

Would a Good and Faithful Disciple Gamble?

BY KEVIN MOORE

The Christian tradition has long been wary of gambling, but we live in a society largely desensitized to its dangers. No wonder we are puzzled about what to do. How can scriptural teachings about common motivations for gambling guide us to a more clear and consistent witness?

The New Testament scholar Ben Witherington imagines a puzzled disciple asking, “What is wrong with a little betting at the office pool or buying a lottery ticket? What is wrong with going to a casino and having a little fun? After all – it is ‘our’ money isn’t it?”¹ This scenario mirrors how many Christians think about gambling today. They simply do not see much harm in it: because they do not risk a lot of money, they do not lose much. They know their limits and only gamble occasionally.

Only a handful of my Christian friends still consider gambling to be an inherently evil activity. And even among those who warn about gambling’s enormous potential for harm and characterize it as a particularly insidious vice, constancy wanes. When pressed, they admit privately that gambling can be a rather innocuous form of entertainment as long as a person keeps it within reasonable boundaries. In the interest of full disclosure and transparency, I admit that I have occasionally succumbed to the lure of the lottery, especially when the jackpot was high.

Consider how many people the annual spring NCAA college basketball tournament, dubbed by sports writers as “March Madness,” entices to participate in office pools; it is more than almost any other individual sporting event.² The wagering involved with horse racing, dog racing, bingo, on-line gaming, poker tournaments, and on virtually every conceivable sporting event and even individual player statistics, only serves to confirm that we

like to gamble. But does the fact that so many of us participate in some form of gambling – even if it is only from time to time – justify our behavior?

Looking at how rapidly the gambling industry – or “gaming,” which is the trade’s “euphemism of choice”³ – has grown since the 1980s and at our own willingness to participate, is it possible for followers of Christ to regard themselves as a culturally distinct community? Arguably, Christians have generally tended either to accommodate their culture or be assimilated by it.

Years ago H. Richard Niebuhr referred to this recurring failure to be agents of redemption and transformation as the “enduring problem.”⁴

Though the Christian tradition has long been wary of gambling, we live in a society that is largely desensitized to its dangers. It is no wonder, then, that we are puzzled about what to do. To gain some moral clarity we would

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do well to review biblical teachings on the comprehensive nature of stewardship, trust in God’s providence, and acknowledge the spiritual danger of the lure of easy money. I will survey a few passages in Scripture and discuss how we can use them to examine our motives in gambling as well as our actions. Finally, I will reflect on how we should address morally suspect practices like gambling when the problems we see are not widely recognized by our society.

A FIRST LOOK AT SCRIPTURE

Admittedly, there is no explicit biblical prohibition against gambling. No commandment says, “You shall not gamble or play games of chance.” Even a clear scriptural reference to gambling is elusive.

Scripture often mentions the ancient practice of casting lots, and to modern readers this unusual act may seem similar to gambling. However, the two activities are quite different. The practice of casting lots was not a way to gain wealth, but a way to guarantee the impartiality of an important decision. On one hand, the practice most often occurs in a religious context—for example, selecting a sacrificial animal (Leviticus 16:8); dividing territories among the tribes of Israel (Joshua 18:1–10); assigning Temple responsibilities to priests (1 Chronicles 24:31), musicians (1 Chronicles 25), gatekeepers (1 Chronicles 26:12–16), and people responsible for various offerings (Nehemiah 10:34); choosing residents for the restored city of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 11:1); identifying the guilty party (Jonah 1:7, and perhaps Joshua 7:14–18); and selecting an apostolic replacement for Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:12–26).

On the other hand, there are a few disapproving references to lots being cast for the spoils of violence (Joel 3:3; Obadiah 1:11; Nahum 3:10). The most infamous incident involves Roman soldiers casting lots for Jesus' clothing at his crucifixion (Luke 23:34; John 19:24; cf. Psalm 22: 18).

