

Gambling

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“Gambling ... is without doubt the most potent vice cherished by the human race.”¹ When one considers the change in attitude toward gambling which has taken place over the past decade, a person is more than ready to agree with the statement made by C. B. Davis and quoted above.

Gambling has traditionally been considered a corruptive element to be eliminated from society. Even though the best law enforcement has been unable to stop gambling in public or private (a fact readily recognized by law enforcement agencies), it was always considered to be detrimental to a sound, productive society. However, that attitude is changing as increasing numbers of state and municipal governments are turning to gambling as a means by which to increase revenue. We are aware of the recent legalization of bingo in the State of Wisconsin and the widely publicized lottery in our neighbor to the south, the State of Illinois.

As never before the people over whom the Lord, our God, has made us shepherds are exposed to gambling and our people are being tempted. I am unable to document any participation of our people in bingo or lottery, but there's no reason to suspect that our people are not plagued by the “most potent vice cherished by the human race.” It would be folly on our part to assume that members of our congregations do not frequent bingo games, purchase lottery tickets or make trips to Chicago's race tracks and Las Vegas' casinos. These legal forms of gambling must be considered a temptation for our people because legal is often equated with moral. The point that I want to make is that we as pastors, if we have not already, will surely be confronted with the question of gambling. Our people will not be satisfied with quick and ill-thought-out answers. We do well to know our minds on this topic and be prepared to speak whenever the occasion presents itself.

Some are ready to classify gambling as a sickness similar to alcoholism. E. Bergler, M.D., in his book, *The Psychology of Gambling*, writes: “Gambling is not a profession. It is a dangerous neurosis. The gambler doesn't gamble because he consciously decides to gamble; he is propelled by unconscious forces over which he has no control. He is an objectively sick person who is subjectively unaware that he is sick. But this ignorance does not make him any the healthier.”² It's obvious that Bergler is talking about the inveterate, the habitual gambler, who is also spoken of as a neurotic gambler. Dr. Bergler, a psychoanalyst, would support Gamblers Anonymous, an organization patterned after Alcoholics Anonymous, which has helped a considerable number of neurotic gamblers. The approach of Gamblers Anonymous to the neurotic gambler is almost identical to the approach of Alcoholics Anonymous to the alcoholic. Perhaps we would agree that when gambling gains control over a human being to the extent that it controls his life that it is a sickness, but we would think of it as an acquired illness. We would agree with Fred J. Cook, who is quoted by L. M. Starkey, Jr., in *The Christian Century* LXXX: “Gambling is an acquired habit.”³ When gambling becomes an all-consuming passion, we would also classify it as sin under the First Commandment. “That now, I say, upon which you set your heart and put your trust is properly your god,” (Luther's Large Catechism). We would also classify gambling as sin, when, as it frequently does, it deprives the family of the gifts which God gives for its sustenance. “If any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith and is worse than an infidel,” (I Timothy 5:8). It does not seem proper to me to classify gambling exclusively as an illness.

