



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

- 📖 Would a Good and Faithful Disciple Gamble?  
(*The Gambling Culture*, pp. 11-18)

### Suggested Articles:

- 📖 If Only the Bible Said...  
(*The Gambling Culture*, pp. 78-81)
- 📖 Casting Lots  
(*The Gambling Culture*, pp. 48-51)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

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# Would a Good and Faithful Disciple Gamble?

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?

### Prayer

God, we confess that we would rather gamble on works than rest on grace. We would rather bet on luck than work to be better people. We hope in the next hand dealt.

Forgive our foolish ways. Forgive us for believing that money will solve our problem, for thinking that excitement will cure our prodigal ways.

In your generosity you gift us with the world and we chance it all for something far less real. God, satisfy us with yourself in whom we rest secure. You have risked everything to win us back. In the light of that love, help us to make good. Amen.

### Scripture Reading: Matthew 25:14-30

### Reflection

"If only the Bible said, 'Thou shalt not gamble,' then life would be simpler" for disciples living in a society that is largely desensitized to the dangers of gambling, Bob Terry suggests.

Kevin Moore agrees, "there is no explicit biblical prohibition against gambling" and says, "Even a clear scriptural reference to gambling is elusive." The Bible frequently mentions the ancient practice of casting lots (the Roman soldiers vying for Christ's seamless garment is a memorable example), but this "was not a way to gain wealth, but a way to guarantee the impartiality of an important decision," he notes. So, on a first look at Scripture, it is clear there is no "proof text" against every act of gambling.

But if we take a second look at the biblical narrative, considering in Moore's words "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," we will find much "relevant counsel and stern warnings, especially regarding greed, idleness, taking advantage of the vulnerable, and other common motivations for gambling."

Key biblical admonitions—e.g., about greed, harming a neighbor, and poor stewardship of money—relate to gambling.

- ▶ *Greed should be avoided by rich and poor alike.* In the biblical story, Moore notes, "greed is closely allied with narcissism, idolatrous self-sufficiency, and taking advantage of the vulnerable." Jesus warns "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed" before telling the parable of the self-focused rich fool (Luke 12:16-21). Stories about Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) and Simon the sorcerer (Acts 8:9-24) are iconic cautions against greed. Pauline letters offer general warnings (Ephesians 5:3; Colossians 3:5) and specific teachings about greed to the poor and the rich (1 Timothy 6:6-10, 17-18).

Closely related is the scriptural concern about coveting, or desiring to have what rightly belongs to others. After noting



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the Torah instruction to respect others' possessions (Deuteronomy 22:1-4), Terry observes that coveting is more than an individual's problem. "Introduce into that society a person who covets what rightly belongs to another, and the moral fiber of the whole society is undermined. The kind of society anticipated is altered. Every relationship is impacted."

- ▶ *Neighbor-love calls us to not harm others.* Gambling is suspect, Terry writes, because it often "seeks personal gain at the expense of a neighbor, and such action can only reduce their well-being." When it does this, gambling treats another person as "only an instrument – a 'thing' – enabling us to achieve our goals" rather than "the object of love."
- ▶ *We are to be careful and generous stewards of all our possessions.* The parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30) makes the point in an ironic way: the "good and faithful" servants use resources like their master would. Put positively, those who have money "are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share...so that they may take hold of the life that really is life" (1 Timothy 6:18-19).

While not every act of gambling is motivated by greed, shows careless disregard of others, or fails in stewardship, Moore cautions that "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."

If we consider gambling in light of these biblical themes, we "may even decide not to participate...ever," Moore writes. But discussing our stance with others will be difficult because the dangers of gambling are not widely recognized. "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." Moore commends the demeanor of the itinerant Quaker preacher John Woolman (1720-1772), who challenged the morally suspect presuppositions and practices of his day "by means of civil, engaging, and persuasive discourse whenever possible without sounding like an alarmist or triggering a reactionary response."

### Study Questions

1. If there are no biblical commands against modern gambling, what guidance can Scripture give to us about this practice? How does Bob Terry respond to those who desire that the Bible give us a "list of sins" to avoid?
2. What motives do people have for gambling? How, according to Kevin Moore, can the complexity and opacity of these motives make our gambling morally suspect?
3. Study how the practice of casting lots is presented in Scripture. Discuss the similarities and differences between that ancient practice and modern gambling.
4. Consider how Andrea Mantegna depicts the Roman soldiers casting lots for Christ's clothing in *Crucifixion*. What critique does the artist imply of gambling? Is this fair?

