

Is Gambling Morally Wrong?

Most Americans are concerned about the moral state of the nation, yet few consider whether or not gambling—a wager of money, property or something of value based on chance—is part of the problem.

“It’s just a game, entertainment,” they say.

Unfortunately, only 31 percent of Americans believe gambling is morally wrong, according to a May Gallup poll. In 2007, legal gambling businesses in the U.S. took in more than \$92 billion—after paying out any “winnings”—according to industry statistics.

Gambling hasn’t always been legal. A century ago, most forms of gambling were illegal in the United States. State lotteries were not legalized until the 1960s. Gambling has traditionally been considered a “vice,” along with prostitution, illegal drugs and pornography. In law enforcement, the term “vice” is often considered an inherently immoral activity, often accompanied by depraved, harmful behavior. And of course a “vice” is the opposite of a “virtue.”

Some leading theologians in the Christian community provide greater clarity than the polling data on the question of morality and gambling.

Albert Mohler, president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and one of the brightest thinkers in Christianity today, says the national explosion of gambling “may well be the most underrated dimension of America’s moral crisis.” Mohler makes no bones about it and gets right to the heart of the matter morally and ethically by identifying it as the “sin of greed.”

“The Bible is clear on this issue,” he writes in a recent online post. “The entire enterprise of gambling is opposed to

the moral worldview revealed in God's Word. The basic impulse behind gambling is greed—a basic sin that is the father of many other evils.”

He goes on: “The Bible presents the stewardship of material possessions as a crucial issue of discipleship. The Christian understands that his possessions and money are not his own, but God's. We are trustees who will be judged for the quality of our stewardship. Those lottery tickets and trips to Atlantic City are going to be hard to explain when God calls stewards to account.”

In addition, Mohler writes, gambling depends entirely on chance—for which the chief “virtue” is luck. “The worldview of the Bible affirms the active sovereignty of God over all events, persons and time—and thus there is no place for luck,” he writes. “The Christian trusts in God, not in the vain hope of a winning lottery number or a favorable roll of the dice.”

Wayne Grudem, author of *Systematic Theology* and the 2010 book *Politics According to the Bible*, also has serious objections to gambling.

“My own judgment is that large commercial gambling outlets such as casinos and state-sponsored lotteries bring much more harm to a society than the benefits they generate (such as tax revenue),” he says. “First, it is socially harmful (and fiscally regressive) because the largest numbers of gamblers come from the poorest segments of the population. Second, (it) leads to an addiction to gambling ... and this addiction destroys marriages, families ... and increases societal breakdown. Third, studies have shown that where gambling businesses are established, crime rates increase.”

Grudem says churches should be teaching that gambling is a very unwise use of money. “While I cannot find biblical basis for absolutely insisting that it is wrong to participate in a charity raffle ... or an office pool ... my personal practice for

many years has been to avoid gambling,” he says.

Gambling seeks to teach people the deception that significant wealth can be obtained without work or the struggle that naturally accompanies it.

The virtues of hard work, saving, being thrifty and investing carefully are all undermined by this vice. In place of these virtues come greed, idolatry, laziness, deception, exploitation and a humanistic live-for-the-moment mentality.

Even though the Bible doesn’t address gambling directly by using that term, principles in Scripture address its foolishness.

Chad Hills, who researches gambling policy for CitizenLink, an affiliate of Focus on the Family, suggests a two-step approach when dealing with any questionable practice. “First, compare or contrast the issue or activity with God’s nature and truth,” he says. “Then, do some research on what ‘fruit’ a particular activity or issue produces. Is it good or bad?

“God’s nature is rooted in love and truth. It is sacrificial and others-centered. He is dedicated to service, not exploitation. He warns against idle hands, ill-gotten riches and malicious or deceitful men.”

Hills continues: “Gambling is rooted in greed and deception. The sole purpose is to lure you in with false hope and take your money. Gambling is self-serving.”

As for the fruit of gambling (see Matthew 7:15-21), Hills says, it’s pretty obvious: It destroys individuals, families and entire communities.

The Bible also is clear that we are to be good stewards of what we are given. “God expects us to be fruitful and responsible in all areas of our lives,” Hills says.

Various Christian religious denominations have differing views

on gambling but almost all of them recognize the inherent dangers and risks associated with this activity.