¹ C. B. Davis, *Something For Nothing*, page 15

² E. Bergler, *The Psychology of Gambling*, R. O. Herman, *Gambling*, page 124

³ L. Starkey, Jr., *The Christian Century*, R. D. Herman, *Gambling*, page 227

Two our brothers have written papers on this topic - gambling. Both have placed gambling in the area of adiaphoria. Brother C. Krug in a paper delivered at a Metro-South conference says: "When we ask the question in the second sense, whether participation in a lottery, though not necessarily soul destroying, must nevertheless be totally shunned by a Christian or forbidden to a Christian, the answer that should be expected from and should be given by a pastor or any other informed member of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod is no. His answer to the question would and should be, Yes, a Christian may participate in a lottery - sometimes. Under what conditions may a Christian do so? If the lottery is not illegal; if he can afford it; if his participation is not controlled and if he is reasonably sure his participation will not give offence to a weak brother."⁴ Brother Jon Mahnke in a paper delivered to the Arizona-California District Pastoral Conference says: "Now we come to the question: 'Is it sinful for a child of God to gamble?' Again we are face to face with a question that cannot be answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no.'"⁵ Both of the brethren are very careful not to give the impression that they in any way endorse gambling. They both set forth very clearly and ably the dangers, pitfalls and sins which are prevalent for those who would gamble, but nevertheless the general tone of their presentations is that gambling should be looked upon as an activity in which each individual Christian must exercise enlightened judgement. I agree with the brethren that there may be Christians who can without sin participate in some insignificant form of gambling, but in my judgement those would be the exception and so few in number that I would be very reluctant to speak of gambling as an activity in which Christians may exercise enlightened judgement. I would rather come down hard and forcefully upon gambling with the possibility of being misunderstood or even considered legalistic or puritanical than to speak about gambling in terms which might give a Christian brother or sister the opportunity to take license to participate in any form of gambling.

I have formulated this approach to gambling for myself for a number of reasons. The first is that it annoys me when it is suggested that our Lord Jesus approved of gambling. It has been said that our Lord commended a successful gambler. Reference was made to the parable which the Savior told about the man who was about to travel to a far country (Matthew 25:14 ff.). He delivered his goods to his three servants: five talents to one; two, to another; and one talent to the third. It was stated that the servant which received five talents and returned ten to his master was a gambler and that he was commended. "Well done thou good and faithful servant ..." (Matthew 25:21). We readily recognize this approach as an abuse of the scriptures. The parable has absolutely nothing to do with gambling. It was told to give insight into the kingdom of God. To suggest that the parable speaks about gambling does the scriptures a great injustice and to suggest that the Savior approved of gambling is a clumsy attempt to justify gambling. Now surely we recognize that gambling was prevalent at the time of Christ, but to infer that the Lord was commending a gambler is neither right nor proper.

A second reason why I take a hard-nosed attitude toward gambling is because this seems to me to be the historic position of our Lutheran church. A footnote in our catechism (Revised Gausewitz, Question No. 99, page 74) says: "Beware of gambling, games of chance, etc." *Catechetical Helps*, E. Kurth, says: "Gambling is the lust for possession without toil."⁶ Please note the blanket condemnation of gambling without taking into consideration any circumstances which might temper that condemnation. W. E. Schramm, who is not of our circles, in his book, *What Lutherans Believe*, under the Seventh Commandment severely condemns gambling. I quote: "All games of chance and devices whereby one wins and another loses, are denounced by this commandment. There are really but three honest ways of getting money: 1. we may work for it; 2. we may have it given to us; 3. we may find it and not be able to restore it to the owner. Money secured in any other way is ill-gotten. It is evident that many well-meaning people do not realize this. Games of chance are often conducted by church members under the auspices of the congregation to which they belong. Gambling for the church is no better, rather worse, than gambling for private gain. The gambling of society people in some fine home is not a whit better than the gambling carried on in some low pool-room. Gambling of any kind, in any place, for any purpose is a form of theft, condemned both by the law of the state and by the law of God."⁷ It's rather striking

⁴ C. Krug, *Can A Christian Participate In A Lottery?* page 7

⁵ J. Mahnke, *A Child of God Takes A Look at Gambling*, page 8

⁶ E. Kurth, *Catechetical Helps*, page 48

⁷ W. E. Schramm, *What Lutherans Believe*, page 50

that the Confessions and especially Luther in the Large Catechism, Seventh Commandment, makes no mention of games of chance, wagering, gambling. Luther makes a number of statements which could be applied to gambling. For example he speaks about defrauding another person “by nimbleness and queer finances or dexterous tricks.”⁸ The reference is to merchandise and trade which takes place in the market place, but Luther’s concept of stealing (by any means to defraud a neighbor) as set forth in the Seventh Commandment of the Large Catechism would seem to indicate that the reference cited above would also condemn gambling. I can think of only two reasons why Luther would not have mentioned gambling. They are: 1. he didn’t consider it important; 2. it wasn’t much of a problem. When I think of the economic conditions at Luther’s time and the poverty in which many people lived, I chase to think that the common people did not have sufficient money even to be tempted by gambling and therefore it wasn’t much of a problem. What I have been saying may seem to be a deviation from the point which I am attempting to establish. I’m trying to let you know that items which I have read in preparing for this presentation have given me the distinct impression that opposition to gambling has been the historic position of the church.

