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Gambling—Morally Wrong and Politically Unwise

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A few months ago, the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints made this statement:

“There can be no question about the moral ramifications of gambling. As it has in the past, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints stands opposed to gambling, including government-sponsored lotteries.

“Public lotteries are advocated as a means of relieving the burden of taxation. It has been clearly demonstrated, however, that all too often lotteries only add to the problems of the financially disadvantaged by taking money from them and giving nothing of value in return. The poor and the elderly become victims of the inducements that are held out to purchase lottery tickets on the remote chance of winning a substantial prize.” 1

This statement condemns gambling from two points of view. In religious terms, it is morally wrong. In public policy terms, it is politically unwise. I will discuss both of these points of view. First, gambling as a moral evil.

Gambling—Morally Wrong

Two generations ago, the English scholar and convert to Christianity, C. S. Lewis, employed an unusual literary device to explain some truths about Christianity. He authored a book consisting of letters of instruction from a senior devil, Screwtape, to his nephew, a junior devil named Wormwood. The *Screwtape Letters* contains some brilliant insights into good and evil human behavior, presented more memorably than would have been possible in conventional sermons.

For example, Screwtape instructs young Wormwood how to lead his “patient” away from a Christian life very gradually by getting him accustomed to small acts or omissions.

“You will say that these are very small sins [Screwtape explains]; and doubtless, like all young tempters, you are anxious to be able to report spectacular wickedness. But do remember, the only thing that matters is the extent to which you separate the man from the Enemy. [The Enemy to Screwtape is, of course, the Lord.] It does not matter how small the sins are [Screwtape continues], provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing. Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.” 2

There is something biblical in C. S. Lewis’s technique of using the wiles of Satan as a setting for teaching the truths of God. The Book of Job presents its teachings in this manner. I will employ this same technique in my discussion of why gambling is morally wrong. I will suggest how Satan and his tempters can use gambling to lead us away from actions and attitudes that our Father in Heaven has commanded us to follow.

Jesus taught us to give. He will even test our willingness to sacrifice all that we have in service to Him and to our fellowmen. Satan, the adversary, teaches men to take—forcibly if necessary, deviously if feasible, continuously if possible. Whatever encourages men to take from one another without giving value in return serves the cause of Satan.

Gambling is a game of chance that takes without giving value in return. Gambling puts money or other things of value into a pool and then redistributes it on the basis of a roll of the dice, a spin of the wheel, or a drawing of a number. Nothing of value is produced in the process.

What does gambling do to its participants? The attitude of taking something from someone else in order to enhance our own position—the essence of gambling—leads us away from the giving path of Christ and toward the taking path of the adversary. The act of taking or trying to take something from someone else without giving value in return is destructive of spiritual sensitivities.

Do these degrading effects apply to such seemingly innocent and trivial acts as buying a lottery ticket or giving political support to a state-sponsored lottery so that others can do so? What do you think? Remember Screwtape’s observation that “the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope.” As Nephi foresaw, in the last days, “there shall also be many which shall say: Eat, drink, and be merry; nevertheless, fear God—he will justify in committing a little sin; ... there is no harm in this.” (2 Ne. 28:8.) But according to the prophets of

ancient and modern times, “the Lord cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance.” (D&C 1:31; see also Lev. 5:17; Alma 45:16.)

More than sixty years ago, President Heber J. Grant and his counselors, the First Presidency of that day, declared:

“The Church has been and now is unalterably opposed to gambling in any form whatever. It is opposed to any game of chance, occupation, or so-called business, which takes money from the person who may be possessed of it without giving value received in return. It is opposed to all practices the tendency of which is to ... degrade or weaken the high moral standard which the members of the Church, and our community at large, have always maintained.” 3

A generation earlier, President Joseph F. Smith had stated:

“The Church does not approve of gambling but strongly condemns it as morally wrong, and classes also with this gambling, games of chance and lottery, of all kinds, and earnestly disapproves of any of its members engaging therein.” 4

