

What's wrong with buying a lottery ticket?

BY HAL LANE

Many Bible believers who would never go to Las Vegas and spend time in a casino see no harm in buying a lottery ticket. They see the lottery as a benign form of gambling that benefits a good cause like education. After all, there is no verse in the Bible that says “You shall not gamble.” So, what *does* the Bible say about the purchase of lottery tickets?

First, gambling shows a lack of faith in God's provision for our needs. Honest labor is the means that God has ordained for us to provide for our needs and the needs of others (Exod. 20:8). In Matthew 6:25-34, Jesus encouraged His disciples not to worry about the future. He promised that the heavenly Father would take care of them as He took care of the birds and the flowers. Gamblers believe in luck and hope to receive reward for no labor.

Second, gambling shows a disregard for the laws of God. The clear motivation of gambling is greed, or covetousness, which the tenth commandment forbids. Ephesians 5:5 says that no covetous person has an inheritance in the kingdom of God, and Colossians 3:5 says that covetousness is idolatry.

Many justify their purchase of lottery tickets because some of the money will be used for education. People, however, do not buy lottery tickets because of education. They buy lottery tickets hoping to get instant wealth. It is greed, not charity, that motivates gamblers. If supporting education was the main purpose, then the lottery would not be necessary. People would support education without the incentive of greed. (Incidentally, the [New York Times](#) has reported that North Carolina is the latest state to discover that the lottery is “no quick fix for its cash-starved public schools.”)

Third, gambling shows a lack of love for others. The few who win lottery payoffs do not care where the money came from or who was hurt in the process. In their book, [Selling Hope: State Lotteries in America](#) (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), authors Clotfelter and Cook state that 10 percent of lottery players account for 50 percent of lottery purchases and the top 20 percent account for 65 percent of purchases. Many of these players are gambling addicts who are robbing their families of needed resources. How can a Christian feel good about benefiting from the misery of others?

Fourth, gambling will undermine the ethics and morals of young people. Youth learn from the examples of their parents and other adults. Parents who gamble endorse gambling and set an example for their children to follow. Surveys show that an alarming percentage of adolescents play the lottery despite its illegality (32% Louisiana, 34% Texas, 35% Connecticut). An experiment with a 16-year-old girl in Illinois showed that she was able to purchase lottery tickets in 49 out of 50 attempts from lottery retailers in that state².

Even for those who do not illegally buy lottery tickets, the example will be there to encourage young people to believe that gambling is acceptable. Parents who buy lottery tickets will have no moral authority to tell their children not to gamble.

Legalized gambling teaches the following principles:

1. **Gambling is good.** The state will give its seal of approval to a practice that has led many into addictive and destructive lifestyles. They will be sanctioning a false hope of instant wealth that has resulted in abandoned children, divorce, financial ruin, theft and suicide. They will lose the moral authority to oppose other forms of gambling that will follow.
2. **Greed is good.** The state will seek to entice players to take a chance on instant wealth. Instead of teaching the biblical principle that the *love* of money is the root of all kinds of evil, it will teach that the *lack* of money is the root of all kinds of evil.
3. **It is good to educate the wealthy with money from the poor.** Despite skewed statistics that attempt to say that lottery tickets are bought by a cross section of the economic spectrum, the truth is that the poor and desperate buy disproportionately more lottery tickets. “Those making less than \$10,000 per year spend more than any other income group, averaging \$597 per year. Moreover, the top 5 percent of lottery players account for over 50 percent of lottery sales, spending on average \$3,870 per year³.”
4. **The end justifies the means.** It is not how we raise money but how we use the money that determines the morality of the means. If citizens are OK with using revenue generated from lottery ticket sales, will state legislators next consider legalizing [other vices] earmarking those funds for students’ benefits?

Lotteries are thinly veiled cloaks for greed and selfishness. Christians can stand out as stars in a dark culture by refusing to participate in the many forms of gambling, including the lottery. “Your life should be free from the love of money. Be satisfied with what you have, for He Himself has said, I will never leave you or forsake you” (Heb. 13:5).