

Invisible Prisons: Gambling

Proverbs 13:1-25, 1 Tim 6:6-21

What does it mean to be Australian?

Does it mean we love our sport?

Does it mean we are relaxed and friendly?

Does it mean we are multicultural?

Well here's some shocking news.

It means we're gamblers. More so than any other country on the planet, we are gamblers.

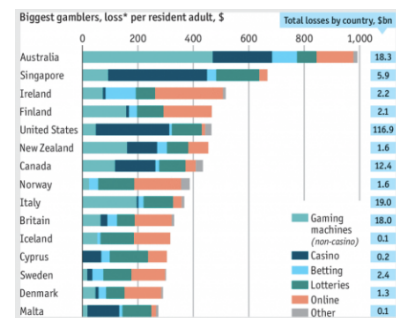
Here's a graph from *The Economist* Magazine.

This graph reveals the average loss per adult for a whole host of nations.

Right at the top, miles a head of our nearest competitor, is Australia.

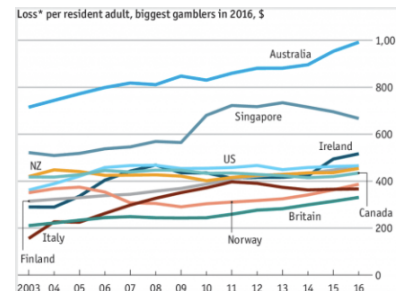
In 2016 we averaged a \$1000 loss per adult in this country.

That's 40% higher than number two on the list which is Singapore.



And we've been number one for a while.

The second graph tells us that for the last 13 years we've been streets ahead of other nations, and the trend is going up. We're losing more as the years progress.



So it's a big thing for our nation,

but here's another worrying fact:

as an ordained minister of ten years standing,

I've only ever come across gambling three times in my pastoral work.

The stats tell us it's happening, but we're not talking about it.

I think we need to talk about it because it's happening and it's damaging!

I'll give you one example from earlier in my career that was quite formative for me.

At a previous church I used to lead a service in a retirement village.

And as we gathered for afternoon tea after the service,

a woman in her 80s told me about her 50 year old son

whose life was a complete mess: unemployed, chronic health issues.

And she mentioned that she was buying lottery tickets

in the hope of winning something that would help her son.

That moment taught me the dangers of making assumptions about gambling.

You might never know or guess who among us is gambling,
you might never know or guess the reasons why they gamble.
It's an invisible prison: you just don't know who's ensnared by this.

The type of prison I want you to think about is a prisoner-of-war camp.
As a kid I used to love watching those old films
where the good guys have to escape from the Nazis.
As a soldier you have to do your best to evade capture in the first place,
and secondly, if you are captured, you have a responsibility to try and escape.
And so first of all we'll think about avoiding capture
and then about how to escape,
and we'll use the Bible to give us a hand in both avoiding and escaping prison.

Now, the Bible doesn't address gambling specifically, but it does talk about money.
And one of the things it impresses upon us is that
there are no short cuts to getting rich.

Our OT reading was from the book of Proverbs,
which has plenty of advice about money, have a listen again to ch 13:11
Dishonest money dwindles away, but whoever gathers money little by little makes it grow.
What's the great hope when you place a bet?
That you'll get the massive windfall!!
But that's not real life! Real life sees wealth being built up bit by bit.
A similar note is struck back in verse 4:
A sluggard's appetite is never filled, but the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied.

Now, it would be a mistake to think that Proverbs is *guaranteeing*
that hard work will make you rich—
there are other verses which explain how easily wealth disappears—
but it is saying that diligence is *more likely* to bring success than a short cut.
Gambling promises quick riches,
but the author of Proverbs has observed a different pattern at work:
it's hard work that tends to bring financial advantage.

Moving to our NT passage and we see another principle emerge,
one of seeking to ***be content with what we have***. 1 Timothy 6:6
But godliness with contentment is great gain. ⁷ For we brought nothing into the world, and
we can take nothing out of it. ⁸ But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.
What might drive someone to take up a chance for easy money?
As we discussed a moment ago,
there are all sorts of reasons why someone might place a bet,
but one big reason could be that we are not satisfied with what we have.