Many other Christian leaders have branded gambling as a moral evil because it leads its participants away from the behavior and attitudes taught by Jesus Christ. A Methodist minister, the Reverend Lycurgas M. Starkey, Jr., asked this question: “Can [a Christian] honestly use his gifts in gambling when his winnings are gained at the expense of another’s losing?” He answered his question as follows:

“The good Christian’s love of neighbor will stand against every practice which hinders the growth of the human spirit toward the likeness of Christ or which breaks down the structures of justice in society. The Christian will himself refrain from gambling and from publicly endorsing it in any form, realizing that gambling is detrimental to the purpose of life as revealed in Jesus Christ.” 5

A thousand Christian and Jewish sermons testify that greed and covetousness are contrary to God’s will for his children. Gambling promotes these evils. Ten times that many sermons elaborate the Savior’s Golden Rule. Gambling, the philosophy and practice of taking, is the polar opposite of the Golden Rule.

In The Screwtape Letters the senior devil instructs his apprentice to persuade the “patient” to concentrate on his own needs and desires and to ignore the effects on others. Gambling is an ideal technique since the participant inevitably considers only his own prospects of winning. The usual news coverage reinforces that attitude. It tells only of the winners. All are encouraged to ignore

the reality that the winner has been enriched at the expense of a multitude of losers. In lotteries, fewer than 1 in 1,000 wins anything. What of the effect on 999 losers?

A related technique of the adversary is to get people to focus so intently on the desirability of ends that they ignore the morality of means. Screwtape and his helpers could undercut the moral base of an entire society if they could just persuade citizens, bit by bit, to ignore or justify immoral means on the basis that the ends are good.

Like so many other sins, a state-sponsored lottery is sugar-coated with the phony sweetness of a good cause. We hear proposals to use state-sponsored gambling as a solution to financial crises in state government. These proposals invite us to focus on the desirability of additional funding and of needed relief for hard-pressed taxpayers and to ignore the costs of gambling. There are moral costs to the participants, and, as I will point out later, there are also financial costs in this means of raising money.

Gambling tends to corrupt its participants. Its philosophy of something for nothing undermines the virtues of work, industry, thrift, and service to others. The seductive lure of a huge possible windfall for a small "investment" encourages participants to gamble with funds needed for other purposes, even the basics of food and housing. Gamblers commonly deprive themselves, they often impoverish their families, and they sometimes steal from others to finance their indulgence. We are all familiar with cases in which trusted employees have stolen from their employers, bringing tragedy upon themselves and their families. All too often this ruinous sequence is traceable to a desperate attempt to pay gambling debts or to finance further indulgence.

If Screwtape were instructing young tempters in an advanced course, which went beyond temptations for an individual patient and instructed in methods that bear on large numbers of people, he would include three influences:

First, an effective way to corrupt morals on a large scale is to persuade huge numbers of persons to try some relatively harmless behavior that will prove to be addictive to some of them. Once the potential addicts can be identified, junior tempters like Wormwood can single them out for special attention, encouraging them to continue their indulgence until they are securely hooked. For reasons we do not understand, some persons lack the control mechanism that allows them to try something and then leave it alone. Some are susceptible to addictions to tobacco, others to alcohol or other drugs, and some can be addicted to gambling. For the susceptible, what looks like a harmless

experiment actually chains them to an indulgence by bonds that seem too strong to break.

If losing a portion of our will pleases the adversary—and it must, since freedom to choose is God-given—then few pastimes will please him more or serve his ends more effectively than those seemingly harmless activities that prove to be addictive to some.

Second, Screwtape’s advanced course would teach that where possible the senior tempter should magnify the impact of his work by encouraging “patients” to indulge in pastimes that are both spiritually degrading and public. This is especially effective for pastimes that can be made to appear recreational, stylish, and fun. Screwtape would cite the familiar television beer commercials as a model for this method. A quiet bet between friends, or even the surreptitious purchase of a lottery ticket, is never as useful to the adversary’s cause as gambling at casinos and racetracks. Highly visible public gambling enhances the impression of recreation and assists in recruiting new participants. Participation in this kind of gambling also increases the likelihood that the tempters will be able to expose their “patients” to other degrading influences like alcohol and prostitution, which they always seem to have in close proximity to places of public gambling.

