

# How Christians can think about the epidemic of online gambling and sports betting

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I am an avid college basketball fan. During my college years at the University of Tennessee, our basketball program took major steps forward in being competitive each year, routinely making the NCAA tournament. I follow my team and interact with various sports accounts on social media, which has put me in the target audience for many marketers including most sports betting apps and other forms of online gambling. These companies routinely target younger to middle-aged men, especially those who show interest in sports. I can't go an hour or two online without seeing multiple ads for sports gambling, and even more so during March Madness. And due to the power of algorithms and digital marketing, the more I research this subject (and even you simply reading this type of article) will increase the likelihood of seeing gambling ads across the internet and social media platforms.

In recent years, there has been an explosion of online gambling especially related to sports. Whether professional sports like football, soccer, and basketball or collegiate sports including the current NCAA basketball tournaments, many of us are inundated with countless advertisements about making a quick buck or even betting on our team to win it all. Most of these ads are tailored to our favorite teams, often using images from high-profile games with the allure of "instant bonuses," free credits, or an easy win. This time of year, online gambling surges leave many in their wake.

According to *The New York Times*, about 30 states plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico currently allow sports gambling either online or in person, which means that over 30% of the population is able to legally bet on March Madness or other sporting events, across sports. These deceptive schemes or forms of "entertainment" can ruin someone's life quickly, particularly those who may be prone to addictions or destructive behavior. They can be devastating and predatory. But how did this explosion in online sports betting become so widespread, and what is the human toll? And how does the Church begin to navigate these complex ethical issues that are plaguing our communities?

## The human toll of gambling

Gambling has become an epidemic around the world in recent decades. It is important to note that gambling is not a new phenomenon or simply related to sports, as this form of entertainment (and addiction) has long been a part of our culture in the U.S., ranging from the allure of Sin City to the lottery in many states across the nation. Due to the digital age, the means have become easier in recent years, and gambling addictions can be assumed as predominant throughout our communities. This is true for about 1-3% of our country's population, which brings the total of those dealing with serious gambling addictions to over

10 million people. Gambling accounts for about \$53 billion of revenue in the U.S. alone, with \$900 million in sports-related gambling in 2019.

And it isn't hard to see the devastating effects of gambling in our communities. Whether it's a neighbor getting \$5 on pump 2 and \$10 worth of scratch-offs or intoxicated casino-goers racking up major tabs with the hopes of striking it big, the house always wins by design. It's clear that gambling is an extremely attractive venture for many as it can bring in desired tax revenue for local governments and be a lucrative business venture. Though if the chances of winning were actually high enough for most to win, then gambling wouldn't be such a profitable business model. Online gambling companies, especially those connected to sports, know they will draw a major profit as most business leaders will never willingly put themselves at great risk of massive financial loss even if the public suffers as a result of their business.

Sports gambling exploded after the 2018 Supreme Court decision to strike down the *Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act (PASPA)*, which opened the door to online sports betting across 21 states. PASPA was a 1992 federal law signed by then President George H.W. Bush, which prohibited states from offering sports gambling, with very few exceptions. The act did not make sports gambling itself a federal crime, but instead allowed the "Attorney General, as well as professional and amateur sports organizations, to bring civil actions to enjoin violations." While many states allowed casinos, racetracks, and other forms of gambling prior to this decision, this case brought by the State of New Jersey allowed for sports gambling to be a major fixture in these institutions including online or app-based sports gambling which have become especially prominent during playoffs, tournaments, and large sporting events.

Given the ubiquity of sports betting in our digital society, it is likely that you or someone you know well is gambling or is struggling with addictive behavior. In light of the addictive and predatory nature of gambling, how should the Church respond to this growing epidemic in light of the biblical ethic?

## **The Church and the common good**

The Christian ethic reminds us of some core truths that apply in conversations about gambling and addiction. First and foremost, we are each called to live righteous and God-honoring lives, knowing that everything we have is from God himself (1 Cor 4:7). Among Christians, it can be tempting to simply give God "his portion" of our income and fail to see that all the rest is a gift from God, too. We are called to wisely steward these gifts as we seek to love God and love our neighbor (Mark 12:29-31). This all comes down to the perennial question of ethics: Just because we *can* do something, does that mean we *should*?

It is important to note here that God is the creator of the entire universe, and he also created each of us in his image whether or not we choose to fulfill our purpose as his image-bearers. It may be one thing to participate in a company tournament raffle or to have a friendly wager between friends, but online gambling and app-based sports betting is a completely different situation especially if one is flippant about their stewardship of God's provisions.

Often gambling is done where one sacrifices their necessities or provision with the hopes of winning big.

Another angle that is not often discussed in light of gambling are the social effects of our sin, greed, and pride. Like the man who gets \$5 of gas and \$10 of scratch-offs, the allure of gambling can be used to take advantage of certain segments of our neighbors and communities. As I mentioned above, gambling is a predatory practice — exploiting some for the benefit of others. An important question for all of us to ask is how does one's participation in this type of industry, even if it is done without malicious motives, encourage or sustain these predatory practices throughout our society? Does your involvement prop up this business model that is known to exploit the weaknesses of others and dehumanize them in the process?

Similar to how payday lending is predatory with astronomically high interest rates and short loan periods, online gambling is designed to line the pockets of the company rather than to promote the common good rooted in the dignity of all people. Taking advantage of our fellow image-bearers, especially in terms of financial provisions and their economic future through highly addictive means like contemporary sports gambling apps, is morally incongruent with the biblical ethic as it is a form of stealing and being deluded by the love of money (Ex. 20:17; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; 1 Tim. 6:10). It does not live up to the standard which Christ gave us to “love our neighbor as ourselves” (Mark 12:31). Gambling also leads to countless other social ills, including the breakdown of families, other highly addictive behaviors, loss of homes and jobs, and extreme financial peril.

Gambling, including the meteoric rise of sports betting, often leads to encouraging vice in our society rather than virtuous and wise behaviors. It is important for the Church to remember that all policies, laws, and practices are inherently moral by nature as they encourage or discourage certain behaviors. As many in our communities are lured in by the delusions of quick cash, massive payouts, and a long list of ‘what-ifs’, the Church must be ready to care for and love those who are seeking to break these addictions. Far from being an isolated and simple issue, gambling has unfortunately become a mainstay in our society, especially in this digital age.