

What Does the Bible Say about Gambling?

By J. Terry Price

When Bill Bennett, author of books such as *The Book of Virtues* decided to quit casino gambling, religious leaders were quick to applaud the news and to offer support and prayers for the morality "guru." When Bennett added that he never thought of gambling as immoral people began to search another book of virtues, the Scriptures, for guidance.

So what does the Bible say about gambling?

It all depends upon your perspective and interpretation. The Bible doesn't directly address gambling and such silence provides the fertile ground for discussion and disagreement. Opinions on the propriety of gambling range from acceptance in moderation to total abstinence.

J. Kerby Anderson, author, lecturer and adjunct professor at **Dallas Theological Seminary**, is in the latter camp and discerns guidance by contrasting the cornerstone principles of the Scriptures with those associated with gambling.

According to Anderson, "The Bible emphasizes the sovereignty of God (Matt. 10:29-30), while gambling is based upon chance. The Bible admonishes us to work creatively and for the benefit of others (Eph. 4:28), while gambling fosters a "something for nothing" attitude. The Bible condemns materialism (Matt. 6:24-25), while gambling promotes it."¹

Anderson cites two particular passages from the writings of the apostle Paul that give instruction regarding the work ethic of a Christian. In Colossians 3:23-24 Paul said, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving."

In 2 Thessalonians 3:7,10, Paul wrote, "For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example....For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: If a man will not work, he shall not eat."

Scripture specifically approves of at least three ways to obtain goods or money. Working to earn money,² obtaining goods through exchange or barter,³ and receiving lifetime gifts or an inheritance at death⁴ are all expressly acceptable ways to increase your wealth or possessions.

Conversely the Scriptures condemn obtaining anything by cheating, stealing or lying, and further condemns the desire of obtaining what belongs to others.⁵

Beyond the Scriptural issues, Anderson and others reject gambling as bad social and governmental policy as well. Societal ills such as gambling addictions, excessive debt, neglected families are cited as prime examples of why, in addition to Biblical direction, gambling should be considered immoral.

Ronald A. Reno, writing for **Focus on the Family**, considers gambling to be an abdication of Biblical instructions to love your neighbor and take care of the poor. Gambling cannot exist without winners and losers and cultivates a desire to place yourself first at the expense of your neighbors. Scriptures teach us to take care of the poor rather than to support activities such as gambling which in order to succeed must, on average, make all participants poorer in the long run. Reno goes on to say that gambling creates and encourages vices such as greed and covetousness going to far as to call it "consensual theft."⁶

Bennett grew up in a different environment and says that he's gambled all of his life even enjoying church bingo when growing up. This philosophy contends that gambling might be permissible if four conditions are met:

What is staked must belong to the gambler and must be at his free disposal. It is wrong, therefore, for the lawyer to stake the money of his client, or for anyone to gamble with what is necessary for the maintenance of his wife and children.

The gambler must act freely, without unjust compulsion.

There must be no fraud in the transaction, although the usual ruses of the game may be allowed. It is unlawful, accordingly, to mark the cards, but it is permissible to conceal carefully from an opponent the number of trump cards one holds.

Finally, there must be some sort of equality between the parties to make the contract equitable; it would be unfair for a combination of two expert whist players to take the money of a couple of mere novices at the game."⁷

However even those who subscribe to this philosophy concede that gambling can lead to problems. For example, if gambling leads to a squandering of time and money then it may be "a source of sin and ruin to others." Like other

addictions, gambling can arouse excitement in the participant and may lead into conduct which is difficult to control.⁸

Under this view, the acceptance of gambling is then conditioned upon the presence of all four of the above requirements and the self-discipline of the gambler. Such a philosophy allowed Mr. Bennett to gamble without being morally conflicted. If you can handle it, that's fine, but if you "can't handle it, don't do it."

Ultimately Bennett has vowed that his gambling days are over because he admits having done too much of it and not providing the example he wishes to set for others. And regardless of positions on gambling in general, ultimately that is a decision upon which everyone could agree.

References:

1 J. Kerby Anderson, "Gambling," <http://www.probe.org/docs/gambling.html>,

2 Ephesians 4:28 and 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12

3 Genesis 47:17 and 1 Kings 5:10-11

4 Matthew 7:11 and Ephesians 4:28

5 Exodus 20:14-17

6 Ronald A. Reno, "Gambling and the Bible," <http://www.family.org/cforum/research/papers/a0008570.html> 7 T. Slater, Catholic Encyclopedia - "Gambling" <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06375b.htm>, 8 Ibid

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