

House and Senate Study Committees on the Preservation of the HOPE Scholarship Program

**Monday, November 2, 2015 – 10:00am
Armstrong State University - Armstrong Center Auditorium
13040 Abercorn Street
Savannah, Georgia 31419**

Presentation by
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First, let me thank our chairmen and the committee for allowing me the opportunity to speak to you today on the issue of “Preservation of the HOPE Scholarship Program” by the legalization of Casinos coming into the state of Georgia.

We know there are people in our state and communities that gamble: some legally by playing the Georgia Lottery and other avenues of legalized gambling. Of course, there are those who play illegally. Recently, it has been brought to light that there have been individuals in high ranking positions and jobs that have taken advantage of illegal gambling in our local communities.

According to Wikipedia – “...a government-run lottery was explicitly allowed in a 1992 constitutional amendment to Article I, Section II, Paragraph VIII of the Georgia State Constitution, approved in a referendum.”

“The Georgia Lottery Corporation, known as the Georgia Lottery, is overseen by the government of Georgia, United States. Headquartered in Atlanta, the lottery takes in over (US) \$1 billion yearly. By law, half of the money goes to prizes, one-third to education, and the remainder to operating and marketing the lottery. The education money funds the HOPE Scholarship, and has become a successful model for other lotteries, including the South Carolina Education Lottery.”

It is my understanding that we are having these discussions now because the Georgia Lottery is falling short of providing enough moneys to fully fund the HOPE Scholarship though we were told it would when Georgians voted to approve the referendum to allow the lottery. Now we are being advised that in order for the HOPE Scholarship to remain available, we must allow casinos to come into the state of Georgia and, of course, eventually into the city of Savannah.

As a pastor, I would guess you would expect me to share a perspective from the Bible as Mike Griffin did earlier. I do not find where the Bible specifically condemns gambling, betting, or the lottery by saying, "Thou Shalt Not!" The Bible does provide us with a number of principles that can guide us on this issue. Let me share a few of them.

First, Scripture warns us to stay away from the love of money; listen to

1 Timothy 6:9 But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. **10** For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.

Hebrews 13:5 Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.

Second, Scripture encourages us to stay away from attempts to "get rich quick"; listen to

Proverbs 13:11 Wealth gotten by vanity shall be diminished: but he that gathereth by labour shall increase.

Proverbs 23:5 Wilt thou set thine eyes upon that which is not? for riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away as an eagle toward heaven.

Ecclesiastes 5:10 He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase: this is also vanity.

Third, Scripture expresses God's blessing upon those who care for and show mercy on the poor while it condemns those who would take advantage of the poor and unfortunate; listen to

Psalms 41:1 Blessed is he that considereth the poor: the LORD will deliver him in time of trouble.

Proverbs 14:31 He that oppresseth the poor reproacheth his Maker: but he that honoureth him (his Maker) hath mercy on the poor.

Gambling most definitely focuses on the love of money and undeniably tempts people with the promise of quick and easy riches. It breeds a form of covetousness. It undermines the ethic of work, sacrifice and personal responsibility that exemplify the best qualities of our American society.

Gambling can destroy families. It can be a major cause of family neglect. It tempts people to neglect their God-mandated responsibility to care for their families.

Gambling is bad social policy; it is bad economic policy; and it is bad governmental policy. Moreover, it undermines the moral foundations of society and invites corruption in government. As a Christian, I believe we must stand against the attempts to legalize casinos to come into our state and thus allow more legalized gambling.

Casinos use all sorts of marketing schemes to entice gamblers to risk as much money as possible. They often offer inexpensive or even free alcohol, which encourages drunkenness, and thereby a decreased ability to make wise decisions. Everything in a casino is perfectly rigged for taking money in large sums and giving nothing in return, except for fleeting and empty pleasures. Now they are going to attempt to portray themselves as a way to fund education and/or social programs. However, studies show that Casino participants are usually those who can least afford to be spending money on gambling. The allure of “getting rich quick” is too great a temptation to resist for those who are desperate. The chances of winning are minute, which results in peoples’ lives being ruined.

The Institute for American Values put together a Council on Casinos in 2013, an independent, nonpartisan group of scholars and leaders who came together to examine the role of casinos in American life. Their report is found in a 56 page booklet entitled, ***Why Casinos Matter***. It lists “Thirty-One Evidence-Based Propositions from the Health and Social Sciences.”

I quote the following –

“Nearly a decade and a half ago, in the early stages of the casino ascendancy, the federally funded National Gambling Impact Study Commission concluded its multi-year investigation of gambling in America with a call for a moratorium on further expansion. That recommendation went unheeded. Instead, states rushed headlong into legalizing new casinos within their borders.