At this point I would like to interject the thought that there seems to be some age-old religious opposition to gambling. *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* states: “Early Rabbis condemned card playing. To win money from a Jew by a game is robbery, to win it from a Gentile is not robbery though a breach of the law.”⁹ Pharisaical philosophy is evident in that statement, but the point to which I want to draw your attention is that, at least as far as I was able to determine, gambling was classified as stealing even prior to the time of Christ. I was unable to determine the basis for the rabbinical policy.

A third reason why I am wary of taking a somewhat soft position over against gambling is because there is more corruption, dishonesty, cheating and wickedness connected with gambling than with any other subject that I have researched. I seriously doubt whether, when money is involved, there can be an honest game of chance, horse race, card game, or whatever. It was truly a revelation to read about the lengths to which people will go to improve the odds in their favor or to win a wager, but then human nature being what it is this should not be surprising.

The fourth and final reason why I have chosen to speak out against gambling whenever I have an opportunity is because I am convinced that gambling can provide no benefit for the soul of human beings and certain is suspect as a recreation. Gambling has too many facets which are an affront to God and His Word. This final point is the one on which I want to speak in greater detail in this presentation.

As with a number of aspects of human life, it would be much simpler if the Lord God has chosen to make a concise statement on gambling, but, since He in His wisdom has chosen to say nothing about the matter of making a wager, we can only look at what knowledgeable people tell us about the gambler and compare that to what the Lord God says in the scriptures.

If I understand what some who are held us as experts are saying about gambling, there is a very distinct idolatrous element in the motivation of a gambler. Dr. Bergler, who was mentioned before, writes: “The gambler is quite a rebel. He is the organizer of a private tempest in a teapot. He is invariable in his individualism; his rebellion takes place, not within a political party, but in splendid isolation. This *private* rebel fights with neither guns or ballots; cards, stocks, dice, chips are his weapons and his invisible colors. Out of inner necessity, therefore, he becomes a specialist in reducing bourgeois values to absurdity, because all who hold such values are a source of inner reproach to him.”¹⁰ The “bourgeois values” against which the gambler is rebelling are those which until recently have been accepted in society, namely, that gambling is a vice, corruptive and detrimental, and I submit that the church, as it has been guided by the Word of God, is the origin of these so called “bourgeois values.”

Dr. Bergler gives us a better insight into what he means by “bourgeois values” when he writes: “Gambling unconsciously revises ... the old childish fantasy of grandeur and megalomania. More important it

⁸ Large Catechism, *Triqlotta*, page 645, No. 227

⁹ *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Vol. IV, Games, page 428

¹⁰ E. Bergler, *The Psychology of Gambling*, R. D. Herman, *Gambling*, page 130

activates the *latent rebellion* against logic, intelligence, moderation, morality and renunciation.”¹¹ I don’t know whether Dr. Bergler is Christian or not, but it seems to me that, when he mentions “moderation” and “morality,” he is saying that the gambler is rebelling against God. He (the gambler) is not going to be told by any one what he can or cannot do. He’ll show ‘em - by his gambling. Am I wrong? Doesn’t such rebellion have idolatrous overtones?

I will be so bold as to suggest that even those who participate in penny ante or who use pennies, nickels or dimes to “keep score” or to make the game more interesting can be rebelling against the church and the Lord of the church. If I have touched an exposed nerve and hurt anyone, I would respectfully ask him to look carefully at his motivation for participating in even a seemingly innocent form of gambling.

