



Should a Christian Play the Lottery?

Brownsburg Church of Christ

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AM Assembly



Introduction:

In 1989, Indiana kicked off the Hoosier Lottery. Listen to what it says on their website:

Over the years, tickets from the Hoosier Lottery have accomplished some pretty amazing things. For starters, they've made lucky winners very happy. But that's only the beginning. They've also significantly lowered excise taxes for Hoosier citizens, bolstered pension and disability funds for Hoosier police and firefighters, and helped to finance a number of other projects for the State of Indiana.

That's why, for the citizens of Indiana, every ticket we sell is a winner. It's been that way from the start.¹

Every ticket is a winner because the money that no one wins goes to good causes. I find it interesting that this is the only tax people pay and think of themselves as winners when the government takes their money. But that aside, listen to what else is said on another page of their website.

The Hoosier Lottery is committed to gambling responsibility and assisting players with finding gambling addiction resources.²

I daresay we won't find a statement like this on any government page about paying taxes responsibly or having to help problem taxpayers. That is the mantra today. "The lottery is for a good cause. As long as people play responsibly, it is a great form of entertainment." That is already society's view. More and more, it is becoming the "Christian" view. We must not allow the world's view to become ours by default. Rather, we must carefully study the Scriptures and allow them to equip us for every good work (**II Timothy 3:16-17**).

I know the very dangerous ground upon which I am walking. Amazingly enough, issues surrounding activities like the lottery have become a hotbed for heated discussions and even division. Some have already come to conclusions that they have decided no amount of Bible discussion will change. There are some who are so convinced that the lottery is wrong that even if I produced a verse that literally said, "Thou shalt play the Hoosier Lottery," it would not faze them a bit. On the other hand, there are some who have become so convinced that the lottery is harmless that even if I produced a verse that literally said, "Thou shalt not play the Hoosier Lottery," they would not be fazed either. My only desire in this lesson is to open our hearts and minds to the life-changing power of the Scriptures. What kind of people are we Christians supposed to be? What should we do with the lottery?

Discussion:

I. What is the lottery?

- A. The Indiana government wants to build Indiana's infrastructure and provide retirement for deserving state employees, including teachers, firefighters, and policemen. Present taxes don't cover what is necessary. Their first thought is, "We can raise taxes. The people of Indiana will go for that. We can tell them it is for a good cause and folks will pay the increased taxes without complaint." Then one lawmaker calls the rest to reality and says, "Don't count on it." How many of us would have voted yes for a tax increase no matter how good the cause? Of course, they could do fundraisers like the schools do and sell cookies or stationery. The overhead is way too high. It would take too much work to make the necessary money. They could just ask for donations. No doubt some wealthy Hoosiers, who have soft spots in their heart for state workers and Indiana infrastructure, would donate some. But the ability to sustain the necessary funds over the long haul with free-will gifts is probably not there.
- B. What is the answer? "We will entice the Indiana populace to give us money with the chance to win large sums of money themselves." Where will they get the money to pay the winners? They will get it from all the other players. Of course, they will skim money off the top for overhead and for the state-funded programs, but the rest of our neighboring Hoosiers' money is ours, if we win.
- C. If you think about it, whoever came up with the lottery is a genius. He knew full well Hoosiers did not want to part with their money, even for such good causes like teacher, policemen, and firefighter retirement. Therefore, he could not just tax us or ask us for donations. But, if he offered us the opportunity to win big,

¹ <http://www.hoosierlottery.com/about-us/lottery-history>

² <http://www.hoosierlottery.com/about-us/problem-gambling>

we would collectively purchase 8.19 million tickets on the very first day.³ What makes the lottery work? Does it work because scratch-off games are so entertaining? Does it work because players are concerned about their retired teachers, police, and firefighters? No, it works because people want money. As “vince jr” (a screen name) wrote to lotterypost.com, “Players want to be winners.”

