



By Gordon Dalbey

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Playing the Lottery—A Game for Losers

I have a confession to make. I'm an ordained minister, author and speaker at Christian men's conferences—but I'm also a man who knows how easy it is to fall under the spell of rainbows promising a pot of gold.

Years ago, as a 50th birthday gift, a non-Christian friend gave me several "Big 50" California State Lottery tickets, each beckoning a \$50,000 jackpot. The year before, I'd left my pastorate to write a new book, moved and bought a house for the first time. By my birthday, the book wasn't finished, conferences had tapered off for the summer, and the mortgage company hadn't forgotten my address. With my bank account needle bouncing on "E," those big, silver-coated "50"s on the tickets just seemed to wink at me from my desk--where I'd tossed them, near the wastebasket.

The good news in getting older, however is that you rack up enough sins to learn something.

For me and the Lottery, it began years ago, when I'd given up a full-time job and moved to Boston for seminary. I thought I'd saved up enough money to keep me going, but within the first year I'd spent my entire savings and was more than \$1000 in debt.

As my worries grew, I began paying more than casual attention to the cheerful guy on the TV commercial who proclaimed that every day someone won hundreds, even thousands of dollars in the Massachusetts State Lottery. All over town, in fact, billboards and ads beckoned me to "Play the Game!"

Eventually, one day I decided to buy two 50-cent tickets with my lunch money—just for fun. After all, as they said, it was just a game. On the other hand, it could solve my debt problem in a flash.

Like the TV guy said, it was easy. I got off the subway on my way to Church History class and just handed over my dollar right there at the newsstand. Later that night at home, I pulled the tickets out of my pocket and hesitated—then laughed at my foolishness, tossed them into the wastebasket and forgot about them.

Yet, when the day came for the winning numbers to be announced, I had second thoughts, and retrieved my tickets from the trash. No sense just wasting a good dollar, I figured. Soon, I found myself hurrying through my New Testament homework. Jumping off the subway car the next morning, I ran to the newsstand, my heart beating much faster than that short spring could cause.

There, at last, I stood before the overhead board, where The Numbers looked down upon me.

Quickly, I examined my tickets, first one, then the other. Again I looked. But just as quickly, it was over. Not even close. Maybe, though, if only the third number could have been first and the second had been...I caught myself as a strange, aching sensation

crept over me, and sighed in self-disgust. Pitching my tickets into a nearby trash can, I rushed off to class.

A few weeks later, I cashed my student loan check, paid my tuition for the next semester—and found that I had about \$50 left over. Just that week, this shivering Californian had received a monthly fuel-oil bill for over one-third my monthly rent. Almost as soon as the cash settled into my hand, the thought crossed my mind that, at 50 cents apiece, I could buy 100 Lottery tickets. With that many, I'd win something for sure!

A few days later, still bruised from my earlier loss and undecided about this “investment,” I ran into a casual friend at church, a self-employed house painter. Business had been terrible for weeks, he complained. And then, just as I was about to chime in with my own problems—and my proposed Lottery scheme—he laughed gently and shook his head.

“Would you believe, things got so bad last week I was about to play the Lottery?”

“Wh-what?” I blurted out—and then, catching myself quickly, forced a lame smile. “Uh, wow—no kidding?”

“Yeah, my faith was at a pretty low ebb,” he sighed. “I don't know how, but I got hold of myself one day and decided that all my panicking was only making things worse. I realized that I'd taken a lot for granted. So I decided instead just to begin giving thanks for what the Lord's given me—my health, my wife, my kids, everything.”

I stood there transfixed as he shrugged his shoulders.

“I can't explain it,” he went on, “but not long after that, a pretty fair contract came through for me. Not lots of money, but enough to put us back on an even keel again.”

I couldn't believe it. There I was, studying at perhaps the finest university in the world to teach others about faith, listening to a struggling house painter preach the most convincing sermon on faith that I've ever heard. Embarrassed—and genuinely hopeful at last—I confessed my own story, and we both shared a good laugh at ourselves.

I never bought another Lottery ticket. I couldn't do anything after that but confess my little faith and give thanks for what God had given me. I can't say that the next day money fell into my hands from heaven. In fact, I went further in debt before finishing seminary. But often during those years of need, I was lifted up by a personal gift, a part-time job, an award—each of which became an inspired part of my ministry that no Lottery win could have provided.

Today, from my comfortable study, in the shadow of my seminary diploma and published books, that season of desperation is painfully embarrassing to recall. Yet I'm thankful for it, even—especially—for not having won the Lottery. For I was taught then to live with an enduring faith through trial and time, not with the endless pagan fantasy of a magic god like the Lottery to lift me instantly out of life's struggles (see Heb. 5:7-9.)

What's more, I know now that it wasn't primarily a financial problem that had led me to hope in the Lottery, but rather, an inner sense of worthlessness. Often, for example, we talk about a person and say, “He's worth millions.” With no money, I was worth nothing from the world's perspective. The demonic lure of the Lottery, therefore, was that while promising to deliver me from my feelings of worthlessness, it served only to confirm them—as I and millions of others became “losers” yet again.

The Lottery's spiritual origin is revealed in the pitch that it contributes money to state education funds and therefore "benefits the children." To Father God, however, children are not stakes in a poker game. Jesus did not say, "Let the kids wait for whatever's left over from the casinos." He said, "The greatest in the Kingdom of heaven is the one who humbles himself and becomes like this child. And whoever welcomes in my name one such child as this, welcomes me" (Matt. 18:4, 5).

Men who value children like Father God—that is, who welcome them in Jesus' name—make appropriate sacrifices to provide for their education. Men who abandon their children's welfare to the whims of gamblers have cursed the Kingdom of God—and need not waste their time awaiting His blessing.

I confess, I did scratch my birthday "Big 50" cards. I mean, you never know—you might be a winner. The fact that I'm writing this article instead of vacationing in Tahiti should tip you off: Once again, the Lottery said I'm a loser.

You never know about the Lottery. But you can be sure about Father God, whose name is not "I might be," but "I Am." You can bank on Jesus, who has already won for us today the security of eternal life as His beloved sons and victorious fellowship as brothers. The world offers no jackpot like that.

No, I'm not on vacation. But I'm awfully thankful for what my Father's given me—including my work.

Today, I occasionally hear materially comfortable men scoff in disgust about "how terrible" it is that "poor people gamble away what little money they have." I can only acknowledge sadly that the Lottery is indeed "a tax on the poor," as others have noted, since most participants are low-income. But, having experienced myself the deeper human brokenness that underlies that truth, I can't share in the judgment of those whose comfort isolates them from temptation.

Instead, I'd rather challenge those of us men who have more food, clothing, and shelter than we really need to give thanks for what God has given us, by sharing it with others. Let's become a faithful community, caring and supporting each other as brothers—not a mass of individuals clinging desperately to our Lottery tickets.

We have nothing but our fear to lose—and the Kingdom of God to win.