**The Lottery: A Stupid Tax on Covetousness**

 *by Harry Osborne*

The billboards on the highway – the displays at the convenience stores – the commercials on television – the reminders have become so numerous that they are inescapable in our daily lives. Yet, we rarely think about it unless the jackpot gets high enough to make the news — the lottery. Unless you escaped to an alternate reality last week, you were inundated with stories about the buying fever of those playing the billion plus dollar lottery last Wednesday. The forecast $1.5 billion dollar jackpot was enough to send our materialistic society into a feeding frenzy! Amid all of the wide-eyed lust for a $1.5 billion windfall for “just a $2.00 ticket,” let us rationally examine the facts.

A reported $2.6 billion had been spent on lottery tickets from the time of the last winning lottery in November 2015 through the drawing on January 9, 2016 – the 19th in a row without a winner. In addition to that amount, another 1.2 billion tickets were sold for last Wednesday’s drawing. Many of those tickets were the $3.00 variety to multiply the winnings below the jackpot, but we will just consider the $2.00 amount for the jackpot itself. Sales of the tickets were so high that the actual payout was $1.6 billion. Now. Let’s do the math. The total payout was still less than 1/3 of the amount paid for tickets. Who really won from the lottery? The real answer is not the 3 individuals who split the “jackpot,” but the conglomerate of state governments that took over twice that amount! (By the way, do you hear any discussion of how many millions of people had to be losers so that those three individuals could get their money?) Without any complaint or question, the government did the very thing they would have arrested and imprisoned others for doing a few years ago. State governments are now raising funds by mafia methods! Rather than citizens being enraged by such a racket, they are praising it and gladly handling their money to government bookie! Call it what you will, but I call it the “Stupid Tax.”

The word "gamble" is sometimes used so loosely that it may be good for us to define the word before we begin and so limit the scope of our study. We will discuss this word in the sense of "to stake or risk money, etc., in the hope of great gain in a game in which success is solely dependent on chance" (see *Webster* and *Oxford American Dictionary*). Further, when that gain takes place, it is at the expense of one or more who lose money without receiving any legitimate benefit or service of commerce.

We are not talking about the loose sense in which the word "gamble" is sometimes used. When one speaks of the farmer's craft as a "gamble," the word is used to mean the same thing as "risk." Risk is involved in any commercial undertaking where a legitimate benefit or service is exchanged for money or the expectation of gain. The Bible clearly approves of this kind of labor involving risk.

James notes the farmer must wait for the rain (clearly implying a risk) in hopes of ultimately making a crop. "See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain" (James 5:7). Other passages clearly show that God approves the acceptance of risk in the process of legitimate labor to make a profit by the work done. Please note also that no other person loses money without benefit for the farmer to gain.

The word "gamble" is also used in that loose sense when referring to an investment whether in the stock market, bonds or some other commercial arrangement. However, we are not using the word in that sense either. In an investment, regardless of the risk, something of value is exchanged for the buyer's money in an effort to cause ***both*** parties to gain. Jesus showed approval for gain by investment.

Jesus told the parable of the talents in which a man of wealth left three stewards in charge of differing amounts of money (5 talents, 2 talents and 1 talent) expecting them to make a profit in commercial enterprise. Two showed a profit with the master's investment upon his return, but one did not because of his failure to attempt any business. The master said the steward should have at least drawn interest on his money (Matthew 25:14-30). True, the primary purpose is not to teach on proper commerce, but the Lord would not use an inherently evil enterprise to teach a spiritual truth about His actions in Judgment.

"Gambling" such as the lottery, casino games and bingo is the topic for this study. Such games of chance do not seek gain through the three means approved in the Bible: wages of labor, profits of investment or free-will gifts. Gain in gambling is never intended to be experienced by all parties as is the case in legitimate commerce. Gain in gambling can only come at the expense of others.

The Bible has a term that describes the action of gambling. The word is "covetousness." This action is not seen as commendable and worthy of state sponsorship in God's word. To the contrary, it is condemned! A brief look at the company of sins it keeps quickly shows God's view of it (Ephesians 5:3-5; Mark 7:21-23; Luke 12:15). This conduct is the very opposite of that commanded by the Lord in our dealings with others. He said, "And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise" (Luke 6:31). Is that what the gambler tries to do? Obviously not! Thus, the gambler stands condemned for his or her part in such action.

However, the individual gambler is not the only one condemned. The casino, bookmaker or other providers of organized gambling are condemned by the same principle. They set the games and the odds in such a way that the organizer is guaranteed over 50% of the total amount wagered. State lotteries involve the government in this vice as the largest offender. Typically, the lotteries are intended to return less than half of the revenue received. In other words, the states set up the system to insure they will take the majority of the money received while they try to convince the gambler that he can become rich by the lottery. The lottery advertisements appeal to people's greed for quick and easy riches. The fact is that the odds of winning a million dollars is far less than the odds of one getting struck by lightning (400,000 to 1). In the case of last Wednesday’s drawing, the chances were **less than the same person getting struck twice by lightning**! It was even less than one getting struck by an asteroid! So add lying, or at least deception, to the list of those things produced by the lottery. What a scam! It should be called "robbery," not "lottery." One who believes the false promise of gain needs to seriously consider his mental acuity as well.

Think about the place of government ordained by God and it really boils down to something very simple (Romans 13:1-7). Does God desire the government that He ordained as “a minister of God for good” to raise money through the same means that organized crime has for years? Or does He expect a higher standard from those whom He authorized to praise good and avenge evil? That is the bottom line! When we seek for God's answer to the question, we will see that gambling is not an effort approved by God for gamblers or the bookmaker -- whether organized by the Mafia or the government. Dear brother or sister, do not join in such foolish ungodliness!