D. That’s what the lottery is—a game that feeds on our desire to win big. What does the Bible say about that?

II. What does the Bible say about the lottery?

- A. Despite using my computer Bible software to search through 12 different English translations of the Bible, I have not found one passage that uses the word “lottery.” While some people stop there and say, “See, we need to speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where the Bible is silent,” I am not willing to stop there. The Bible never uses the word “lottery,” but it does speak about the system we have described.
- B. Read **I Corinthians 13:4-7**. This is the love we are to have for all men. Jesus even said we are to have this love for our enemies (**Matthew 5:44**). Love, Paul said, does not seek its own. The lottery is a system whereby that is exactly what we do—we seek our own. I want my fellow Hoosiers to put their money in the pot so I can have it. No doubt, I may have visions of generosity sprees with my winnings, but that dream of generosity seems somewhat weak considering the fact that I have to take money from millions of Hoosiers before I will be generous to any of them. When we put our money down on the gas station counter and ask for the lottery ticket, what are we seeking? Our own. We are not loving anyone but ourselves.
- C. Read **I Timothy 6:6-10**. Can we honestly read this passage and say Christians can play the lottery? The whole system works on a cycle of discontent, love for money, and a desire to be rich. All three of these characteristics are condemned by this one passage. The real problem here is that we tend to think in degrees. “As long as I don’t really, really desire to be rich and really, really love money, then I don’t violate this passage.” But that is not what is said. Brethren, let’s be honest. When I buy a lottery ticket, what do I want? I want to win big money. I want to be made rich in an instant. I am feeding my love for money. Someone will say, “But Edwin, we work to make money and look for promotions to make more money, how is that different?” If in your desire to provide for your family (**I Timothy 5:8**), to serve others (**I Peter 4:10**), or pursue your heart’s desire (**Ecclesiastes 11:9-10**) God blesses you with physical wealth, then more power to you. Remember, however, what Paul further said in **I Timothy 6:17-19**. But if you are working because you love money or desire to be rich, then you, like the lottery player, have violated this passage.
- D. Read **Ephesians 5:3-7**. Could there be more powerful teaching against playing the lottery than this passage? Twice this passage condemns covetousness, claiming it is idolatry. Those who covet have no inheritance in God’s kingdom. It concludes by warning us not to let people deceive us with empty words into thinking we are allowed a little covetousness. If we do, God’s wrath will come upon us. Paul did not say if our covetousness becomes idolatrous it is wrong. He said covetousness, any covetousness, is idolatry. Look at the sins with which God ranks it (*e.g.* **Romans 1:28-31**). In fact, according to **I Corinthians 5:11**, congregations are supposed to withdraw from any brother or sister who is covetous. No doubt someone will say, “But Edwin, what if I play the lottery without covetousness?” These are empty words that deceive. The term translated “covet” or “covetousness” in these passages is the Greek word “pleonexia.” According to **Thayer’s Lexicon** the word means “...one eager to have more, especially what belongs to others.” According to **McClintock and Strong**, it means, “...the desire of increasing one’s substance by appropriating that of others.” What is the lottery but a physical activity which exactly parallels the definition covetousness in the Bible? I might as well ask, “What if I covet without covetousness?” What has our state government done but promised us that if we put something into the pot, we might get a whole bunch of our fellow Hoosiers’ money? We offer them nothing for compensation. We render them no services. They are not freely giving it. They don’t want us to have it—they are playing because they want to win what is ours. We are playing to appropriate for ourselves what belongs to others. What am I doing when I buy a lottery ticket? I am acting out the very definition of covetousness.

Conclusion:

Brethren, you tell me, considering these godly principles that describe the character and behavior we Christians are supposed to have, what should we do with the lottery? It should not even be named among us (**Ephesians 5:3**). And if any among us impenitently delve into this covetousness, we, as a congregation, should follow Paul’s directive and withdraw from such a one (**I Corinthians 5:11**).

³ <http://www.hoosierlottery.com/about-us/lottery-history>