The gambler is also motivated by a feeling of omnipotence. If there is anything that the gambler does not lack, it is self-confidence. He is sure that he has figured out the system – this time. In spite of the fact that he has failed numerous times, this time he has the right formula to win. He is going to beat the odds. Even though he knows that he can’t win, he continues because to his mind he has the power to win. L. C. Starkey, Jr., calls attention to this phenomenon: “I quote from Science Digest: ‘Every neurotic gambler in the casino or on the race track knows the odds are against him. But the thrill of gambling, the feeling of omnipotence, and the unconscious self-punishment overpower him.’”¹² For a human being, whether consciously or unconsciously, to appropriate to himself a characteristic of God certainly must be considered an affront to God and His word.

The gambler in by far the greatest number of cases has a faith which includes a power other than the almighty God. T. Veblen his book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, states: “The chief factor in the gambling habit is the belief in luck.”¹³ When Lady Luck becomes the source of providence, the Lord God is replaced and I think we will all agree that which luck replaces the almighty God, the gambler is involved in a form of idolatry. The gambler believes in a strange god. C. B. Davis in his book, *Something For Nothing*, says: “I do believe the impulse to gamble is generated more often than not by a subconscious longing for assurance that they are this day in favor with the strange force or anthropomorphic agency which sees, records, judges and passes out rewards and punishment.”¹⁴ Call that “force” or “agency” whatever one will, luck, fortune or whatever. In the case of the gambler it would hardly be identified as God. The gambler frequently is involved in idolatry.

Akin to faith in luck is animism, which Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary defines as the belief that all objects possess a natural life or vitality or are endowed with indwelling souls. The gambler frequently gives the impression that he believes that the inanimate objects which he uses in gambling have life and being. We think of the person shooting craps, who exclaims, “Come on, baby,” as he rolls the dice. This is animism as I understand it and this is common among gamblers. T. Veblen, mentioned above, uses this concept when he wrote: “The sporting man’s sense of luck and chance, or of fortuitous necessity, is an inarticulate or inchoate animism.”¹⁵ Animism can easily be part of the thinking of even the most infrequent and casual gambler. To believe that inanimate objects have life and being is going beyond that which the Lord, our God, sets forth as an article of faith. Let the gambler beware.

Many theories have been expounded as to why people gamble. We have heard some mentioned already. The thrill of gambling, unconscious self-punishment, the hope of getting something for nothing are among the most common theories. However, in more recent times another has been added. Dr. Bergler has labeled it as “pleasurable-painful tension.”¹⁶ As I understand this concept, it has nothing to do with winning or losing, but is the suspense, the tension, created by making a wager. The outcome of the wager is relatively unimportant. The gambler anticipates the exhilaration which he feels from the time he places the wager unto he knows the outcome. It is maintained that people can get as “high” on this feeling as the user of drugs gets when under the

¹¹ E. Bergler, *The Psychology of Gambling*, R. D. Herman, *Gambling*, page 127

¹² L. C. Starkey, Jr., *Christians and the Gambling Mania*, R. D. Herman, *Gambling*, page 230

¹³ T. Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, R. D. Herman, *Gambling*, page 107

¹⁴ C. B. Davis, *Something For Nothing*, page 259

¹⁵ M. T. Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, R. D. Herman, *Gambling*, page 109

¹⁶ E. Bergler, *The Psychology of Gambling*, R. D. Herman, *Gambling*, page 117

influence. I have always felt that when people choose to escape reality by whatever means, they are participating in a form of idolatry, because during the escape they are controlled by something other than the Lord God and His word.

As the concluding thought for this section of this presentation I would like to turn your thoughts toward the words of our Savior: “No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon,” (Luke 16:13). In my opinion gambling in whatever form or degree can easily become “mammon.” Therefore, I will warn against what I consider to be the idolatrous elements within gambling.