Departing Hymn: "Self-Sufficient! Is the Cry"

# Would a Good and Faithful Servant Gamble?

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To consider how key biblical admonitions – e.g., about greed, harming a neighbor, and poor stewardship of money – relate to gambling.
2. To examine the biblical references to casting lots and distinguish this ancient practice from modern gambling.
3. To discuss how to challenge presuppositions and practices of gambling in a society that is largely desensitized to its dangers.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *The Gambling Culture (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

## Begin with a Comment

“Gambling was likely to surface at some point as one of the major besetting sins of a culture [like ours] with too much discretionary income,” New Testament scholar Ben Witherington observes in a blog. Yet he 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?” (<http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2006/02/god-and-gambling-latest-scourge.html>, accessed July 11, 2011).

Kevin Moore notes that “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.... 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?”

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the unison prayer in the study guide.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Matthew 25:14-30 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

In this opening study Kevin Moore and Bob Terry examine the biblical narrative for insight and guidance regarding gambling. It may be unsettling to learn that the Bible does not directly prohibit gambling. (Scripture often mentions casting lots, but without condemning the practice. In any case, Moore points out that casting lots was not a form of gambling.) Does this mean that there is no moral problem with gambling? Moore and Terry unfold the “morally suspect” nature of modern gambling by relating the practice to biblical teachings against greed, harming a neighbor, and poor stewardship of money. Even if some gambling practices are morally permissible (this seems to be Moore’s view), all of them are morally suspect – because our motives for gambling are mixed, are difficult for us to know, and may be misinterpreted by others.

## Study Questions

1. Both Kevin Moore and Bob Terry suggest that the Bible can guide our actions by examining the circumstances of our gambling and correcting our motives. Moore points to the biblical critiques of “greed, idleness, taking advantage of the vulnerable, and other common motivations for gambling.” Terry argues that gambling is (typically) a form of coveting and, therefore, is opposed to love of neighbor. Both mention that gambling is often poor stewardship of our resources.

Terry says the desire that Scripture give us a list of sins that we must avoid “betrays a spirit caught up in a legalistic approach to Scripture. Like the scribes and Pharisees whom Jesus condemns in Matthew 23, we give attention to the small things but are oblivious to the more important things: justice, mercy, and faithfulness.... For the Christian, the core issue related to gambling is not a ‘thou shalt not’ prohibition. The core issue is what it means to love your neighbor as yourself.”

2. Moore observes that people may gamble “because they have fun with numbers or puzzles,” “as a social activity, a pastime they enjoy with their friends,” to “compete with other players, or against ‘the house’ (the casino’s system), especially when incredible odds are stacked against them,” or “if they have attained a level of quantifiable expertise..., to supplement their income.” He notes that “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.”

Moore continues, “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.”

3. Divide members into small groups to examine some of the Scripture passages that mention casting lots. Usually the practice is approved because it serves a religious function – “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).” In the few disapproving references, the lots are cast for the spoils of violence (Joel 3:3; Obadiah 1:11; Nahum 3:10). The most infamous incident of this sort involves Roman soldiers casting lots for Jesus’ clothing at his crucifixion (Luke 23:34; John 19:24; cf. Psalm 22: 18).

Casting lots shares with gambling the element of chance (though some may say providence determines the outcome). Otherwise the practice was very different from modern gambling: participants did not risk their money and it “was not a way to gain wealth, but a way to guarantee the impartiality of an important decision.”

4. Mantegna shows the soldiers using gambling paraphernalia of the artist’s day – dice and a two-colored wheel. They seem “nonchalant and distracted from the grisly torture they are inflicting. To emphasize this, the artist contrasts the competition among the soldiers casting lots to the mutual support of the grieving women.” Perhaps Mantegna means to critique gambling as a distraction from more important concerns.

## Departing Hymn

“‘Self-Sufficient!’ Is the Cry” is on pp. 55-57 of *The Gambling Culture*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.