Think about the challenge that's present here in Paul's example,
he says that he is satisfied with food and clothing, the bare necessities.
It seems as if he'd be happy entering the grave with zero financial gain.

We brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it, he says.
And there's a truth to his observation here.
When I was a teenager there was a T-shirt which said
"he who dies with the most toys, still dies!"

And its true! You can't take it with you!

As we learnt last week,
the great heroes of the Bible were focused on the future, and Paul's the same.
Getting ahead in this world is not as important as preparing well for the next.
So if you are tempted to use gambling as a way of getting ahead in this life,
then Paul suggests you might have the wrong idea about what really matters.

In fact, he goes on to say that if you do take short cuts to get ahead
then its likely that you'll end up worse off in the hear and now.

Verse 9 Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish
and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a
root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and
pierced themselves with many griefs.

I mean, Paul could easily be talking about Gambling here, couldn't he?

Gambling's a temptation, it can trap us because of its addictive nature.

It's foolish, casinos and poker machines are designed to take your money,
the house always wins, so it's smart to recognize that;

as an investment strategy, gambling is pretty foolish.

And gambling certainly plunges you into ruin and destruction and grief.

There's an old saying, isnt there: *a Bird in the hand is worth two in the bush*

It's better to hold on to and be content with what you have

rather than to go off chasing something you'll probably not even capture.

So it is with our finances.

The Bible also speaks about ***recognising God as the giver***: skip down to verse 17

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope
in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with
everything for our enjoyment.

Where does gambling put its hope? It's putting your hope in luck, isn't it?

Christian people don't believe in luck,

we believe in God's provision for us,

and so we seek to ask him for what we need.

And he *will* give us what we need.

This is the God who,

in response to our need for the forgiveness of sins, gave us his son.

How will he not give us what we need in *this* life?

You probably know that Star City is located at Pyrmont.

There is no longer any Anglican church building in Pyrmont,

There used to be until the 1960s but it was demolished and never replaced.

So what kind of hope is now set before the people of Pyrmont?

Not the true hope that revealed when a church speaks about God

but the false hope of a cavernous room full of pokies.
Talk about getting things back to front: no church but a casino!

So we have hard work, contentment, God as the giver.
There is one more Biblical theme that's really important,
and we see Paul touch on it in v18
Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.
Paul wants us to be focused on ***what's good for other people.***
Christ's concern for us sent him to the cross, so we must think of others too.
For Paul, this concern leads him to talk about generosity,
but thinking of others leads us to ask some pretty hard questions of gambling.

If you do back a winner, where do the winnings come from?
They come from the losses of others, don't they?
Our success in gambling comes at the expense of others.
Perhaps the winnings we get from gambling
are a form of the dishonest money that's spoken of in Proverbs 13.
Money which has a dark origin and is the cause of someone suffering.

I know there are some people who love to bet as a hobby.
They like the challenge of using their brain to try and pick a winner.
They seek to gamble responsibly, they stick to a budget.
Just like some people spend thousands on a golf membership,
they spend thousands placing bets, and they might even win something back.

The problem is that gambling is not just about you!
It's also about the people you're seeking to take money from!
And so that's why our own discipline in setting boundaries
doesn't really justify our participation.
The fundamental Christian way of thinking is to think of others,
and if we bet without this in mind then we're not thinking as Christian people,
we're not thinking Biblically about what we're doing.

You may have noticed that I haven't tried to define gambling.
I don't find gambling an easy thing to define.
It's kind of like a ferocious monster with a long tail.
The scary end is easy to identify and its dangers are all too real and obvious.
The roulette table where it's high risk, based on luck,
where the winnings are taken from the losers,
and the environment of the casino is designed to help you stay addicted.
We all know, that's gambling!

But the monster has this long tail where it doesn't look as dangerous
and where it's hard to tell if it's still the gambling monster or not.
The school raffle where the winnings are provided by donors, not losers,
and where everyone knows that the proceeds are going to a good cause.

What about “gambling” on the stock market?

If the stock market is gambling then most of us are in trouble
because if you have superannuation, then you’ve got shares!