Gambling in my opinion should be avoided because it violates the law of Christian love. Any underlying principle in gambling is that the individual thinks not of his neighbor’s good, but only of his own. This is true whether the wager is large or minimal. I submit that in the card game where only pennies are involved, each individual is thinking only of himself and not of his neighbor. If that’s not the case, why are they playing for money? I ask myself why the game cannot be played without money. Why does money make it more interesting? I think T. Veblen supplies the answer when he says: “This further motive (for gambling) is the desire of the anticipated winner ... to heighten his side’s ascendancy at the cost of the loser.”¹⁷ Veblen is saying that the wager in effect “rubs salt in the wound,” “adds insult to injury or however one would care to state it. The thought is that it’s bad enough to loose the “game”, but loosing is made even worse by the lose of whatever amount is waged, or to look at it from the view point of the winner he dominates his opponent not only in the contest, but also in the wager, which heightens his “ascendancy at the cost of the loser.”

I can find in the concept just enunciated no room for our Lord’s injunction, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” Neither can I understand how the gambler’s purely subjective point of view can stand up under the scrutiny of God’s Word, which says: “Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others,” (Philippians 2:4) and again: “Let no man seek his own, but every man another’s wealth,” (I Corinthians 10:24) and then again: (Charity) “doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil.” (I Corinthians 13:5). Not even in jest would I intimate that those passages allow the depriving of another human being of his God-given trust by whatever means, among which I include gambling. Instead the passages quoted above cause to cite the warning that the gambler is playing with fire.

Gambling gives vent to base and hence sinful human traits. It not only gives vent to such traits, it fosters, even develops, base human traits. It’s no secret among those who have made a study of gambling that gambling is an outlet for the suppressed human nature. Robert D. Herman, editor of *Gambling*, writes: “What other cultural devices are available to middle-class and lower-class men that can be as effective in bolstering a sense of independence and self-determination and that so completely exercise mental skill and natural powers. In short, commercialized gambling offers to many people efficient means to enhance self-esteem and gratification in a culture in which satisfactions are increasingly likely to be found in enterprises of consumption rather than production.”¹⁸ Notice how the importance is placed upon the human being. Notice also how traits of the human being which do not permit him to humble himself before the Lord are the traits which are said to be developed by gambling.

Gambling also develops pride. A person is not a gambler unless he is absolutely sure of himself. Dr. Bergler implies that pride is essential for a gambler when he says: “First, he (the gambler) is subjectively certain that he will win. Second, the gambler has unbounded faith in his own cleverness. Third, the gambler claims that life itself is nothing but a gamble.”¹⁹ Naturally there are other human activities against which the charge can be leveled that they develop pride, but that in no way detracts from the fact that gambling fosters pride. Then the words of the scriptures come to mind: “These six things doth the Lord hate: Yea, seven are an abomination unto him: A proud look ... ” (Proverbs 6:16, 17).

Jealousy and greed also are given free reign in gambling. Isn’t that the whole thought behind gambling? If a person were neither jealous nor greedy, I can’t imagine why he would gamble. If he were content with what

¹⁷ T. Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, R. D. Herman, *Gambling*, page 108

¹⁸ R. D. Herman, *Gambling*, page 104

¹⁹ E. Bergler, *The Psychology of Gambling*, R. D. Herman, *Gambling*, page 120

he has, as the directs, he would not be involved in gambling. Some one might raise the question about gambling as a form of recreation. I will have a statement to make on that subject a little later, but for now let it suffice to say that I cannot conceive of gambling as recreation in which jealousy and greed are completely absent.

In the last three paragraphs I have attempted to demonstrate that gambling does not suppress the sinful flesh, but rather encourages it. This is another reason why I feel that gambling is an activity which we do well to condemn.

