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GAMBLING: SHOULD WE EVER PLAY THE SLOTS
AND STUFF LIKE THAT?

INTRODUCTION

Today is the Ides of March. It follows quickly on the heels of Friday the thirteenth. The Ides of March has also traditionally been regarded as an unlucky day, going back to Roman times when Julius Caesar was assassinated on March 15, 44 BC. Perhaps it is an appropriate day to touch on the subject of gambling.

Our missionary Ben Yazzi was scheduled to speak this morning. His governor in New Mexico just declared that anyone who leaves the state must self-quarantine for fourteen days upon his or her return. He understandably did not want to do that. So we will reschedule his visit. I did not find out about that until Friday afternoon and was not at a point in my study where I wanted to do the next message in our David series. So I decided to revise an older message and address a subject that has significance for us living in southern Nevada. It is an issue that needs to occasionally be revisited. We ought to have a Biblical perspective on gambling.

According to the Nevada Gaming Control Board our state took in \$6 billion in gambling revenue in the last six months ending in January. The Las Vegas Strip alone accounted for \$3.3 billion of that amount. According to the Nevada Resort Association hotels and casinos accounted for 38.9% of state tax revenue in 2018. Gambling is obviously big business here in our state. It drives our economy. The appearance of the corona virus is going to adversely affect tourism and the economy in our area.

Most of us recognize that there is a downside to all of this. According to a 2018 study conducted by WalletHub, Nevada had the highest rate of gambling addiction. Nevada was also ranked as the most gambling-friendly state. Traditionally Christians have had a negative view of gambling. We Christians living in southern Nevada have a unique situation, living in the midst of a gambling culture. To raise any question about gambling on one level seems almost unpatriotic.

The Pew Research Center conducted a national survey in 2013 in which respondents were asked: “Is gambling morally acceptable, morally unacceptable, or not a moral issue at all?” Twenty-five per cent said that it is morally acceptable, 24% morally unacceptable, and 47% not a moral issue at all. I found it interesting that they did the same survey in Russia and 62% of the Russians found gambling to be morally unacceptable.

There is no specific verse in the Bible that says that it is wrong to gamble. There are, however, Biblical principles that should affect our thinking on the subject. We could look at the subject in terms of whether gambling is a good social or economic policy or whether it is appropriate for Christians to be involved in the gambling industry, both of which would be worthwhile topics of discussion. But today I would simply like to focus on what Biblical principles should affect our personal view of participation in gambling. Should we play the slots and stuff like that?

I.

First of all, consider LAS VEGAS AND EPHEBUS: A ROUGH PARALLEL. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. LAS VEGAS AND EPHEBUS...) Don read a passage from the Book of Acts about an incident that happened during the Apostle Paul’s stay in Ephesus. This story provides a helpful background for a consideration of gambling in that there are some rough parallels between the culture in Ephesus and the culture in Las Vegas. (EPHEBUS MAP) Ephesus was a major city in the western part of Asia Minor. It was the capital of the Roman province named Asia. Historically it had been a major seaport and trading center. By Paul’s time, however, the dominant economic force was religious tourism.

Ephesus was the home of the Greek goddess Artemis, who was called Diana by the Romans. She was a fertility goddess. People came from throughout the Roman Empire to worship her. (EPHEBUS TEMPLE ARTEMIS) The temple to Artemis in Ephesus was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. It was three times larger than the Parthenon in Athens. As our passage indicates, there was a hospitality industry that focused on religious pilgrims and that made and sold souvenirs for religious pilgrims.

Ephesus was also an occult center. A couple of verses before the passage that Don read (ACTS 19:19), we are told, **“And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver.”**

From the information that we have in the Acts account it seems that Paul did not go to Ephesus to attack Artemis worship or to get rid of occult activity. (PROJECTOR OFF) He came to Ephesus to present a positive message about the gospel of Jesus Christ, that by believing in the Son of God who died for the sins of the world people might receive the gift of eternal life. In the process of presenting that message, a significant number of people stopped going to the temple and stopped buying Artemis images and stopped participating in occult activities. Government and business began regarding this Jesus movement as their corona virus. There was a backlash because people's jobs were being affected. Economic activity in Ephesus was threatened.

