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Beating the Gambling Habit

by Ronald E. Hawkins

Mark Twain, once a steamboat pilot himself, brought to life for us the fabulous era when paddle wheelers made great highways of the Missouri, Ohio, and Mississippi rivers. In the 1850s about 2,000 professional gamblers worked the riverboats. Elegant in their broadcloth coats and white ruffled shirts, they fit naturally and fondly into our musings of life on the mighty Mississippi.

But anyone who has actually lived with a gambler would tell us that in reality the elegance is gaudy, the glamour is tawdry, and the allure is deadly. He would tell us to look past the glitter and into the gloom that the compulsive gambler lowers over his home and family.

Compulsive gamblers are always tragic figures. Like other addicts, their obsession consumes them. They spend their time and efforts organizing all available resources to assist them in fulfilling their dream of the "big strike." This is why they may initially seem so charming. They need the rest of us. Their charm is always manipulative and serves as a means to an end. We are their marks, the resources without which they could not support their addiction. Gamblers operate on three false concepts.

A False Concept of the World of the Self. Gamblers believe that if they could just be rich, make that strike, or demonstrate their success, they would be genuinely happy. Solomon warned of the danger of such thinking when he said, "Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire" (Eccl. 6:9).

Contentment is an elusive commodity for gamblers. Their desires roam restlessly from one unpossessed

When the gambler views his addiction as sin, he puts himself in a position where God can root this problem out of his life.

possibility to another. They always want something more. Their concept of happiness is rooted in temporal success. They measure their self-esteem in winnings, and consider themselves virtually worthless until they win the big one.

They are doomed to unhappiness. They risk whatever they have for more. Eventually they wind up with less than nothing, and their lives are surrounded by the carnage of their wandering desire. They have no concept of biblical stewardship.

A False Concept of the World of Relationships. Someone has said God created us to love people and use things. Gamblers use people to get the things they need to make them feel significant. John cautioned us not to love the world nor the things in the world (1 John 2:15). Love of the world's success symbols, and the aura of success that the possession of those things brings, is at the core of the gambler's addiction. The carnage of broken relationships, shattered marriages, and angered children testify to the gambler's cruel addiction.

A False Concept of God. The gambler only wants to hear about a

God who will meet his need. He worships the god of luck. His god is a cosmic bellhop, a resource to assist him with the task of making the big strike. The gambler frequently becomes very embittered when he discovers that God's agenda does not include making him wealthy. His addiction drives him deeper and deeper into spiritual death.

Compulsive gamblers need several things if they ever hope to escape their addiction.

Compassion. Love, grace, and patience must always be our starting point as we deal with the sinner. Paul was an excellent counselor. He said we must be patient with all (1 Thess. 5:14), and he openly expressed his love for those "taken in a fault" (Gal. 6:1). We must master the art of loving the sinner while hating the sin, and lovingly share our conviction that only the reality of Christ and the Holy Spirit can break such evil bondage.

Challenge. We must challenge their unbiblical ideas about self-significance, relationships, stewardship, and success. Gamblers need people around them who challenge their presuppositions and show them the significance found in serving God and others out of a heart of love. They need to understand true stewardship—to become humbly conscious that life, and health, and every earthly possession, and the happiness that constantly eludes them, come from God. Such a conviction yields the fruit of contentment.

We must challenge gamblers to realize that God gives true success to every believer on the basis of his position in Christ. We cannot work to obtain wealth or significance. We became wealthy and significant the moment we were made acceptable to God through the application of

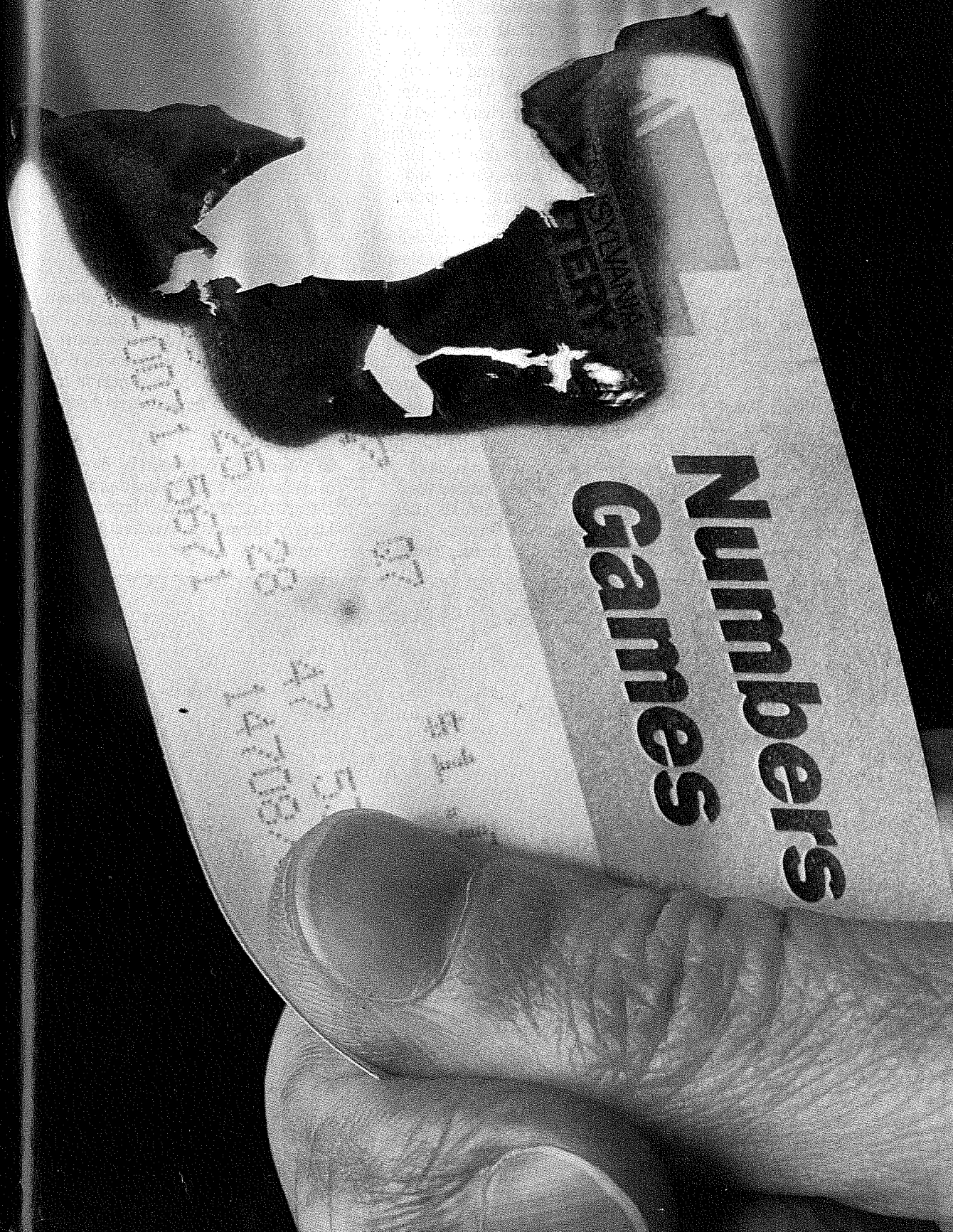
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Christ's redemptive work in our personal lives.