The practice of casting lots includes a principal element of gambling – namely, chance – though in certain cases some would say the determining factor was divine providence. However, an essential element of gambling – risking one's assets with the hope of winning a sizable prize – does not appear to be involved. Since casting of lots is not gambling and there are no other scriptural passages that specifically address gambling and its destructive effects, we cannot construct a “proof text” argument against all acts of gambling.

EXAMINING MOTIVES AS WELL AS ACTIONS

A Christian perspective on gambling must consider not just *what* we do – roll the dice, lay down the cards, spin the wheel, or mark the Bingo card – but *why* we do it.

Modern gambling appeals to a wide array of human interests, needs, and desires. Some people like to gamble because they have fun with numbers or puzzles, and relish the opportunity to take on the mathematical constructs the various games present. Others gamble as a social activity, a pastime they enjoy with their friends. Some are drawn to gambling so they can compete with other players or against “the house” (the casino's system), especially when incredible odds are stacked against them. Other gamblers, if they have attained a level of quantifiable expertise in one or more of the games, may play to supplement their income. Then again, many darker and more desperate motivations to gamble drive those who are vulnerable, naïve, poor, or addicted. Finally, and perhaps ultimately, there is greed, the insatiable lust for immediate wealth.

This range of possible motives can make it difficult for us to examine our own hearts. If we gamble, are we motivated by greed, a spirit of healthy competition, an unhealthy addiction to risk, or a bit of all three? Do we simply enjoy the company of our friends or crave the distraction from life provided by a gambling machine? As we know, motivations are complicated because one motive can mask another. We rarely see ourselves clearly.

Furthermore, even if we know our own hearts, others who observe *what* we are doing may not understand *why* we are doing it. They might imitate our actions, but with different motives. In the most spiritually dangerous situation, they might assume our gambling is an endorsement of greed, self-promotion, and so on. Thus, whatever our position on gambling, we must take into consideration the wide range of human constitutions that include individual interests, dispositions, and varying degrees of self-control. In light of that, we need guidance for those who are knowledgeable and spiritually strong, but also for the vulnerable members of our communities.

A SECOND LOOK AT SCRIPTURE

Even though there is no explicit scriptural condemnation of gambling, there is a great deal of relevant counsel and stern warnings, especially regarding greed, idleness, taking advantage of the vulnerable, and other common motivations for gambling.

Consider, for instance, Jesus' parable about the rich fool who, after amassing great wealth, rashly believed he could "relax, eat, drink, [and]

be merry" (Luke 12:16-21).

In Scripture we find a great deal of relevant counsel and stern warnings, especially regarding greed, idleness, taking advantage of the vulnerable, and other common motivations for gambling.

The man failed to keep in mind that life is a fleeting gift and that he was only an interim trustee of his possessions. Jesus' introduction to the parable—"Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (12:15)—is an unwelcome warning for

anyone with an inclination to gamble. It is also worth mentioning that Luke deftly juxtaposes this parable with Jesus' exhortation that his disciples should not worry about life's necessities, what they will eat and what they will wear, but "strive for his kingdom" (Luke 12:22-31).

Several narratives in the book of Acts explore the base motives that may drive us to seek wealth. Ananias and Sapphira publicly pretend to embrace the early Jerusalem church practice in which "no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common" (Acts 4:32), but then foolishly keep some of the proceeds from a land sale for themselves (Acts 5:1-11). Although their desire for recognition certainly plays a role in their scheme, I suspect greed is also a contributing factor in their deception of the community.

Likewise, mixed motives are present in Simon who "had previously practiced magic...and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he was someone great" (Acts 8:9). He attempts to purchase from the Apostles Peter and John the ability to convey the Spirit through the laying on of hands (8:18-19). Peter strongly disapproves of Simon's request with the following curse: "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God's gift with money!" (8:20). Without realizing it, Simon the sorcerer had become a quintessential realization of the biblical warning: "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your own pleasures" (James 4:3).