“Moreover, during this period of expansion, casino gambling itself has changed dramatically. A national market headquartered in Nevada and Atlantic City has been joined by dozens of new regional markets across the country. Table games catering to high rollers have largely given way to slot machines catering to middle and low rollers. Casino gambling as a once or twice a year vacation has largely given way to casino gambling as a once or twice a month or once or twice or more a week pattern of life.

“Whether or not you personally gamble in them, they are influencing the nation as a whole. They are affecting our health, our economics, our politics, our ideas and social values, and perhaps even our sense of who we are as a people and what obligations we have toward one another. They appear to be connected in important ways to the rise of American inequality.”

The council goes on to list “31 Propositions” that outline the effects of casinos. They are extremely concerning. Let me summarize some of these:

Casinos contribute to the process of people becoming addicted to gambling and then depend on problem gamblers for their revenue base. This, of course, affects the individual first and foremost, but it does not stop there: it filters down into the family, the community, the church, the city, the state and, yes, our entire country.

Some of the economic impacts are extracting wealth from communities, weakening nearby businesses, and hurting property values in host communities.

I quote, “Some people believe that operating slot machines has historically been viewed as dishonest because it was illegal. That is partly true. But the larger truth is that operating slot machines has historically been treated as illegal because it is dishonest. Enticing people who may be vulnerable or unwary to lose their money by betting against a machine that has been programmed in advance to take their money has not, in the American experience, been generally viewed as an honest thing to do—an ethical problem that becomes even more serious when the government is actively involved in the enticing.”

I spoke to one of the gentleman in our church. He told me the story of his great - grandparents, grandparents and his mother who lived in Atlantic City. His great - grandfather, Mr. Onfrey came from the Ukraine and married a coalminer’s daughter from Pennsylvania. They purchased a 4 story building and established, owned, and operated Maxymuks Café in hopes of living the American dream. His great grandparents were the first to get a liquor license after prohibition ended and opened a bar in the bottom floor of their building. They operated a bed and breakfast especially during the summers as people would come to enjoy the beaches.

He told me about how his grandfather lost his house due to gambling. When the casinos came in, they destroyed his great-grandparents business, property values went down, poverty zoomed out of control and the crime rate skyrocketed. His great grandmother had a stroke after being held up at gun point for the third time. The last time he visited, the neighborhood was dreadful. I can tell you this. This gentleman is definitely not in favor of casinos coming to Georgia.

You may be familiar with the slogan that is said to have originated in 2003 from R & R Partners Inc., a big powerhouse advertising and public relations firm. This slogan describes a major player in the gambling scene found in the unincorporated township called Paradise. Yes, this is where you find the Las Vegas Strip. A place known for its reputation of luxurious casinos that highlight gambling. Here’s the slogan - “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas!”

Is this what we want those who visit the cities of Georgia like Savannah, Atlanta or others to think of? Don’t tell your family, your friends, your coworkers where you went or what you did while you were gone? Is this the type of reputation the Hostess City of the South, our city, your city, my city, wants to convey?

Would we not want people to leave the city of Savannah and tell everyone about the wonderful connection to history they experienced and felt as they visited the many historic sites available? Would we not want people to leave and talk about the culture and the arts, theaters and performances, the colleges, the squares, our stunning downtown, our beautiful beaches, gorgeous homes, amazing churches, places of worship and the

incredible restaurants that serve some of the finest foods that you find anywhere? The list could go on and on.

It is very tempting and enticing when you are handed the brochure we received when we arrived this morning, not to mention having one company talking about spending 1 billion dollars and then another 2 billion on casinos in Atlanta. Is that truly how we as Georgians want to fund the education of our youth?

The Hope Scholarship is very important to prospective college students of Georgia. All three of my sons had the opportunity to take advantage of this scholarship. My wife and I sacrificed and paid for all three of them to attend a private school from Kindergarten through 12th grade while we faithfully paid our taxes for the funding of public education as we still do today. Our young people are worth every ethical effort we can come up with to assist them in getting a good solid education, but there must be a better way to accomplish this honorable objective than to allow casinos to come into our state.

I plead with you to consider the ultimate and the long term cost to this decision. Information gathered from following sources...

“Georgia Lottery.” Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georgia_Lottery

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King James Version

“Why Casinos Matter.” A Report from the Council on Casinos. 2013

<http://americanvalues.org/catalog/pdfs/why-casinos-matter.pdf>

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“What ever happened to ‘What Happens In Vegas Stays In Vegas’?.” Ryan Gile. November 19, 2007. <http://www.vegastrademarkattorney.com/2007/11/what-ever-happened-to-what-happens-in.html>

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