Third, if a senior devil like Screwtape sought to weaken the productive basis of an entire society, he could not do better than to try to interest its citizens in spending their productive or leisure time in gambling. Whether occupation or pastime, gambling adds no goods or services to the productive base of the society and it contributes nothing to the physical, emotional, or social well-being of its participants.

I conclude my discussion of the moral evils of gambling with these words of Richard L. Evans:

“The spirit of gambling is a progressive thing. Usually it begins modestly; and then, like many other hazardous habits, it often grows beyond control. At best it wastes time and produces nothing. At worst it becomes a ruinous obsession and fosters false living by encouraging the futile belief that we can continually get something for nothing.” 6

Gambling is obviously an effective instrument for opposing the work of God. No wonder the prophets have opposed it vigorously.

Gambling—Politically Unwise

Gambling is also bad political policy. Solely in terms of its effects on society and government, a law that permits gambling is hard to justify, and a law that sponsors or promotes gambling is a sure loser.

It should not be surprising that many of the public policy arguments against gambling are mirror images of the moral and religious considerations just reviewed. The moral codes of religion are rooted in our Creator's teachings of how his children should live to be happy, prosperous, and at peace. A religious and moral person is generally a good neighbor and a good citizen. The encouragement of moral behavior by citizens is generally good public policy.

Gambling Undercuts Productivity and Encourages Crime. The first public policy argument against gambling concerns productivity. Columnist George F. Will explained it this way:

“Gambling is debased speculation, a lust for sudden wealth that is not connected with the process of making society more productive of goods and services. Government support of gambling gives a legitimizing imprimatur to the pursuit of wealth without work.” 7

In the words of Governor Bob Graham of Florida, “What the lottery says about success is the wrong message. What it says is that you don't have to work hard, you don't have to try to improve yourself. All you have to do is just take your roll of the dice.” 8

A Catholic priest, Monsignor Joseph Dunne, deplores what the lottery teaches children: “Why should they get an education when with a little bit of luck they can win a bundle of money for life? That's what lotteries are doing to our youth.” 9

The philosophy of something for nothing or something for far less than it is worth is at the root of a multitude of crimes: theft, robbery, looting, embezzlement, fraud, and many other kinds of plunder. By nourishing and legitimating that philosophy, gambling is a threat to the prosperity and peace of any nation.

Publicly Sponsored Gambling Is Dangerous Because It Becomes Addictive to the Body Politic, Which Then Preys upon Its Citizens. Gambling is especially pernicious when it is administered by government or when government relies on it as a substantial source of public revenue. In times when a government's appetite for taxes seems insatiable, government officials who depend on gambling to finance a share of the public budget have a strong temptation to promote gambling and to protect it from opposition.

Speaking of New York State's recent legalization of gambling, the editor of the Saturday Review described the state's role in these words:

"The first thing that is obvious is that New York State itself has become a predator in a way that the Mafia could never hope to match. What was intended as a plan to control gambling has become a high-powered device to promote it. The people who can least afford to take chances with their money are not only not dissuaded from gambling but are actually being cajoled into it by the state. Millions of dollars are being spent by New York State on lavish advertising on television, on radio, in buses, and on billboards. At least the Mafia was never able publicly to glorify and extol gambling with taxpayer money. And the number of poor people who were hurt by gambling under the Mafia is minuscule compared to the number who now lose money on horses with the urgent blessings of New York State." 10

As George Will observed, "Such advertising is apt to be especially effective, and cruel, among people whose tribulations make them susceptible to dreams of sudden relief." 11

Senator David Durenberger said this:

"You can't run a successful lottery by telling the whole truth. You need hard-sell promotion, often vague and misleading about the odds and the prizes. That enterprise of parting the sucker from his dollar is questionable enough in the free marketplace; it's no business for a state or federal government whose purpose is to serve and protect the people." 12

Gambling Is a Costly Way To Raise Revenue for Public Purposes. As a Newsweek business section writer noted: "The strongest case against lotteries may simply be that they are inefficient." 13

Most methods of state taxation cost only one to two cents to bring in each dollar of revenue. In contrast, between sixty and seventy-five cents of every dollar spent on a lottery ticket goes to operating expenses and prizes. 14 Would knowledgeable citizens tolerate a government revenue program that collected a dollar and only turned twenty-five to forty cents into the public treasury? Such an enterprise should be rejected as an unacceptably costly way to raise revenue.

