

Is Gambling Entertainment or a Sin?

By

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One of our visitors at church asked about gambling, since a Lutheran pastor wrote that he considered playing the lottery once a week to be “entertainment” and therefore, with only a dollar at stake, harmless.

Gambling is a sin because it is based upon gaining from another’s loss, in other words, a sophisticated form of stealing. Gambling is also sinful because it is fueled by coveting, which violates the Ten Commandments. Our confessions state: “For although you go your way as if you had done no one any wrong, you have nevertheless injured your neighbor; and if it is not called stealing and cheating, yet it is called coveting your neighbor’s property, that is, aiming at possession of it...” Luther, Large Catechism, Concordia Triglotta, p. 669.

If you think that the lottery is not based upon getting something for nothing, then watch the ads on TV, which fuel coveting by promising millions of dollars in return for a “small investment.”

One must be blind to ignore the cases of mothers and fathers who fail to clothe and feed their children because income has been diverted for the “big win” at the racetrack, lottery, or card game. Can we happily spend money taken from these children?

Nor should we cloak sin with Pharisaical limits and say, “It’s only one dollar a week.” Those who buy lottery tickets are buying the ads which seduce people who cannot afford to gamble. If I steal only one dollar from my neighbor, is it not a theft because of the small sum involved? One dollar a week adds up. C.F.W. Walther used to teach that stealing a penny is a sin, just as much as stealing a fortune.

The lotteries, riverboat gambling and Indian reservation casinos have all attracted crime without benefiting the community. (An Atlantic City resident told me that legal gambling increased crime without raising wages.) The Word of God warns us against the mentality behind the “big win” which will solve all our problems.

Proverbs 21:25-26 (KJV) The desire of the slothful killeth him; for his hands refuse to labor. He coveteth greedily all the day long: but the righteous giveth and spareth not.

God will not let the righteous go hungry or his children begging for bread (Psalm 37), but Donald Trump’s casinos and the state lotteries will. Ironic fact: Trump had to beg the courts to protect him from bankruptcy, caused by his casinos in Atlantic City.

Also, many “legal” gambling operations have been penetrated and subverted by organized crime.

If Lutherans go to church every week and play the lottery, are they not pronouncing their blessing upon all gambling? Paul warned us not to tempt others with our behavior, even if we can justify it. (1 Corinthians 8:11).

I have a worthwhile alternative to playing the lottery: Why not send \$1 a week to a truly orthodox Lutheran Seminary? Think of it as gambling, the way the sower carelessly sows the seed in Mark 4. God will multiply the Word and He will bless the money given to support future pastors. Think of it as entertainment. What greater joy could one have than to help a student become a teacher or pastor?

Gambling, like all other sins, will lead us away from Christ by hardening our hearts. We are forgiven through His death on the cross. The Word not only reveals the will of God but also gives us the power to obey it, first showing us our true condition, then offering us the forgiveness and comfort of the Gospel.

Those who are still tempted to play the lottery should remember what professional gamblers call their clients: suckers.