

## Are State Lotteries Immoral? (Part 2)

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*  
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*This column is a continuation of a theme begun last week where I dispute the claims of Pastor John Piper with respect to the morality of the state lottery. In my column prior to that one I had developed a public policy thesis that the state lottery is the best tax because it is a voluntary, even if it is a “stupid tax” paid by the fatuous and the ignorant.*

I concur with Piper’s condemnation of greed and covetousness among lottery players. Paul said that, “those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition” (I Timothy 6:9). Jesus said, “Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses” (Luke 12:15).



However, Piper’s notion that playing the lottery harms the poor is debatable. Even if poor people are worse off because state lotteries or other gambling exists, that fact does not mean that the participation by relatively wealthier individuals exacerbates poverty. Moreover, there is no good reason to assume that public policy outlawing lotteries would reduce poverty or gambling, any more than Prohibition in the 1920s reduced alcohol use. Indeed, Piper’s notion smacks of the sentiment that is commonly found in modern American liberals, who blame big business or big government for bad individual behavior and its outcome. But such sentiment is false.

Is it not said that lung cancer and smoking addiction are not the fault of the individuals who choose to smoke but rather the fault of greedy, manipulative firms like Phillip Morris and R. J. Reynolds, along with advertising firms and the media which make commercials that impel people to smoke? They are supposedly profiting at the expense of the weak and poor and the federal government compounds the problem by issuing subsidies to tobacco farmers.

This sort of drivel, although commonplace, is simply not true. People choose actions, and expend scarce resources for them, because they expect to benefit. Individual choice, when voluntary, is never someone else’s fault. Adam had no right to alleviate his guilt by blaming Eve, nor did Eve by blaming Satan. As the Scripture says in Galatians 6:5 and II Corinthians 5:20, “each one shall bear his own load” and “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad”. Individuals will be judged according to what they have done in the body without appealing to the sins of others for mitigation of the consequences. Lottery winnings are not “plunder” (as Piper said), and playing the lottery in moderation does not necessitate “spiritual suicide”. They are proceeds from an entertaining game (at least to some) with very poor odds, in which millions of individuals voluntarily choose to participate.

Piper does not want his ministry or church to receive any of the filthy lucre of lottery winnings. I could certainly understand Piper’s reasoning if his goal were to reduce the number of people in his church who are given to excess in the lottery. But Piper should be careful to not go beyond what the Bible says. After all, Jesus received a fragrant, expensive gift that was bought by a woman of ill repute (Luke 7:36-39).

On a similar occasion, the Apostle John records that the disciples too—Judas Iscariot in particular—complained about Mary’s inefficient use of the valuable oil. “But Jesus said, ‘Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial. For the poor you have with you always, but Me you do not have always’” (John 12:7-8). It was Judas Iscariot who raised concerns about the poor being harmed. If Jesus Christ was willing to receive benefits from apparently wasteful means, or even from ill-gotten gains, then why should the church reject them?

Furthermore, one might argue that the doctrine of Proverbs 13:22b would reach the epitome of fulfillment in the giving of lottery winnings to the church. It says, “The wealth of the sinner is stored up for the righteous”. Why is it wrong for the saints to benefit by the undoing of the wicked? Accordingly, the Bible records many instances where the wealth of the unsaved is rightly received by God’s people and

used for righteous purposes. The Queen of Sheba—not necessarily a believer—and Hiram’s ships brought exotic treasures to Solomon that augmented the glory of the Temple and wealth of God’s people (I Kings 10:1,10-12; II Chronicles 9:1,9-11). The unbelieving king Artaxerxes granted Nehemiah’s request for safe passage and timber to rebuild the Temple, Jerusalem’s wall, and houses in Judea (Nehemiah 2:4-8). The wise men from the East (or magi)—astrologers that interpreted dreams and performed magic—were probably not truly converted men and yet Christ received their gifts by Joseph and Mary (Matthew 2:1-2,9-12). Ananias and Sapphira were slain for lying to the Holy Spirit but there is no indication that their offering was refused by the church (Acts 5:1-11).

The Bible does not condemn gambling *per se*. It only condemns the excesses that might devolve from gambling. The lottery is permissible in moderation (a Category B1 activity in last week’s column), like using wine or beer, which the godly may use in moderation. In saying this, I am careful to concur with the *Westminster Confession of Faith* in its application of the eighth commandment against fraud and lying. Its *Larger Catechism* (question 142) condemns “wasteful gaming; and all other ways whereby we do unduly prejudice our own outward estate, and defrauding ourselves of the due use and comfort of that estate which God hath given us.” Excessive gambling is sin, just as excessive use of alcohol (drunkenness) is sin. I also affirm my commitment to a providential understanding of life. There is nothing that is outside of the control of a sovereign God. Yet God has set forth certain random processes to serve His purposes in the world, as Ecclesiastes 9:11 affirms: “I returned and saw under the sun that—The race is not to the swift, Nor the battle to the strong, Nor bread to the wise, Nor riches to men of understanding, Nor favor to men of skill; But time and chance happen to them all.” In this life, God permits the lottery to work just as He permits random number generators to work, but always under His permissive decree.

While I do not play the lottery, I will leave others to their liberty. And I see no reason for churches to abstain from receiving gifts derived from state lottery winnings that will help them further the Gospel, edify the church, and assist the poor, widows, and orphans.