We Christians cannot help but notice that we live in a metropolitan area that professes values that are contrary to the Scriptures. Las Vegas has proudly proclaimed itself to be Sin City. "What happens here, stays here" is not talking about Christian conversion. But following the example of the Apostle Paul, our main message should be a positive one. There is salvation and eternal life that comes from having a relationship with Jesus Christ. As people are truly converted, their values will change. If the gospel was to make dramatic inroads into our metropolitan area, we might see a backlash like they had at Ephesus in Paul's day. The economy involving strip clubs and casinos and questionable entertainment would be affected. We Christians might well take the heat for that if there was a Christian revival in Las Vegas.

II.

I propose for you, then, Roman numeral II in the outline: THE QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER) In terms of our personal choices about gambling there are no specific verses or passages that directly address the subject. Someone might make the case that gambling is just their form of entertainment and that they limit how much they spend. I am not suggesting that if we ever put a quarter in a slot machine, we stand condemned before God. But I am suggesting that there are Biblical principles that should affect our thinking and behavior in regard to choices that we make about going to the casino or playing the slots or buying lottery tickets or betting on sports or playing poker.

A.

This is the first question to consider (II. A. IS MY PARTICIPATION MOTIVATED...): IS MY PARTICIPATION MOTIVATED BY GREED? The New Testament has a number of warnings about greed. Jesus was speaking in Luke #12 v. 15 when he addressed His disciples. (LUKE 12:15) He said, "**Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness---** some translations have greed, **for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.**" The original Greek word for "greed," or "covetousness," in the New Testament, with only one exception, refers to the desire for material gain. It is wanting things for their own sake.

Wheaton College philosophy professor Jay Wood says, **“Greed is an inappropriate attitude toward things of value, built on the mistaken judgment that my well-being is tied to the sum of my possessions. Greed is more than mistaken belief--- as if knowing a few more facts would somehow solve the problem. It also involves emotions (perhaps longing, unfulfillment, fear) and attitudes (a sense of entitlement, rivalry). Greed alienates us from God, from our neighbor, and from our true self.”** (*Christianity Today*, 1/2005, p. 34)

In 1 Timothy #6 vv. 9 & 10 (1 TIMOTHY 6:9-10) the Apostle Paul writes, **“But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.”** Is my interest in gambling motivated by the love of money? Do I participate because I want to get rich quick?

“What’s wrong with trying to get ahead in the world, with trying to have a little extra money to put away for retirement or for the kids’ education or even to give to the church?” Nothing. But is this the wise way to do it, and is this how God suggests that we go about it? In Ephesians #4 v. 28 (EPHESIANS 4:28) we are told, **“Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him--- play the slots--- no--- let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.”**

Consider two verses from Proverbs #28. (PROVERBS 28:20) In v. 20 of Proverbs 28 we read, **“A faithful man will abound with blessings, but whoever hastens to be rich will not go unpunished.”** Is our motivation in playing the slots to hasten to be rich? Verse 22 (PROVERBS 28:22) of the same chapter says, **“A stingy man hastens after wealth and does not know that poverty will come upon him.”** The sad reality is that poverty often does come upon those who become problem gamblers.

The ones who win a significant payoff have their pictures posted in some of the casinos. But for some reason there are never pictures of those who spent the rent money at the casino and didn’t get anything for it. (PROJECTOR OFF)

To be fair, I can imagine that many people could argue that they don’t participate out of greed. Their motivation is just to have some fun and entertainment. They don’t spend large amounts of money. They don’t put their retirement at risk. Maybe they just play the penny slots. OK, that argument might have some validity.

B.

Let's consider a second question: (PROJECTOR ON--- II.A.B. HOW DOES MY PARTICIPATION...) HOW DOES MY PARTICIPATION AFFECT MY DEMONSTRATION OF FAITH IN GOD? Is there some way in which I am compromising my faith in God? Maybe yes, maybe no.

One of the most famous of the proverbs appears in Proverbs 3 vv. 5 & 6. (PROVERBS 3:5-6) The author exhorts, **"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."** The object of our trust in life ought to be the God of the Bible. For many people in the casino it is Lady Luck. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In the days of the New Testament when Paul was writing, there was a goddess who was called Tuche by the Greeks and Fortuna by the Romans. She was the goddess of luck and chance. She was their version of Lady Luck. Does anyone ever call upon Lady Luck in the casino?