In the Pauline letters we read that "greed must not even be mentioned among you" (Ephesians 5:3), and that saints in Christ are called to "Put to

death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)" (Colossians 3:5). Timothy is exhorted concerning the "love of money." Disciples with modest wealth should value godliness and contentment with necessities rather than clamoring after riches. "Those who want to be rich" risk being "trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction," including the possibility of wandering "away from the faith" (1 Timothy 6:6-10). People who are rich should be instructed "not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God.... They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share" (1 Timothy 6:17-18). This guidance to Timothy is especially helpful in offering advice not only to those who seek wealth, but also to those who have it. It addresses communal obligations as well as individual responsibilities.

Though this survey has been cursory, it indicates that Scripture holds a consistent view of greed: it is a sin to be avoided by rich and poor alike. Greed is closely allied with narcissism, idolatrous self-sufficiency, and taking advantage of the vulnerable. Furthermore, those who are rich are to use their wealth for the good of others.

In view of these scriptural principles — along with responsible and generous stewardship of our resources — we should, at a minimum, reconsider our presuppositions about gambling and may even decide not to participate ...ever. For, as we noted above, our motives in gambling are often mixed and may be hidden from ourselves. Surely we can be honest enough to admit that greed is one of the primary reasons we gamble. Even if it is not, others may misinterpret our actions and believe that we are endorsing greed. All of this makes gambling morally suspect.

CRAFTING OUR WITNESS ON GAMBLING

The itinerant Quaker preacher John Woolman (1720-1772) records in his journal how he responded when a magic show was performed in a nearby "public-house" during the summer of 1763. Concerned that his neighbors were going to see the drifter's enchanting performance, Woolman positioned himself at the entrance to the pub in order to speak to patrons as they entered. He wanted to "convince them that their thus assembling to see these sleight-of-hand tricks, and bestowing their money to support men who, in that capacity, were of no use to the world, was contrary to the nature of the Christian religion." Woolman reports that after an hour-long debate one of the show's supporters conceded to his position.⁵

Woolman was no quack. He lived a simple, quiet life and supported himself as a tailor and dry goods shopkeeper. He is remembered for an exemplary life of service on behalf of the poor. Believing that slavery was an egregious offense, he worked tirelessly to end the evil scourge, even refusing to draft wills until the testators agreed to free their slaves at death.

To the extent that we do not share Woolman's deep misgivings about

magic, his attempt to warn his neighbors at the pub entrance strikes us as quaint and misguided. His moral conscience was sensitized to an issue that no longer disturbs us.⁶ Nevertheless this anecdote is instructive because it exemplifies the proper deportment when opposing gambling. Like Woolman, we should show consideration for our conversation partners by speaking with clarity, being gentle, remaining patient, and avoiding character attacks at all costs.

When a practice like gambling becomes part of everyday life, participants develop a taken-for-granted mindset that avoids reflection and ignores important questions that might lead them to change their ways.

Finally, Woolman's life and ministry remind us how difficult it is to change the ethos of a culture. Woolman, who opposed slavery throughout his life, fully recognized that "Deep-rooted customs, though wrong, are not easily altered, but it is the duty of all to be firm in that which they certainly know is right for them."⁷ When a practice

has become part of everyday life, participants develop a taken-for-granted mindset that avoids reflection and ignores important questions that might lead them to change their ways.

The physicist Max Planck famously bemoaned the inertia that keeps us from changing our beliefs: "a new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it."⁸ Such is the case with cultural beliefs about gambling. Disciples from the previous generation who unequivocally opposed gambling have died and the new generation of disciples lives in a world that is all too familiar with organized gambling as a means of funding public works like schools and parks. We struggle to see its dangers because we have become desensitized to gambling's ubiquitous cultural manifestations. Any attempt to transform our gambling culture will be met with smug condescension. Even to submit questions about the practice would probably invite well-funded opposition and some personal risk.

Perhaps, a place to start is to focus on our own faith communities and endeavor to create in them an ethos that is more faithful to the biblical witness. Such communities would be transformative because in them we would be drawn to follow the God:

who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.
The LORD sets the prisoners free;
the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.

