

# If Only the Bible Said...

B Y B O B T E R R Y

**Gambling violates the heart of the biblical message because it is the opposite of loving God “with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” and loving “your neighbor as yourself.” No “thou shalt not” prohibition is necessary to understand that truth.**

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**I**f only the Bible said, “Thou shalt not gamble,” then life would be simpler. Gambling could be placed alongside other impermissible acts like murder, adultery, stealing, and lying in the lengthy catalog of sins. The Christian position on gambling would be clear for all to know and follow, if only the Bible said, “Thou shalt not ....”

Unfortunately this desire for the Bible to give us a list of sins to 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.

The prophet Micah sums up God’s demands when he responds to the rhetorical question “What does the LORD require of you?” with the direction “to act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8, NIV).<sup>1</sup>

The apostle Paul instructs the first-century church similarly: “whatever other commandments there may be are summed up in this one rule: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” He then adds, “Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law” (Romans 13:9b-10, NIV).

This teaching echoes Jesus’ words. When asked to give the greatest commandment, Jesus responds by referencing Deuteronomy 6:5—“you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength”—and Leviticus 19:18—“You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:29-31; cf. Matthew

22:37-39). And he emphasizes, “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:40, NIV).

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.

Loving your neighbor means recognizing the infinite value of all individuals. God’s image placed in humankind at creation (Genesis 1:27) gives every human being worth. Christians believe this worth is of such significance that God provides reconciliation for wayward people through the act of his Son, Jesus, on Calvary’s cross. If God values humanity so greatly, then certainly his people should. And if Christians value their neighbors (all their neighbors), then they will do them no harm.



Gambling, by definition, does harm to our neighbor. It attempts to take the property of another person without returning something of similar value. Gambling seeks personal gain at the expense of a neighbor, and such action can only reduce their well-being. Doing harm to a neighbor not only violates the principle of “love your neighbor as yourself” but it also violates the command of our Lord Jesus to “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31, NIV). No one wants to lose hard-earned property without adequate compensation. That is why people buy insurance to protect against fire and flood. That is why stealing is a crime. Yet the gambler seeks to do just that – to take the property of another without appropriate compensation. Gambling panders to selfishness, to personal passion, rather than promoting love of neighbor and conduct toward neighbor that we desire for ourselves.

Equally important is what gambling does to our neighbor’s personhood. Gambling turns a neighbor into a means to an end rather than an end in itself. To use the terminology of philosopher Martin Buber (1878-1965), gambling turns a neighbor into a “thing” instead of a “thou.” A neighbor becomes only the means by which our economic goals are achieved. Concern for a neighbor’s well-being is absent. A neighbor is not a “thou” with whom we enjoy relationship. A neighbor is not the object of love. A neighbor is only an instrument – a “thing” – enabling us to achieve our goals. What could be more tragic? Such action reminds us of Paul’s words in Romans 1:22-25, where he weeps over people who “claimed to be wise but they became fools...[and] exchanged the truth of God for a lie.”



The Bible has much to say about desiring what belongs to another. Exodus 20:17, the last of the Ten Commandments, declares “You shall not covet... anything that belongs to your neighbor.” To covet goes beyond desire. To covet is to crave something that rightly belongs to another. In his commentary on this passage, Roy Honeycutt, former president of Southern Baptist

Theological Seminary, notes that coveting is the first step toward stealing because coveting always conveys the idea of scheming to take something from another. Again, that is gambling's purpose – to gain the property of another without returning something of comparable value.

God calls for us to respect our neighbors and their possessions. We have only to look at Moses' instruction to the people that if they found anything that belonged to another, they should give it back:

You shall not watch your neighbor's ox or sheep straying away and ignore them; you shall take them back to their owner. If the owner does not reside near you or you do not know who the owner is, you shall bring it to your own house, and it shall remain with you until the owner claims it; then you shall return it. You shall do the same with a neighbor's donkey; you shall do the same with a neighbor's garment; and you shall do the same with anything else that your neighbor loses and you find. You may not withhold your help.

You shall not see your neighbor's donkey or ox fallen on the road and ignore it; you shall help to lift it up.

*Deuteronomy 22:1-4*

No "finders, keepers" attitude from God. God intended Israelite society to be based on love of neighbor, not envy or coveting.

Paul picks up this theme when he counsels Timothy that "the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil" (1 Timothy 6:10). Here the reference is to the damage done to the character of the one coveting money. Jesus says it plainly: "You cannot serve both God and money" (Matthew 6:24, NIV). The verses that follow illustrate that God desires us to "seek first the kingdom of God" (6:25-33). When our heart is focused on God, then there is no room for love of money. Yet gambling is based on love of money. Gambling undermines God's sovereignty by turning our priority away from him and toward money.

Coveting is more than an individual problem, however. Violating moral limits has societal consequences. Since God desires society to be based on love of neighbor, people are expected to construct a society reflecting these values. Voluntary agreement with God's plan is presumed. 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. Gambling cultivates coveting what rightly belongs to another. It alters relationships with others as love of neighbor gives way to selfish passion. God's perfect plan for human relationships is undermined by sin.

The Bible speaks of the importance of work (Proverbs 13:11; Ecclesiastes 5:10-20; 1 Timothy 6:6-10; Ephesians 4:28). Gambling fosters a something-for-nothing attitude and ignores the warning that "wealth gotten by vanity shall be diminished" (Proverbs 13:11, KJV). The Bible demands careful stew-

ardship of all one has (Matthew 6:33; Romans 14:12; Colossians 3:17). Gambling embraces reckless and irresponsible actions. The Bible emphasizes God's sovereignty (Matthew 10:29-30). Gambling counts on chance and luck.



The United Methodist Church's *Book of Discipline*, in a section on "the economic community," teaches:

Gambling is a menace to society; deadly to the best interests of moral, social, economic and spiritual life; and destructive to 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.<sup>2</sup>

That position is consistent through the centuries in most traditions of the Christian faith. Certainly Baptists have opposed gambling consistently. For example, Southern Baptists adopted resolutions opposing the spread of predatory gambling for five consecutive years between 1983 and 1987, and in 1996 and 1997.<sup>3</sup>

As a Baptist who believes the Bible is the sole authority for our faith and practice, I understand that gambling violates the heart of the biblical message because gambling is the opposite of loving God "with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength" and loving "your neighbor as yourself." That is why most Baptist groups have historically opposed gambling and why most continue to oppose the evil of gambling today. No "thou shalt not" prohibition is necessary to understand that truth.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Scripture passages marked "NIV" are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

<sup>2</sup> *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (2008), ¶163 (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2008), 121-122.

<sup>3</sup> The Southern Baptist Convention resolutions are available online at [www.sbc.net/resolutions/default.asp](http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/default.asp), accessed May 19, 2011.



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