

The questions which we have been asked to consider this month concern that constantly recurring – and one might also say endless – source of conflict and controversy in the world's life, namely – money! The questioner asks, in essence;-



Is it wrong for Christians to accept interest?
Is it wrong to invest in Premium Bonds?
Is it wrong to buy National Lottery tickets?



We are, of course, discussing where the *Christian* stands in relation to these issues, in the light of New Testament principles. We are *not* discussing the attitudes of non-believers.

‘Usury’

In her letter, our questioner mentions the Old Testament reference to ‘*usury*’, and we begin with this word, because it has a bearing on the answer to the first of the questions.

‘*Usury*’ is the word found in the ‘Authorized Version’, where it is the translation of half a dozen closely related Hebrew words. It does not occur in the revised versions, where, instead, we find the word ‘*interest*’. So, ‘*usury*’ is quite simply the obsolete word for ‘*interest*’, although, it should be said that, over the years, this old word has acquired a rather unpleasant connotation and there lingers about it the suspicion of unsavoury business dealings.

The O.T. attitude towards ‘usury’.

There are, in fact, several words, which, in the Hebrew Scriptures, are used in connection with the lending of money at interest. For instance, in Ex.22:25 we find that the children of Israel were forbidden to take interest on loans made to poor fellow-Israelites.

But this law did not apply to money lent to a ‘foreigner’, as Deut.23:19-20 plainly states, so that an Israelite incurred no guilt, if, when lending to a ‘Gentile’ he imposed an interest charge. This law was laid down prior to the entry of Israel into the land of Canaan.

Sometimes it is pointed out that the prophet Nehemiah angrily condemned those who ‘exacted usury’, in Nehemiah 5; 1-13, but when we read the prophet’s scathing words we should understand that he was not condemning the practice as *sinful in principle*. The passage reveals that his anger was directed against those of his fellow-Jews who were imposing interest on loans made to their poorer brethren, in defiance of God’s law. In other words, the prophet was warning those who behaved in this manner, that they were disobeying God.

In the New Testament Age.

When we turn to the New Testament we find that the lending of money at interest continued to be a common legitimate practice in Jewish society. In fact, since in those days the Jews were under Roman occupation, life in Palestine reflected Roman commercial practices generally, and banking, credit and interest, were everyday realities.

In the New Testament, the English word ‘usury’ occurs only twice, and the original

Greek word – ‘*tokos*’ – has a slightly amusing meaning. It means ‘to bring forth’ – ‘birth’. You will probably recognize it as part of the word ‘*prototokos*’, which is translated ‘firstborn’ (‘*proto*’ = first, and ‘*tokos*’ = born). The thought behind ‘usury’ is that it *multiplies*, or, in other words, it ‘breeds’. In ‘usury’, then, money *begets* money!

Matt. 25:27 and Luke 19:23 are both helpful here. These are the two verses in which the word is found, and they occur in the Lord’s parable about a master who calls his servants to account for their handling of money he had given them to use on his behalf. When speaking to the ‘one talented’ servant, Jesus puts these words into the master’s mouth, “*You should have invested my money with the bankers, and, at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest*”. ‘Interest’ is the translation of the word for ‘usury’ and there is nothing in the Lord’s parable to suggest that the master was acting in an unjust or improper manner. He expected his money to have ‘worked’ for him and to have earned ‘interest’.

This illustration introduces another question which must be considered.

How may money be honourably obtained?

I can think of only three basic ways:

- Firstly, it may be received as a *gift*.
- Secondly, it may be earned as *payment* for either labour or service rendered.
- Thirdly, it may be obtained *by way of barter or sale*; that is, by offering something in exchange for money.

If we look at the questions in the light of these basic principles, I think that we see that:-

1. To use wealth to produce ‘interest’ is perfectly legitimate and permissible.

To put money to ‘work’ does not involve wrong-doing, proving the nature of the investment is morally acceptable. Consider this illustration. If a farmer owns a tractor or some other piece of machinery, and a neighbour asks if he may borrow it on payment of a fee – in other words, hire it - would it be wrong for the farmer to agree to this transaction? Or, if the farmer is approached by the same neighbour with a request for a financial loan, promising to repay the capital with interest, would it be wrong if he agreed to make the loan? Of course not, because both the machinery and the money are *assets* which the farmer has the right to use in a fair and honourable way. They are both ‘working’ for him.

But let us take this a step farther. If the farmer *deposits* his money in a ‘Savings Account’ – (and, of course, the bank will use his money in its own business transactions) - and his savings attract interest, would this be immoral? I think not, because, again, his assets are being put to work for him. This is surely what the Lord Himself implies in His parable. The one-talented man was clearly condemned because he failed to act prudently with the asset that his master had committed to him.

2. Now consider the ‘Premium Bond’ and the ‘Lottery’ Questions.

Here the situation is different, because both are forms of gambling. Perhaps we should first ask the question, ‘*What is Gambling?*’ The simplest answer is that, *to gamble is to risk money on the outcome of an event, in the expectation of gaining a*

larger sum. In the case of 'Premium Bonds', as everyone knows the 'event' involved concerns a sequence of numbers.

According to this definition, the purchase of 'Premium Bonds' is nothing more than a modern form of gambling, because when a person invests money in the Bonds he does so knowing that the interest his investment would normally attract, will become his 'stake' and part of the collective prize-money, from which he hopes to win an amount much larger than his 'stake'.

The 'National Lottery' is an even more obvious form of gambling. Everyone surely knows that the total income from the sale of National Lottery tickets is used, first, to provide a profit for the organisers, who 'cream off' a certain percentage of the sale for whatever purposes they have in mind, leaving the remainder to be distributed as prize money.

The only major difference between the 'Premium Bond' and the 'Lottery Ticket' is that, whilst the purchaser of 'Bonds' is assured that his initial investment will remain intact, any money expended on the 'National Lottery' is a straightforward wager, from which a financial gain, whilst theoretically possible, is highly unlikely. As in most forms of gambling, the organisers risk nothing. It is always the gambler who is more likely to lose than to win! From this standpoint alone, leaving all moral and religious considerations aside, gambling is a foolhardy business.

How do people defend gambling?

Someone will say, "I never wager more than I can afford?" But not everyone can truthfully say this, and it is an undeniable fact that there are people who are so strongly addicted to gambling that they wager all their income, causing serious hardship for their families. Children have often suffered because a father – or a mother – has become unable to control the urge to gamble, and very often, people have found themselves drowning in the debt which their addiction has created.

Just consider! Money which forms the 'National Lottery win' is often money which has been lost by people who can ill afford to lose it. Concerning gambling, Mark Twain once said, "There are two times in a man's life when he should not speculate: when he can't afford it, and when he can".

Do not expect to find a verse in the Bible that states, "Thou shalt not gamble or buy Lottery Tickets", because, as you know, it is not there. What we can find in abundance, are verses which warn us against the danger of covetousness, and just as many verses which teach us, as Christians, to depend, not on 'luck' or 'chance', but on the care and providence of our heavenly Father. Remember that the Lord Jesus said:

- "Your heavenly Father knows what you need before you ask Him". Matt.6:8.
- Heb.13:5, "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have."
- 1st Tim. 6:8, "Having food and clothing, let us be content".
- 1st Tim. 6:6, "There is great gain in godliness with contentment."

But may I suggest that you read, and think about, 1st Tim. 6:6-10? There is a blessing in these verses for every one of us – whoever we are.

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