The Word of God destroys the gambler's myths about God, self, stewardship, and relationships. The gambler must confront these manipulative and self-serving myths and label them as sin. Only when the gambler faces his compulsion as sin, will he realize that God through Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Bible, has made provision for dealing with that sin. There lies the addicted gambler's only hope.

Confession. If the gambler sees his addiction as merely a psychological disorder or aberration, his hope for a remedy lies only in man. When he views his addiction as irresponsible behavior for which he accepts responsibility, and which he labels as sin, he puts himself in a position where God can root this problem out of his life. God can cleanse from all sin (1 John 1:9) if we are willing to agree with Him that the behavior is in fact sin, and if we accept the deliverance found only in Christ.

Change. For the gambler, change is not an option but an imperative. Once at the point of confession he must own the responsibility to make himself accountable for change. True conversion stems from repentance. Paul carefully outlines the fruit of biblical repentance in 2 Corinthians

7:11. We must hold the gambler strictly accountable and encourage him to evidence the following fruit.

Carefulness. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the gambler must diligently practice disciplined disengagement from everything associated with his former life of sin. He must also consistently participate in all that will cause his new life in Christ to prosper—Bible reading and memorization, church attendance, fellowship with believers, prayer, and so forth.

Clearing of Self. The gambler could at one time be charged with having made a god out of his gambling. Now all will clearly realize that his God is the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Spirit, appropriate fruit issues from his life.

Indignation. The gambler delivered from his addiction will manifest anger toward the sin that held him in bondage, and indeed against all sin. With his eyes opened, he considers the terrible potential for the ruin of human life, and he is angry at sin.

Fear. The former gambler knows firsthand the deceptive power of sin. He knows he needs God's power for daily victory over such a powerful foe. Its power to ruin promotes a healthy fear.

Zeal. We must encourage the former gambler to expend his energies for the cause of Christ.

Vengeance. The former gambler

must learn to keep his spiritual house in order. He must meet every vestige of his old lifestyle with the greatest of spiritual energy. Through fasting, prayer, and Christian fellowship the remnants of the old habit must be put to death. Always, in every way, the one who was once the willing slave of gambling clearly becomes the willing servant of Jesus Christ.

Celebration. For the first time in his life the gambler now has something over which he may rejoice. He is no longer a prisoner of his sinful habit. The living Christ has set him free to see himself as a child of God. Herein lies his real significance. Following the dynamic patterns of accountability that Paul lays down in his discussion on repentance, the gambler sees his real purpose in life. He is now equipped to be a steward in God's house. As a steward he moves forward to serve his God and others. In so doing he makes full proof of his new life in Christ and finds a cause of rejoicing in his own work for God and others (Gal. 6:4). Such a man is truly rich and free to be genuinely happy.

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Are You a Compulsive Gambler?

Would you answer yes to seven of the following questions?

1. Do you ever lose time from work due to gambling?
2. Does gambling ever make your home life unhappy?
3. Does gambling affect your reputation?
4. Do you ever feel remorse after gambling?
5. Do you ever gamble to get money with which to pay debts or otherwise solve financial difficulties?
6. Does gambling cause a decrease in your ambition or efficiency?
7. After losing do you feel you must return as soon as possible and win back your losses?
8. After a win do you have a strong urge to return and win more?
9. Do you often gamble until your last dollar is gone?
10. Do you ever borrow to finance your gambling?
11. Do you ever sell anything to finance your gambling?
12. Are you reluctant to use "gambling money" for normal expenditures?
13. Does gambling make you careless of the welfare of your family?
14. Do you ever gamble longer than you had planned?
15. Do you ever gamble to escape worry or trouble?
16. Do you ever commit, or consider committing, an illegal act to finance gambling?
17. Does gambling cause you to have difficulty sleeping?
18. Do arguments, disappointments, or frustrations create within you an urge to gamble?
19. Do you ever have an urge to celebrate any good fortune by a few hours of gambling?
20. Do you ever consider self-destruction as a result of your gambling?

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