The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous.

Psalms 146:7–8

As followers of the Lord who watches over the disenfranchised and the vulnerable, should not we do this as well?

The biblical call to social justice is deeply at odds with our society's radical individualism: recall that Witherington imagines the puzzled disciple asking, "After all – it is 'our' money isn't it?" However, in Scripture "social justice, like love, seeks the welfare of all persons in community," E. Claude Gardner has noted. "It aims directly at the good of the group and indirectly at the good of each person in the group."⁹ Thus, we have not acted with justice when we merely mind our own business and spend our money prudently. We are stewards not only of our resources, but also *of one other*; and because of that, we cannot blindly pursue our own pleasure, especially if it comes at the expense of others.

As good and faithful disciples, then, it is critical to reexamine our gambling presuppositions and practices by means of civil, engaging, and persuasive discourse whenever possible without sounding like an alarmist or triggering a reactionary response. Like the seventeenth century French philosopher Blaise Pascal, let us encourage one another and our neighbors to place our bets on God and his providence rather than on the lure of instant wealth via risky wagers where the odds are truly against us.¹⁰

NOTES

1 Ben Witherington, "God and Gambling – the Latest Scourge" (February 8, 2006), accessed April 20, 2011, <http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2006/02/god-and-gambling-latest-scourge.html>. Reader comments on this blog and Witherington's responses offer an accessible introduction to the gambling debate among Christians. Another good entry point is the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America "Gambling Study" (www2.elca.org/socialstatements/economiclife/gambling/), accessed April 20, 2011.

2 Edward H. Kaplan and Stanley J. Garstka, "March Madness and the Office Pool," *Management Science* 47 (March 2001): 369–382. "March Madness" was coined in 1939 by Henry V. Porter to describe the Illinois High School Association basketball tournament, and it is a registered trade mark of the IHSA. More recently the term has been used across the country for season-end basketball tournaments, especially the popular NCAA-sponsored college tournaments. See "A Brief History of March Madness" online at www.ihsa.org/marchmadness/history.htm, accessed April 26, 2011.

3 For a disturbing investigative report on the human costs of gambling, see Maura J. Casey, "Gambling with Lives," *First Things* (November 2009), available online at www.firstthings.com/article/2009/10/gambling-with-lives, accessed April 26, 2011.

4 In *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), H. Richard Niebuhr famously analyzes the long-standing tension between Christian discipleship and cultural assimilation. He identifies those Christians who adhere to the principle of cultural separation as "anticultural radicals" who stand "against culture." Other factions in the Church see Christ as being part "of culture" (the "accommodators"), "above culture" (the "synthesizers"), or in paradox with culture. Niebuhr's last and preferred category of disciples views Christ as

“the transformer of culture.” For a helpful critique and development of Niebuhr’s typology, see Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1966).

5 John Woolman, *The Journal of John Woolman and A Plea for the Poor: The Spiritual Autobiography of the Great Colonial Quaker*, introduced by Frederick B. Tolles (New York: Corinth Books, 1961), 158–159.

6 This story illustrates the width of the cultural chasm between us and the eighteenth century. Rather than diminishing the value of Woolman’s *Journal*, however, it reminds us why reading such “old books” is vital for our common life: they get us out of our own time and force us to reexamine our assumptions. C. S. Lewis makes this point nicely in “On the Reading of Old Books,” *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, edited by Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1970), 200–207.

7 Woolman, *Journal*, 37.

8 Max Planck, *Scientific Autobiography and Other Papers*, translated by Frank Gaynor (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), 33–34.

9 E. Claude Gardner, *Biblical Faith and Social Ethics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 263. This book continues to be a valuable articulation of God’s expectations for social justice.

10 For an interpretation of Blaise Pascal’s famous “wager on God,” see Peter Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal’s Pensees Edited, Outlined, & Explained* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1993), 291–307.



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