While the tradition of the Catholic Church has been that gambling is not considered an inherent moral wrong, they have recognized the serious social ills that often accompany gambling. The Catechism of the Catholic Church reads: "Games of chance (card games, etc.) or wagers ... become morally unacceptable when they deprive someone of what is necessary to provide for his needs and those of others."

The Florida Catholic Bishops have stated that gambling can "become morally wrong when it interferes with one's other duties or responsibilities". The Florida Bishops further state, "Gambling is often accompanied by vice and social evils. We are concerned over the impact of easier gambling opportunities on low and moderate income families and individuals, as well as those for whom gambling becomes a compulsive behavior. We are also concerned for the impact on neighborhoods, housing patterns and the homeless, and on public morality in general."

In 1997, the Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution opposing all forms of gambling and its promotion through advertisements. The conclusion of the resolution speaks with moral clarity on the topic: "[W]e, the messengers of the Southern Baptist Convention ... call on all Christians to exercise their influence by refusing to participate in any form of gambling or its promotion; and ... we urge our political leaders to enact laws restricting and eventually eliminating all forms of gambling and its advertisement."

Unexpectedly, the most strongly worded opposition to gambling comes from the United Methodist Church. While this denomination tends to lean politically moderate to liberal on many social issues, they have taken an official stand against all gambling.

They state in their Book of Resolutions: "The United Methodist Church opposes gambling in any form. Gambling is a menace to society, deadly to the best interests of moral, social, economic, and spiritual life, and destructive of good government. As an act of faith and concern, Christians should abstain from gambling and should strive to minister to those victimized by the practice. ... The Church should promote standards and personal lifestyles that would make unnecessary and undesirable the resort to commercial gambling—including public lotteries—as a recreation, as an escape, or as a means of producing public revenue or funds for support of charities or government.

"Gambling, as a means of acquiring material gain by chance and at the neighbor's expense, is a menace to personal character and social morality. Gambling fosters greed and stimulates the fatalistic faith in chance. Organized and commercial gambling is a threat to business, breeds crime and poverty, and is destructive to the interests of good government. It encourages the belief that work is unimportant, that money can solve all our problems, and that greed is the norm for achievement. It serves as a 'regressive tax' on those with lower income. In summary, gambling is bad economics; gambling is bad public policy; and gambling does not improve the quality of life."

The Presbyterian Church (.) has a long history of opposition to all forms of gambling as an abdication of stewardship. A 1950 statement described gambling as "an unchristian attempt to get something for nothing or at another's expense." A 1992 statement petitioned civic and government leaders to resist state-sanctioned gambling and the false promises for fiscal benefits from such, and encouraged state councils of churches and related public policy advocacy groups to be active in resisting the spread of legalized gambling.

The Assemblies of God opposes gambling, calling it "an artificial and contrived risk taken for selfish gain at another's expense." A statement from the denomination's

Commission on Doctrinal Purity and the Executive Presbytery reads: "A careful study of the Scriptures indicates that gambling is a form of evil that the Christian seeking to live by scriptural principles should avoid."

Finally, during President George W. Bush's administration, 220 religious leaders in the U.S.—representing liberals, conservatives, evangelicals, Catholics and Jews—issued a joint statement calling on the nation's leaders to oppose the spread of gambling.

In closing, there seems to be a reasonable question as to whether or not gambling or wagering is in every instance an inherent moral wrong. But beyond the ivory tower philosophical speculation of that question, stands the stark evidence of the real and destructive effect that this vice has had upon the poor, and upon families, marriages and communities. It is these sad truths that lead us to the clear conviction that the vice of gambling remains an inherently unproductive, predatory, immoral, destructive and unwise activity that should be highly discouraged and never promoted or sponsored by governmental, community or religious leaders who truly wish to serve the common good of society and maintain the well-being of citizens and families.

John Stemberger, an Orlando attorney and the president of the Florida Family Policy Council is a leading voice on life, marriage, family and social conservative issues in Florida. In 1986 while a student of Political Science and Philosophy, Stemberger founded the Institute for Conservative Studies (ICS), a permanent student led think-tank at Florida State University. After internships in the Florida House and Senate, Stemberger served as the lobbyist for Florida Right to Life. In 1992, he served as the Political Director of the Republican Party of Florida during the final campaign of former President George H. W. Bush. In 2008, Stemberger led the statewide coalition and campaign to successfully pass the Florida Marriage Protection Amendment by a 62 percent margin.