(PROJECTOR ON--- FORTUNA) Fortuna had an annual festival that was dedicated to her. The Roman governor Pliny the Elder once criticized the place that this goddess had in every day life in the Greco-Roman world. He wrote, **"Everywhere in the whole world at every hour by all men's voices Fortune alone is invoked and named, alone accused, alone impeached, alone pondered, alone applauded, alone rebuked and visited with reproaches; deemed volatile and indeed by most men blind as well, wayward, inconstant, uncertain, fickle in her favours and favoring the unworthy. To her is debited all that is spent and credited all that is received, she alone fills both pages in the whole of morals' account; and we are so much at the mercy of chance that Chance herself, by whom God is proved uncertain, takes the place of God."**

The prophet Isaiah addressed the people of Israel in #65 of his book. In v. 10 of #65 the prophet gives a promise from God. (ISAIAH 65:10) He says, **"Sharon shall become a pasture for flocks, and the Valley of Achor a place for herds to lie down, for my people who have sought me."**

In vv. 11 & 12 of Isaiah 65 the Lord has a different message for people who trust in something else. He says, (ISAIAH 65:11) **"But you who forsake the Lord, who forget my holy mountain,**

who set a table for Fortune and fill cups of mixed wine for Destiny, (ISAIAH 65:12) I will destine you to the sword, and all of you shall bow down to the slaughter, because, when I called, you did not answer;

when I spoke, you did not listen, but you did what was evil in my eyes and chose what I did not delight in.” It seems that the people who turned away from God had come to base their lives on luck, on fortune, on destiny. The Lord regards that as evil.

C.

Consider the issue with a third question. (II.B.C. IS PARTICIPATION GOOD STEWARDSHIP?) IS PARTICIPATION GOOD STEWARDSHIP? If God is sovereign in our lives, then all of our resources should be regarded as belonging to Him, and we should see our position as stewards of these resources.

In 1 Corinthians #4 vv. 1-2 (1 CORINTHIANS 4:1-2) the Apostle Paul writes, **“This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.”** In this context Paul is speaking about our stewardship of spiritual resources. But the principle can legitimately be broadened to include the other resources that our sovereign and gracious God blesses us with. So in regard to the issue at hand we can ask ourselves: Is spending money on some form of gambling good stewardship?

A survey sponsored by the Consumer Federation of America and the financial services firm Primerica found that 28% of American adults believe that their best chance for building long-term wealth is to play the lottery, rather than to save and invest. Among households with annual incomes of \$35,000 or less, 40% put their faith in gambling. Fewer than a third of respondents said that \$25 invested weekly for 40 years at a 7% annual yield would amount to over \$150,000. The actual result after 40 years of such saving would be \$286,640. \$25 invested weekly for 40 years at a 7% annual yield would produce \$286,640. (PROJECTOR OFF)

When we were living in Connecticut, I came across a study that was done of residents there who were buying tickets for Powerball jackpots. The study found that the average buyer was spending \$40 a week to win the big payoff. If that amount of money had been invested each week in an S & P 500 stock index fund five years earlier, the study claimed that a nest egg of \$19,491 would have been produced. If that weekly investment had begun 25 years earlier, the nest egg would have grown to \$503,986. The odds of winning the Powerball jackpot were supposedly 1 in 80 million. Which investment reflects better stewardship?

Someone might well object: “But there is risk in doing both things. Look what has happened to the stock market in the last two weeks. Why is it OK to invest in the stock market but wrong to spend money at

the casino?” Gambling money does perhaps produce casino jobs and nice buildings. But other finance people argue that it has little long-term economic value. Larry Burkett says, “...**gambling consumes, but it doesn’t produce. It creates no new money and no new goods.**”

Investments should be a win-win situation. When we invest in stock or some kind of savings instrument, we provide capital that people will use to improve and expand business or to build homes. Hopefully we will also get a reasonable return for the money that we have made available to others. My brother, who is a money manager, says that we can pick any twenty year period in the last 50 years, and one can find that the average stock market investment made at the beginning of that time will have averaged at least a 6% annual gain over those twenty years. Hard core gamblers too often get only debt for their investment.

D.

Consider a fourth question: (PROJECTOR ON--- II. C. D. IS GAMBLING BECOMING...) IS GAMBLING BECOMING AN ADDICTIVE HABIT? Is it getting to have an unhealthy hold on my life? In 1 Corinthians #6 v. 12 the Apostle Paul says (1 CORINTHIANS 6:12), “**All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be dominated by anything.**” In other words, there are some things that are not inherently wrong. But these things can become wrong if they get an unhealthy hold on our lives.

