

Gambling: The Peril of Great Price

Steve, a thirty-two year old resident of Saint John, quit gambling nearly three years ago by signing himself into a 28-day addiction recovery program in Prince Edward Island. The same program was available at the Ridgewood Treatment Centre in Saint John, but Steve knew it would be easy to sign himself out if things got too difficult.

Following his rehabilitation, it was really tough when he first came face to face with a video gambling machine. Today, whenever possible, he still avoids convenience stores that have such machines.

Steve admits that his problem existed even back in high school days, when he would bet on the outcome of throwing coins against a wall and playing cards for money. He estimates that he has blown over \$250,000 since he left school and started working. He still has debts today and figures it will be 15 years before he is free from them.

"I can make my payments and we have food in the house, which is better than it used to be," he said.

He remembers times when he would have the money for a mortgage payment in his hand, due that day, and go out and lose it gambling.

Today, Steve is a member of a Saint John chapter of Gamblers Anonymous. His story is one that could be repeated many times over, with one exception — he got help while most of the others are still caught in a compulsive addiction.

Rachel Volberg, a New York-based sociologist and researcher, compiled a study on gambling for the New Brunswick government. According to the 1993 report, New Brunswick has a minimum of 3,000 pathological gamblers and 10,000 problem gamblers, a total of 13,000 which represents 2% of the province's population. The report included this telling finding: "Both the lifetime and current prevalence rates were higher in New Brunswick than in any similar surveys except New Zealand and Connecticut."

The lure of scoring big in lotteries and video game machines is an increasing peril today. Gambling has been growing in legitimacy as both federal and provincial governments have turned to lotteries and other betting to supplement tax revenues.

To some people gambling may be a trivial matter of throwing down a few dollars each week with no ill effect to themselves or their families, but to those who become addicted it has brought increased stress and deterioration to their individual lives and families. Gambling begins a long road of pain and disillusionment to those victimized by its clutches. The financial and psychological toll from compulsive wagering can be as severe as other destructive behaviours, such as drugs and alcohol.

Though the Bible does not explicitly prohibit gambling, it does provide relevant moral teaching which gives guidance on the matter. What points should a Christian consider on the questionable matter of gambling?

First, gambling substitutes chance in the place of dependence on God. The Bible teaches us to seek the lordship and leadership of our God, where gambling looks to fate, destiny and luck. Bowing the knee to "Lady Luck" is a form of idolatry, since it replaces a sense of dependence on God to sovereignly order and provide.

“Lady Luck” is not a very trustworthy source in today’s million dollar lotteries. The chance of scoring a big windfall is a statistical monstrosity. Riches appear to be within a moment’s reach, when in reality, the statistics indicate they will never be grasped. False hope pushes gambling victims toward an elusive dream.

Second, gambling places the material ahead of the spiritual. We are admonished to order our lives by seeking first spiritual pursuits (Matthew 6:33).

When we give priority to material pursuits, it chokes out the spiritual because the desire for gain is insatiable. The love of money nourishes cravings that cannot be satisfied. We are instructed that godliness with contentment is great gain, and that people who want to get rich acquire unquenchable desires that may drive them into ruin and destruction (I Timothy 6:6-10).

Preoccupation with material gain makes us susceptible to greed and avarice. Jesus warned us, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” Luke 12:15.

The substance of life consists in the love of God and others, contentment and gratitude, friendship and family, peace and harmony. Gambling may draw one away from these realities.

Third, gambling undermines the biblical principle of stewardship. It is not good management to carelessly throw away resources that God has entrusted to our care. When Jesus returns we will be called to give an account of the use of the resources He entrusted to us.

Fourth, gambling contradicts the biblical work ethic. Gambling mocks the work ethic by deluding one to believe something can be gained for nothing.

Each person is compelled under God to work. Jesus said, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working” John 5:17. Paul commands that one should labour and do one’s work. “For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: ‘If a man will not work, he shall not eat.’ ... Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat” II Thessalonians 3:10-12.

Work has a functional value. It is the means for sustaining and supporting one’s self and family. It not only provides for daily provision but also contributes to a sense of well-being, fulfillment, and self-respect. Work enables the disciplined growth of the individual. It is through work that humans express their industry and creativity.

Gambling contributes nothing to the common good. It undermines values, mocks work, robs children, enslaves its addicts, subverts governments, and poisons whatever it touches. Biblical teaching leads us to reject gambling’s false premises.