Gambling Is an Unfair Way To Raise Revenue for Public Purposes. In the words of former Florida Governor Reuben Askew, the lottery is "the worst form of taxation ever invented." 15 This is because the poor pay a much higher

proportion of their income than the rich. Economists describe this kind of tax as highly regressive. Writing in the National Tax Journal, one economist stated that most forms of gambling, including state lotteries and numbers games, turn out to be “two to three times more regressive than sales taxes.” 16 The Salt Lake Tribune editorialized this point as follows:

“Because of their get-rich-quick appeal, lotteries are apt to attract those bettors least able to afford such wagering. State and local governments ought not be the proprietor of any practice which encourages the poor to become poorer.” 17

An official with a firm that markets lottery products told a trade audience that the typical player of a numbers game is a laborer or service worker who is male, nonwhite, with less than an eighth-grade education. 18 Scholarly studies confirm that lotteries draw their revenues from the poor and disadvantaged. And the revenues are substantial. In 1985 the Washington, D.C., lottery took in an average of \$176 for every man, woman, and child in that district. 19

Gambling Increases Government Expenditures. The effects of gambling impose increased government expenditures for social welfare and law enforcement. Some of these expenditures concern compulsive gambling, a disease as serious for its victims and their families as alcohol or drug addiction. The New York Times states that New York, Maryland, Connecticut, and other Eastern states are now finding it necessary to fund expensive governmental programs to rehabilitate compulsive gamblers. 20 Dr. Robert L. Custer, one of the United States’ leading authorities on gambling problems, estimates that there are at least two million compulsive gamblers in the nation today. Other estimates go as high as eight million. 21

Compulsive gambling also imposes a heavy cost in law enforcement. According to one expert, more than 80 percent of the compulsive gamblers who eventually sought help admitted that in pursuing their addiction they had committed felony crimes, usually against banks or other businesses. The American Insurance Institute has estimated that “as many as 40 percent of all ‘white-collar crimes’ have compulsive gambling as their cause.” 22

The social effects of gambling have been noted throughout history. After a period in which lotteries were common in England, a Parliamentary Committee described their effects in 1808. They reported people who had lived in comfort and respectability being reduced to poverty and distress; domestic quarrels, assaults, and the ruin of family peace; fathers deserting their families, mothers neglecting their children, wives robbing their husbands of the earnings of months and years, and people pawning clothing, beds, and wedding rings in

order to indulge in speculation. “In other cases,” the committee reported, “children had robbed their parents, servants their masters; suicides had been committed, and almost every crime that can be imagined had been occasioned, either directly or indirectly, through the baneful influence of lotteries.” 23 England abolished lotteries a few years later.

In the United States, there was a public revulsion against lotteries, including state-sponsored lotteries, a generation later. The constitutional provisions that still forbid lotteries in some states are a product of that revulsion. Governor Thomas E. Dewey of New York State summarized the United States’ experience as follows:

“The entire history of legalized gambling in this country and abroad shows that it has brought nothing but poverty, crime and corruption, demoralization of moral and ethical standards, and ultimately lower living standards and misery for all the people.” 24

State Lotteries Encourage Citizens to Take Up Gambling. A state lottery encourages many non-gamblers to take up gambling. Its goal, as explained by an official of the Public Gaming Research Institute, “is to get lots of people to play a little bit.” 25 That is what happens. Like a virus, official sponsorship spreads gambling like an epidemic. A Los Angeles Times survey revealed that five out of six players in the new California lottery had not played other gambling games. 26 Similarly, a six-month county-wide study conducted in 1979 by the Delaware Council on Gambling Problems showed that more than half of the “regular” lottery players (those who bet three or more times per week) had never gambled before legalized lotteries became available. 27

Advocates of legalized gambling argue that their games will eliminate illegal gambling, but there is no evidence that this has occurred. Instead, legalized gambling wins new participants, which expands the market and the potential revenues of illegal gambling. And illegal gambling and the drug traffic provide the financial underpinning of organized crime, with all of its destructive effects on the integrity and effectiveness of law enforcement personnel.

