

Legalized Gambling

Promised Gain Comes With Great Pain

A Statement from the Office of the President

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A number of weeks ago, my office received correspondence from one of our nation's congressmen that contained very sobering information about gambling. We need to be clear that it is not possible, on the basis of God's Word, to say that each and every instance of gambling is sinful. It is true however that every act of gambling does present a tremendous opportunity for temptation. What is clear is that legalized gambling is increasing in popularity across our nation. It rests on the promise of gain but comes at the cost of considerable pain to our society.

The National Gambling Impact Study Commission released a report, following a two year study of gambling in America. It reveals some very troubling facts about gambling's impact on the poor and those who become addicted to gambling. The findings were alarming enough for a majority of the commission to call for a "pause" or moratorium on further gambling expansion in America to give time to dig deeper into its effects.

Americans now wager about \$600 billion a year, which is more than is spent on groceries! In 1992, it was \$329 billion a year. In 1974, it was just \$17 billion. That is a staggering increase of 3,500 percent over 25 years! And the gambling commission noted in its report that "with little stretch of the imagination, it is conceivable that, some day, gambling enterprises may be franchised and, at least, in parts of the country, become as common as fast food outlets are today." Gambling today is not simply harmless family entertainment, as advertising for commercial and state-sponsored gambling seems to indicate. Millions of people have become addicted to gambling and have brought untold suffering on themselves and their families.

We now know some very real and troubling facts about gambling and addiction. According to the gambling commission report: "in 1997 . . . the Harvard Medical School Division on Addictions . . . estimated at that time that there were 7.5 million American adult problem and pathological gamblers and 7.9 million American adolescent problem and pathological gambles."

That is more than 1.5 million people having difficulty with gambling and more than half of them are children. This means that our nation's youth is disproportionately impacted by gambling.

Or, to put it another way, there are currently more adult and adolescent problem and pathological gamblers in America than people residing in New York City. There are six times as many adolescent problem or pathological gamblers in America than men and women actively serving in our combined armed forces—the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines and Coast Guard.

The statistics do not tell the whole story. According to the report, the impact of human suffering is truly immeasurable. For example, in "Atlantic City, the Commission heard about a 16-year-old boy who attempted suicide after losing \$6,000 on a lottery." Many children are hurt, even if they themselves do not have a gambling problem. Quite often they are the victims of addicted parents or guardians. "The Commission heard testimony of numerous cases in which parents or a caretaker locked children in cars for an extended period of time while they gambled. In at least two cases, the children died."

When it comes to the poor and gambling, the commission found that "the education category with the highest per capita spending includes those who did not complete high school. . . . College graduates have the lowest. With respect to household income. . . those with incomes less than \$50,000 spend more than others, and the lower-income categories have the highest per capita spending." Legalized gambling victimizes the poor and preys on our society's weakest members. It entices those who are the most desperate with the offer of a way to achieve wealth and prosperity. It tempts those who are at the most vulnerable point, and this is truly disturbing. A nation such as ours cannot, and must not, put the interest of industrialized gambling above the need and concern that we must have for the poor. Surely, it is not in the best interest of our nation to do so.

The commission reported "a further criticism is that, in pursuit of revenues, some lotteries have employed overly aggressive and even deceptive advertising and other marketing methods. Lottery advertising has advanced in recent years from simple public-service-announcement-type ads to sophisticated marketing tools. Critics charge that they are intentionally misleading, especially regarding such matters as the minuscule odds of winning the various jackpots. (As an agency of government, lotteries are not subject to federal "Truth in advertising" standards). State-sponsored lotteries are perhaps the most harmful because they project an image legitimizing gambling and ultimately help nurture a gambling culture among our children—the next generation of gamblers."

I would simply ask that all church workers of our Synod, and our congregation's lay leaders, consider how best to communicate the profoundly harmful impact that state-sponsored and legalized gambling is having on our nation and on our communities. The problems associated with gambling will only grow worse as gambling continues to gain a foothold in our communities and becomes more commonplace across our nation. We Lutherans know that it is our duty to avoid stealing, but in so doing also to do whatever we can to help our neighbor to improve and protect his property and business. Gambling is one area where, as Christian citizens, we can work to improve a situation so harmful to the poor and to families devastated by a family member caught up in a gambling addiction.