Gambling does not fit under God's concept of an industrious life of service. E. Kurth in *Catechetical Helps* says: "Gambling is the lust of possession without toil."²⁰ To get rich without working might be said to be the essence of gambling. An anonymous writer once wrote: "Good luck is a lazy man's estimate of a worker's success." There's a lot of truth in that statement especially when viewed from the point of view that the Lord God blesses the faithful efforts of His people. To the unbeliever the Lord's blessings on faithful labor must seem like good luck, but it's not only the unbeliever that is prone to such thoughts. Every human being has an innate desire to gain wealth by means other than honest labor. The people who are responsible for government sponsored and government run lotteries have recognized this human trait and are exploiting it. C. B. Davis in his book, *Something For Nothing*, speaking about on-track pari-mutual betting makes this statement: "This is a compromise and maybe it is with the devil and maybe it is only with the reality which cannot be ignored. It is a concession to human nature. It offers a fairly well regulated outlet for what seems to be an irrepressible human urge to get something for nothing."²¹ L. Wessell in *Proof Texts of the Catechism* supports that concept when he says: "It is this unwillingness to labor and to be content with honest earnings which also in our time makes thieves of many kinds, robbers and burglars, swindlers and gamblers, speculators and users [sic.], and those who live and fatten on the toil and sweat of others."²²

The Lord God through the Apostle Paul has something to say about the unwillingness to work. In II Thessalonians 3:10-12 we read: "For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat. For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busy bodies. Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ that with quietness they work and eat their own bread." I'm sure we are all aware of the setting in which the Apostle spoke those words. For purposes here today we would take note of the emphasis on work and the emphasis on contentment. The Apostle restates these thoughts in Ephesians 4, verse 28: "Let him that stole steal no more, but rather let him labor, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth." In addition to the emphasis on honest labor, please, not the reason for the labor, charity, not self-centered purpose. God's concept for His people is an industrious life of service. In my opinion gambling can find no room in such a life.

Gambling is very bad stewardship of treasure. Jimmy, the Greek, on the Today show on Friday, September 12, 1975, said that there is no way in which the gambler can win in the gambling places of Las Vegas. He maintained that gambling must be looked upon as recreation. Such a statement seems to me to be an attempt to make gambling appealing to people who still have questions about its morality. If one cannot win in gambling, then looked upon purely from the stand point of the stewardship of God's gifts it must be considered a waste of a God-given trust. But don't we frequently waste our God-given trust. Someone might say that purchasing the privilege to play a round of golf is bad stewardship, so, if there is no excess and if the individual can offered it and if he can do it without giving offense, why not use money to purchase recreation by gambling. There is a difference and this is a gut feeling which I have between using money to purchase recreation and using money as part of the recreation. There's a difference between wasting money foolishly and taking a chance with it. Lest it should be thought that I consider money to be holy, let me deny any such allegation, but to use money in gambling seems to me to be a use which is beyond the purposes for which the Lord, our God, entrusted it to us.

²⁰ E. Kurth, *Catechetical Helps*, page 48

²¹ C. B. Davis, *Something For Nothing*, page 14-15

²² L. Wessell, *Proof Texts of the Catechism*, page 57

I have a similar feeling when I hear it said that life is a gamble or that the farmer is gambling when he plants his seed. I consider such statements to be an attempt to belittle any argument opposing gambling. I can't understand the thinking behind such a comparison, but to me there is a vast difference between a child of God going about his life confident of the protection of his heavenly Father or a child of God using all the skill and knowledge which he has accumulated planting seed and waiting for the promised blessing of his Lord and a person putting his money on the line in a gaming event. The first two examples are good stewardship and give glory to God. However, I have difficulty seeing how God is glorified in the last example. It's bad stewardship of treasure.

When I consider all the points which I have attempted to set forth in this presentation, when I consider all the filth, greed, corruption and wickedness which surrounds gambling, when I consider what God says in His word, I return to the thought with which I began. I will speak out against gambling whenever I have opportunity because I am convinced that gambling cannot bring any benefit to the soul of human beings and to say the least is suspect as a form of recreation. This is the only way that I know to lead the people under our pastoral care through these trying times. Once open and legalized gambling has lost its novelty children of God will more readily recognize that gambling has many facets which are an affront to God and His word.

In closing permit me to say that I doubt whether anyone has changed his opinion as a result of this presentation. I also doubt whether anyone has learned anything about gambling. Perhaps the only thing accomplished by this presentation is that you have learned something about the speaker.