State Lotteries Provide Only a Small Percentage of Government Revenues. State lotteries do not fulfill their claims of providing significant financial relief to the states who are persuaded to adopt them. The largest proportion of state and local revenues obtained from lotteries are 2 to 3 percent in Maryland and New Jersey. 28 More typical for small states are the less than 1 percent figures received in Rhode Island and Vermont. 29

Even when local revenues are excluded from the base, there wasn't a single state where lottery revenues amounted to as much as 6 percent of total revenues, according to 1985 figures from the National Conference of State Legislatures. 30

California's lottery profits will be used entirely for education, but they will add only \$187 to the average per pupil expenditures of \$3,573, 31 an increase of only 5 percent. That kind of increase is not worth the costs associated with this morally tainted tax.

State Lotteries Benefit the Wrong Parties. The only beneficiaries of a state lottery are the businesses that sell the specialized products and services used in lotteries. Those businesses are behind the campaigns to adopt them. A study of contributions to the Florida lottery campaign showed that 84 percent came from businesses that stood to benefit from the lottery—primarily gambling suppliers and convenience stores. 32 The same pattern is emerging in Idaho, where a gambling supplier is wooing state legislators with extravagant promises of the revenues that can be obtained by means of a state lottery. 33

State-sponsored lotteries are a good news/bad news proposition. The good news is for a handful of businesses that are sure to profit by it, and for professional gamblers and the crime syndicate that will benefit from having their most profitable enterprise promoted and legitimized by the state. It is also good news for a tiny number of winners who cannot be predicted in advance but who are sure to be fewer than one in a thousand of those who participate.

The bad news is for the hundreds of thousands of losers and for the citizens at large. As a method of raising revenue to support any worthy object, a state lottery is the most unfair and expensive form of taxation, and its victims require increased state expenditures for social welfare and law enforcement. In short, the state lottery is costly, ineffective, and unfair.

“Don't Legislate Morality” Is a Superficial Argument. Those who oppose a state-sponsored lottery are often accused of trying to legislate morality. For example, a recent letter to the editor in a Salt Lake City newspaper closed with these assertions:

“The lottery will bring money to the school system and fun and hope into the lives of the players. To those who object, I say don't play. But don't try to legislate my morality.” 34

“Don't legislate morality.” I suppose persons who mouth that familiar slogan think they are saying something profound. In fact, if that is an argument at all,

it is so superficial that an educated person should be ashamed to use it. As should be evident to every thinking person, a high proportion of all legislation has a moral base. That is true of all of the criminal law, most of the laws regulating family relations, businesses, and commercial transactions, many of the laws governing property, and a host of others.

So what does it mean when a person says, “Don’t try to legislate morality?” There is ample room for debate on the wisdom of most legislation, whether it has a moral base or not. Some legislation is unwise or undesirable because it is an excessive interference with liberty or because it will be impossible or expensive to enforce. But the mere statement that we should not legislate morality contributes nothing to reasoned public discourse.

Legal–Moral Objections to State–sponsored Lotteries. I conclude this discussion of public policy arguments against gambling with several moral objections. Law is concerned about morality, and there are serious legal–moral objections to state lotteries. I quote five of these objections from a publication of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Christian Life Commission:

“It is a moral issue when the state decides to derive income from an activity which is a highly regressive form of taxation that affects poor people more extensively than affluent people.

“It is a moral issue when a state decides not only to tolerate gambling but to get in the business of planning games, engaging in promotional activities ... and targeting its citizens through extensive marketing analyses in the hopes of creating new gamblers. ...

