

Gambling

President Gordon B. Hinckley



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Gordon B. Hinckley, "Gambling," *Ensign*, May 2005, 58

My dear brethren, we've had a wonderful meeting. I wish to endorse all that has been said and to leave my blessing with you.

First I'd like to say just a word concerning those we have sustained this afternoon as members of the Quorums of the Seventy.

I am convinced that there are literally hundreds of brethren worthy and capable to serve as general officers of the Church. We see them everywhere. Those sustained today have been chosen to fill particular responsibilities. In most cases, this will involve sacrifice, which will be willingly made.

Among those sustained, as you have noted, is my 63-year-old son. I make it clear that I did not advance his name. That was done by others whose right it was to do so. I feel extremely sensitive about the matter of nepotism. As the lawyers say, I recused myself from participating. However, I believe he is worthy and qualified in every respect. In the first place, he had a great and wonderful mother. I wish I could recommend his father.

I mention this only because of my sensitivity concerning the matter of nepotism. Please do not hold it against him for his relationship to me. He's powerless to help it.

Now, to go on to the subject that I wish to discuss tonight. I do so in response to a number of requests that have come to me concerning the position of the Church on a practice that is becoming more common among us, and particularly among our youth. That is the matter of gambling in various forms.

The story is told that one Sunday Calvin Coolidge, onetime president of the United States and a man noted for few words, returned from church. His wife asked him what the preacher spoke about. He replied, "Sin." "What did he say?" she asked. "He was against it," was his reply.

I think I could answer the question concerning gambling just that briefly. We are against it.

Gambling is to be found almost everywhere and is growing. People play poker. They bet on horse races and dog races. They play roulette and work the slot machines. They gather to play in bars, saloons, and casinos, and, all

too often, in their own homes. Many cannot leave it alone. It becomes addictive. In so many cases it leads to other destructive habits and practices.

And so very many of those who become involved cannot afford the money it takes. In many cases it robs wives and children of financial security.

The game of poker, as it is called, is becoming a college and even a high school craze.

I read to you from a *New York Times* News Service article:

“For Michael Sandberg, it started a few years ago with nickel-and-dime games among friends.

“But last fall, he says, it became the source of a six-figure income and an alternative to law school.

“Sandberg, 22, essentially splits his time between Princeton, where he is a senior and a politics major, and Atlantic City, where he plays high-stakes poker. ...

“Sandberg’s is an extreme example of a gambling revolution on the nation’s college campuses. Sandberg calls it an explosion, one spurred by televised poker championships and a proliferation of Web sites that offer online poker games.

“Experts say the evidence of gambling’s popularity on campus is hard to miss. In December, for example, a sorority at Columbia University conducted its first, 80-player, poker tournament with a \$10 buy-in, a minimum amount required to play, while the University of North Carolina conducted its first tournament, a 175-player competition, in October. Both games filled up and had waiting lists. At the University of Pennsylvania, private games are advertised every night in a campus e-mail list” (Jonathan Cheng, “Poker Is Major College Craze,” in *Deseret Morning News*, Mar. 14, 2005, p. A2).

The same thing is happening right here in Utah.

A mother writes me as follows:

“My 19-year-old son plays poker on the Internet, and the people on the Internet do not [seem to] care if you are not 21. All you have to do is have a bank account with money in it. He has been playing steady for almost a year now. He used to have a job, which he quit because he is so addicted to the Internet and poker playing for money right now. He enters poker tournaments all the time, and, if he wins, that is the money that he [uses] to buy the things that he needs. All he does is sit and play on the Internet.”

I am told that Utah and Hawaii are now the only two states in the United States that have not legalized lotteries and gambling of various forms. From the letters I have received from members of the Church, it becomes apparent that some of our young people start by playing poker. They get the taste of getting something for nothing, and then travel outside of the state to where they can gamble legally.

One writer says in a letter to me: “I can see this evil creeping up in so many lives lately. It is all over the TV. ESPN has something called Celebrity Poker and National Poker Championships.”

She continues: “One of our friends invited my husband to sign up for the local poker championship game for a fee. His friend said, ‘It’s not gambling. Your money just goes into this big pot, and whoever wins gets the pot.’”

Is this gambling? Of course, it is. Gambling is simply a process that takes money and does not offer a fair return in goods or services.

We now have state lotteries on a very large scale. Once the law almost universally prohibited them. Now they are operated as a means of gaining revenue.

Some 20 years ago, speaking in conference, I said: “Lottery fever recently peaked when New York State announced that three winning tickets would split \$41 million. People [had] lined up to buy tickets. One winning ticket was held by 21 factory workers, with 778 second-place winners, and 113,000 who received token amounts. That may sound pretty good.

“But there were also 35,998,956 losers, each of whom had paid for a chance to win [and received nothing]” (in Conference Report, Oct. 1985, 67; or *Ensign*, Nov. 1985, 52).

Some American states have imposed heavy taxes on casinos as a source of revenue. The operating company also must have its profit. Then comes the winning ticket holder. All others who bought tickets are left empty-handed.

I am so grateful that when the Lord established this Church He gave us the law of tithing. I talked at one time with an officer of another church which, I understand, relies on the playing of bingo for a substantial part of its income. I said to this man, “Have you ever considered tithing to finance your church?” He replied, “Yes, and oh, how I wish that we might follow this practice instead of playing bingo. But I do not expect this change in my lifetime.”

Casinos have been opened on Indian reservations as a means of securing income for those who own them. A few win, but most lose. They have to if some win and if the house is to make its profit.