Chris Drew came to Las Vegas in 1991 with her husband and kids. She and her husband became regulars at local casinos. (PROJECTOR OFF) When they divorced, she became a more regular customer. Chris began to take the maximum cash advance on six credit cards to feed a quarter video poker habit. In 1994 she won a \$1000 jackpot. She became convinced that she could win more. In 1995 she declared bankruptcy with \$40,000 in credit card debt.

About the same time, she landed a job in the Las Vegas Planning Department. She was good at what she did, and she was rewarded with raises and promotions. During lunch hours and after hours she continued to gamble. She pawned her jewelry and took out a second mortgage to feed her gambling habit. In 1999 she took control of her department’s petty cash fund. She began writing fictitious receipts to get cash to spend at the casinos. A few years later she was found out, fired, and arrested. She was sentenced to six months probation and ordered to pay restitution. She did finally seek help for her addiction. But it was a struggle. She had to deal with depression. She also found it difficult to get a good job. (*Las Vegas Review Journal*, 5/1/2007)

Most gamblers will never become compulsive gamblers, but some will. Most of us know someone who is. Studies show that somewhere between 2 and 4% of all Americans will have a problem. According to the National Council on Problem Gambling there are six million adults and 500,000 teens who can be classified as problem gamblers. Compulsive gambling will never be a problem for people who stay away from it.

E.

Consider a fifth question: (II. D. E. DOES MY PARTICIPATION...) DOES MY PARTICIPATION IN SOME WAY HARM OTHERS? How does gambling square with the Golden Rule? Jesus said that the second greatest commandment is to love one's neighbor as oneself. If we happen to be successful in gambling, many forms of a possible payoff will involve taking money from a large corporation. We don't need to worry very much about their finances. They will always figure out how to come out on top. But some forms of gambling, like poker, involve taking money that belongs to other individuals. Sometimes these others cannot afford to lose the money that they wager.

Some gambling revenue, of course, also goes into advertising to promote more gambling. Does our participation have a part in promoting values that we really should not be promoting?

Most states sponsor lottos. In Connecticut the state sponsored advertising had slogans like "You can't win, unless you play." "You only need a dollar and a dream." Do we Christians really want to have a part in promoting that kind of message? Does financial success really come from participating in that? Or does it more often come from hard work and saving?

Several years ago the bipartisan National Gambling Impact Commission found that 80% of gambling revenue nationwide comes from households with incomes less than \$50,000 a year. Players with annual incomes less than \$10,000 spent almost three times as much on gambling as those with incomes of more than \$50,000.

Perhaps we should also consider the moral example that we set for adults as well as young people when we participate in some form of gambling. When a relative or a friend becomes a compulsive gambler, do we lose a position of moral authority when we discourage them from gambling if we are playing also? Do we set a bad example for the younger generations?

I knew three families in my last church who had considerable involvement in gambling. Two of the families were on welfare. In one of them the older son of the single mother told me that his mom often spent \$20 or \$25 a day on lottery tickets. That was money that she could not afford to spend. The other family also involved a single mom. She had a child with spina bifida. She could not afford to lose the money that she spent either.

There was one family who did strike it rich. The couple won a multi-million dollar jackpot. I don't know how much they spent to get a winning ticket. I suspect that it was a substantial amount. They bought a beautiful house. The husband in the family used some of his winnings to acquire a mistress. The wife found out about it a year later. She confronted him. A few hours later he dropped dead from a heart attack. "All that you need is a dollar and a dream."

I believe that the wife was truly a Christian. She visited our church a few times. Suzy and I visited her in her home. To the best of my knowledge she did not use her riches to help Christian causes. A bit later she came down with cancer. She was convinced that with the right diet and with enough faith in God she would be cured. I did her funeral a short time later. The sons who inherited the money promised that they would give the church a gift in appreciation for my involvement with their mom and for leading the funeral service. We never heard from them again.

Jesus said, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.' And he told them a parable, saying, 'The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, "What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?" And he said, "I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" But God said to him, "Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.'"

My purpose this morning is not to condemn those among us who have some kind of involvement with gambling. My purpose is to encourage us all to think biblically. It is difficult to look biblically at things that have become so ingrained in our culture. But it is also dangerous to accept the standards and practices of our culture which have become so acceptable and so much a part of our world without looking at them from God's perspective.