“It is a moral issue when a state adopts a form of gambling which in all probability will increase the extent and the amount of illegal gambling.

“It is a moral issue when a state adopts a form of gambling that will draw off large amounts of money, especially from the poor people for whom the state supposedly has a responsibility to provide assistance.

“It is a moral issue when a state engages in naive projections and adopts financial planning that amounts to putting a shoddy patch on a state’s long-term financial problems.” 35

To summarize: that governments would tolerate gambling is regrettable; that governments would promote gambling is reprehensible.

So what should Latter-day Saints do about gambling? They should not participate in any way, and they should encourage others, especially their family members, not to participate.

What should Latter-day Saints do about state-sponsored lotteries, present or proposed? The First Presidency answered that question in their statement last fall:

“We urge members of the Church to join with others with similar concerns in opposing the legalization and government sponsorship of lotteries.” 36

If members of our Church do not oppose immoral and pernicious practices, who will? If not now, when? We can make a difference! May God help us to do so.

Gospel topic: gambling

Notes

1. Letter of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 26 Sept. 1986.
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3. *Improvement Era*, Sept. 1926, p. 1100.
4. *Improvement Era*, Aug. 1908, p. 807.
5. Lycurgas M. Starkey, Jr., “Christians and the Gambling Mania,” in *Gambling*, ed. Robert D. Herman (New York, 1967), pp. 232–33.
6. *Improvement Era*, Dec. 1946, p. 793.
7. *Deseret News*, 21 Oct. 1978, p. S-7.
8. In *The Christian Science Monitor*, 10 July 1985, p. 32.
9. *Gambling and Lotteries*, television documentary produced by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (1986).
10. Norman Cousin, *Saturday Review*, 2 Sept. 1978, p. 48.
11. *Deseret News*, 21 Oct. 1978, p. S-7.

12. Deseret News, 30 June, 1985, p. A-18.
13. Newsweek, 13 June 1983, p. 68.
14. Newsweek, 13 June 1983, p. 68; see also "Lotteries Made 22 States \$3.78 Richer," USA Today, 29 Apr. 1986.
15. Gambling and Lotteries.
16. National Tax Journal, 30:22-29 (Mar. 1977).
17. Salt Lake Tribune, 1 Dec. 1985, p. A-16.
18. Daniel W. Bower, "Video Lottery Devices: A New Generation of Players," Fourth Annual Gaming Conference and International Gaming Congress (Philadelphia: Laventhol and Horwath, 1982), pp. 23-24.
19. Salt Lake Tribune, 6 July 1986, p. A-13.
20. New York Times, 29 Dec. 1981, p. A-12.
21. Christian Science Monitor, 12 July 1985, pp. 3-4.
22. State Legislatures, Oct. 1981, p. 20.
23. In Francis Emmett Williams, Lotteries, Laws and Morals (New York, 1958), pp. 26-27, 43-44.
24. As quoted by Starkey, in Gambling, p. 232.
25. "22 States Find Their Lotteries Are Safe Bets," USA Today, 29 Apr. 1986.
26. Salt Lake Tribune, 6 July 1986, p. A-13.
27. Impact of State-Sponsored Gambling on the Community, a six-month study conducted in 1979 in New Castle County, Delaware by the Delaware Council on Gambling Problems.
28. State Operated Lotteries, pamphlet (Nashville, Tenn.: Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, Feb. 1985), p. 6.
29. Salt Lake Tribune, 6 July 1986, p. A-13.

30. Steven Gold of The National Conference of State Legislatures, quoted by Richard Benedetto, "22 States Find Their Lotteries Are Safe Bets," USA Today, 29 Apr. 1986.
31. Salt Lake Tribune, 6 July 1986, p. A-13.
32. Greg Warner, Florida Baptist Witness, 28 Aug. 1986, p. 4.
33. Kevin Richert, The Idaho State Journal, 27 Apr. 1986, p. 4.
34. Deseret News, 2 Dec. 1986, p. A-9.
35. State Operated Lotteries, p. 7.
36. Letter of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 26 Sept. 1986.