I think one way forward with all these gray areas

is to ask some questions stemming from our Biblical principles.

Is this a risky short-term strategy? Am I doing this because I’m not content?

I know my own super provider

gives me the option of different share portfolios based on risk.

It’s tempting to go high risk/high gain, but I’ve resisted.

Another question: Am I thinking of others by making this bet?

I remember one holiday down on the south coast,

Jas and I were on holidays at Gerroa, and on the first night we went out to dinner at the Gerroa Beach Fishermans’ Club, some of you may have been there! They had a meat tray raffle. You should have seen these meat trays! If you know anything about the south coast you’ll know about how good their sausages are. I thought to myself, “If I win, this holiday is going to be awesome. Think of the BBQs we’ll be able to have!” And so I bought a ticket. The raffle was drawn for the first meat tray, not my ticket. And so they started selling tickets for the second meat tray, and I bought ten. The second draw was conducted...not my ticket. Not any of my tickets. I kid you not, I had to force myself to stop. I still remember the internal dialogue...
You think the tail of the monster is harmless but if you grab onto it,
the head whips around and bites you.

It opened my eyes to the fact that even the humble raffle can be problematic.

We will never raise funds at this church by a raffle,
because it can set something off within someone.

And the Bible tells us to be mindful of others,
particularly the weaker members of our community.

And in any case, as Paul has said,
Christian fundraising should be motivated by generosity,
not by the promise of an easy win.

I’m not going to rebuke people for entering into a raffle,
but I’m never going to run one.

So there are just some of the Biblical themes that we should think about,
and if we follow them,
we’ll have a better chance of avoiding the prison of gambling.

But what if we’re already there? What if we’re already in prison?

When POWs are imprisoned behind barbed wire they can’t just walk out.
Escaping prison will mean taking some well-considered and deliberate steps,
and it may take some time, some planning,

and there may be some failed attempts before you're successful.
And it will take team work.

When the Bible speaks about effecting change in your life,
the three big resources that it points us towards are
the word of God, prayer, and the Christian community.
For each of these three weeks I'll speak about one of these resources,
but I also want to say you'll need to get help from secular sources as well.

We know that that there is something physiological happening with addiction,
so some kind of medical help might be needed.
Speak with your GP as a first port of call.
Or give one of these numbers a ring: Gambling Help/ Gamblers Anonymous.

Gamblers Anonymous has come out of Alcoholics Anonymous
And you've seen Alcoholics Anonymous in the movies.
It's a meeting, and members have sponsors who act as mentors.
The help you get from a secular sources like Gamblers Anonymous
will emphasize the importance of making your escape with a team!
And the Holy Spirit says *Amen* to that.

When the Bible speaks about effecting change in your life
it speaks about the Christian Community.
James 5:16 Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be
healed. James continues in v 19 My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander
from the truth and someone should bring that person back, ²⁰ remember this: Whoever turns
a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of
sins.

James has the expectation that we deal with our issues as a team.
It doesn't have to be a big team—the whole church doesn't have to know—
but maybe admit your difficulty with one or two in the church that you trust.
I'm sure you will receive a gracious response,
I'm sure you'll receive sympathy and not condemnation,
particularly if you're admitting it's a problem.

Part of the advantage of saying something
is that it breaks the secrecy of gambling which is part of the prison,
and it opens up avenues of moral support.

Maybe you yourself are an escapee.
If that's you then maybe you could become a mentor to others.
That would be a great ministry within our church.
The statistics tell us that people need help,
and there is help available, and we can play a part in providing that help.

But perhaps what people need more than help is grace.
At a previous church there was a man I was trying to encourage in ministry
I was trying to get him involved in leading services and praying.
He said "I don't think that's a good idea" I said "why not?"
he said "I struggle with the temptation to gamble,
and have done so for many years".
I told him that the desire to be holy was commendable,
and that being tempted and living with the struggle
was no barrier to the kind of service we were talking about.
But he still refused. I think he needed to hear a word of grace:
that Jesus forgives,
and that while the work might be slow, he does bring about change.

Let's ask him to be at work right now!