One of our young men recently said, “Pay five bucks to see a movie; pay five bucks to play poker—it is the same idea.”

It is not the same idea. In one case you get something for which you pay; in the other case, only one picks up the winnings and the others are left empty-handed.

Experience has shown that the playing of poker can lead to an obsession to gambling.

From the early days of this Church, gambling has been denounced.

As far back as 1842, Joseph Smith described conditions when the Saints lived in Missouri. Said he, “We made large purchases of land, our farms teemed with plenty, and peace and happiness were enjoyed in our domestic circle, and throughout our neighborhood; but as we could not associate with our neighbors ... in their midnight revels, their Sabbath breaking, horse racing and gambling, they commenced at first to ridicule, then to persecute, and finally an organized mob assembled and burned our houses, tarred and feathered and whipped many of our brethren, and finally, contrary to law, justice and humanity, drove them from their habitations” (in James R. Clark, comp., *Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. [1965–75], 1:139).

Brigham Young, in October of 1844, said this concerning Nauvoo: “We wish to suppress all grogshops, gambling houses, and all other disorderly houses or proceedings in our city, and to tolerate no intemperance or vice in our midst” (in *Messages of the First Presidency*, 1:242).

Presidents of the Church and counselors in the Presidency have repeatedly spoken concerning this evil. George Q. Cannon, counselor to three Presidents of the Church, said: “There are many evils in the world which young folks need to be guarded against. One of these is gambling. There are various forms of this evil but they are all bad and should not be indulged in” (*Gospel Truth: Discourses and Writings of President George Q. Cannon*, sel. Jerreld L. Newquist, 2 vols. [1974], 2:223).

President Joseph F. Smith stated, “The Church does not approve of gambling but strongly condemns it as morally wrong, and classes also with this gambling, games of chance and lottery, of all kinds, and earnestly disapproves of any of its members engaging therein” (“Editor’s Table,” *Improvement Era*, Aug. 1908, 807).

President Heber J. Grant counseled: “The Church has been and now is unalterably opposed to gambling in any form whatever. It is opposed to any game of chance, occupation, or so-called business, which takes money from the person who may be possessed of it without giving value received in return. It is opposed to all practices the tendency of which is to . . . degrade or weaken the high moral standard which the members of the Church, and our community at large, have always maintained” (in *Messages of the First Presidency*, 5:245).

President Spencer W. Kimball said: “From the beginning we have been advised against gambling of every sort. The deterioration and damage comes to the person, whether he wins or loses, to get something for nothing, something without effort, something without paying the full price” (in Conference Report, Apr. 1975, 6; or *Ensign*, May 1975, 6).

Elder Dallin H. Oaks, who is with us tonight, in 1987 delivered a masterful discourse on this subject at what was then Ricks College. It was entitled “Gambling—Morally Wrong and Politically Unwise” (see *Ensign*, June 1987, 69–75).

To these statements of the position of the Church I add my own. The pursuit of a game of chance may seem like harmless fun. But there attaches to it an intensity that actually shows on the faces of those who are playing. And in all too many cases this practice, which appears innocent, can lead to an actual addiction. The Church has been and is now opposed to this practice. If you have never been involved in poker games or other forms of gambling, don’t start. If you are involved, then quit now while you can do so.

There are better ways to spend one’s time. There are better pursuits to occupy one’s interest and energy. There is so much of wonderful reading available. We are not likely to ever get too much of it. There is music to be learned and enjoyed. There is just having a good time together—in dancing, in hiking, in cycling, or in other ways—boys and girls together enjoying one another’s company in a wholesome way.

I have been reading a new book, recently published by the Oxford University Press, which has received considerable attention among us. It contains a study conducted by members of the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. It deals with the religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers. Those who conducted the study questioned young people of various faiths and traditions. (See Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* [2005].)

They reached the conclusion that our LDS youth know more about their faith, are more committed to it, and abide more closely by its teachings concerning social behavior than do their peers.

One of the researchers stated, “The LDS Church asks a lot of its teenagers, and . . . more often than not, they get it” (in Elaine Jarvik, “LDS Teens Rank Tops in Living Their Faith,” *Deseret Morning News*, Mar. 15, 2005, p. A3).

Our young people were found to be more likely to hold the same religious beliefs as their parents, to attend religious services once a week, to share their faith with others, to engage in fasting or some other form of self-denial, and to have less doubt about their religious beliefs.

Commentators on the study speak of our youth arising early in the morning to attend seminary. “It is hard to get up so early,” one seminary student said. “But there are blessings that come from doing it. It is a wonderful way to start the day.”

The researchers point out that not all of our youth are perfect, but by and large they excel in a most remarkable way. I should add that there is no time to play poker for these high school students.

My dear young friends to whom I speak tonight, you mean so very much to us. You are so very important. As members of this Church and as holders of the priesthood, you have so great a responsibility. Please, please do not fritter away your time or your talents in an aimless pursuit. If you do so, it will lessen your capacity to do worthwhile things. I believe it will dull your sensitivity to your studies in school. It will disappoint your parents, and as the years pass and you look back, you will be disappointed with yourselves.

The priesthood which you hold as young men carries with it the privilege of the ministering of angels. That companionship, I submit, is incompatible with indulgence in games of chance.

“Choose the right when a choice is placed before you” (“Choose the Right,” *Hymns*, no. 239).

May heaven’s blessings rest upon you, I humbly pray, as I leave you my testimony of this work and my love for all who are engaged in it, in the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Gospel topics: gambling, morality, sacrifice, temptation, tithing