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Proverbs 13:11, ESV

*¹¹ Wealth gained hastily will dwindle,
but whoever gathers little by little will increase it.*

Psalm 22:16–18, ESV

*¹⁶ For dogs encompass me;
a company of evildoers encircles me;
they have pierced my hands and feet—
¹⁷ I can count all my bones—
they stare and gloat over me;
¹⁸ they divide my garments among them,
and for my clothing they cast lots.*

Matthew 27:32–35, ESV

³² As they went out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. They compelled this man to carry his cross. ³³ And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), ³⁴ they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall, but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. ³⁵ And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots.

For my clothing they cast lots.

When I was a kid, people used to drive from LA to Las Vegas for the weekend. It was a five or six-hour drive, on a gently rolling road, through the desert. It was indeed beautiful. There were areas with scattered Joshua trees. But once people got to Las Vegas, they were hit with bright lights that shined 24/7. The casinos back

then would give people free food and cheap rooms – anything to lure them inside to gamble. My parents never went there; they believed that gambling was evil. I still believe this. Proverb 13:11 says this: ¹¹ *Wealth gained hastily will dwindle, but whoever gathers little by little will increase it.* This is from the English Standard Version. A better translation for a modern reader is from the New King James Version: ¹¹ *Wealth gained by dishonesty will be diminished, but he who gathers by labor will increase.* The lesson, of course, is that God blesses those who put in honest labor for their income. But when we gather money by mistreating or cheating others, we certainly are not blessed. It's amazing how relevant the ancient proverbs are today. It's the house that profits from gambling. Those casinos in Las Vegas, they are the ones that to this day gain their wealth dishonestly by exploiting the compulsion that some people have to gamble. There is something about the rush of taking money that you need to take care of yourself or your family and risking the loss of it in a split second – that is what the casinos count on. When I was a kid, I had a friend whose father was a gambler. He would go off to Las Vegas several times a year. I remember once being in my friend's house and not understanding why my friend's mother was so upset that her husband was leaving to go watch a show in Las Vegas and maybe do a little golfing. As I learned over time, he was really going there to gamble. He would lose every time, apparently,

and his family suffered as a result. One day when I was playing with my friend in his room, I heard his parents arguing. He was about to leave on one of his trips to Las Vegas. They were talking loudly. I remember it scaring me. Then suddenly, my friend's mother yelled: "If you leave, don't come back!" I'll get back to this.

One thing that's been bothering me a lot lately is the recent barrage of commercials on TV encouraging us to gamble online, via our cell phones. These commercials occur in the middle of NFL games. They are outlandish and lavish, showing a man dressed up as Caesar, with thousands of people essentially worshipping him as he proclaims in a loud voice that we should all get on our phones right now, install his gambling app – and start placing bets. We can bet not just on the outcome of games, apparently, but also on the instantaneous outcome of individual plays. It is a disturbing, disgusting attempt at drawing in people who cannot control their compulsions, and to get them to lose vast amounts of money in, well, seconds. Clearly, the goal is to recruit an entire new generation of young gamblers. There is a new Las Vegas out there and it is everywhere. You do not have to do what my friend's father did and get in your car and drive to Las Vegas. You can gamble anytime, all the time.

Psalm 22 is often used on Good Friday, when we commemorate the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. It begins with an agonized call for help. The Psalmist

faces death, and the words of the Psalm alternate between total desperation and trust in God. There are several places in the Psalm that seem to have strong parallels with the death of Jesus. Here is the beginning, which sounds very much like Jesus crying out to God the Father upon the cross:

*¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?
² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer,
and by night, but I find no rest.*

The Psalmist declares that people seek his death, his eradication:

*⁶ But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people.
⁷ All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads;*

When death seems close, the Psalmist declares this:

*¹⁶ For dogs encompass me; a company of evildoers encircles me;
they have pierced my hands and feet—
¹⁷ I can count all my bones— they stare and gloat over me;
¹⁸ they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.*

Now, how about that? At the bitter end, when some human is suffering beyond belief, what happens? They cast lots for his clothing – which they would later do after Jesus died on the cross. That’s how humans treated each other back then and this is how humans still treat each other. That’s how powerful the urge to

gamble is. It overwhelms our human decency. This is indeed what happens after

Jesus dies:

³²As they went out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. They compelled this man to carry his cross. ³³And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), ³⁴they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall, but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. ³⁵And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots.

Now, I don't think that we have a lot of compulsive gamblers here. But I am concerned about the state of our society, that we would glorify the use of technology to earn money in evil ways. It's politically incorrect to call anything evil. If you can do it technologically, then it's okay. By definition, if it doesn't involve actual physical violence, there is nothing wrong with it. The good news is that only a minority of our society is likely to be caught up in this new, instantaneous, global age of gambling. But sadly, it will be young people, those who have already been programmed to live according to the demands of their digital devices. Of course, gambling isn't the only problem. We are all being told to minimize our carbon footprint in order to protect the world. We're supposed to stop burning fossil fuels. But if you have money, the rules do not apply. Just one rocket launch where a billionaire can entertain himself by spending a few minutes in orbit, creates about 300 tons of carbon dioxide; in minutes, this dwarfs

the annual output of hundreds of cars. It's as much carbon dioxide as gets produced flying several hundred people from the U.S. to Europe. Space tourism is supposed to really take off; hundreds of these flights will apparently occur every year, but of course, you need to be wealthy to be on one of them. Just as we see with gambling, if you can do it technologically, it is perfectly fine.

The truth, though, is that all of us are guilty. Clothing workers in Asia, the people who make the things we wear, earn tiny amounts of money, and it's estimated that the large majority of them don't get enough to eat, at least not by our standards. These are people are in Cambodia, Bangladesh, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Haiti, India, Indonesia, and Myanmar. Cobalt and Lithium for our computers and electric car batteries is mined in places like the Congo and Chili. And yes, the people doing this work are often poorly paid; many of them are children, and the folks who get rich are, for the most part, in the U.S. and Europe.

But I'm not here to lay a guilt trip on you. There is hope and it lies in remembering that there are global truths and global, never-changing moral laws. Let me read to you the last ten verses of Psalm 22. The author is calling out to God. Even in his desperation, listen to what the Psalmist says:

²² *I will tell of your name to my brothers;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:*

²³ *You who fear the LORD, praise him!*

- All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him,
and stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!*
- ²⁴ *For he has not despised or abhorred
the affliction of the afflicted,
and he has not hidden his face from him,
but has heard, when he cried to him.*
- ²⁵ *From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will perform before those who fear him.*
- ²⁶ *The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the LORD!
May your hearts live forever!*
- ²⁷ *All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the LORD,
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before you.*
- ²⁸ *For kingship belongs to the LORD,
and he rules over the nations.*
- ²⁹ *All the prosperous of the earth eat and worship;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
even the one who could not keep himself alive.*
- ³⁰ *Posterity shall serve him;
it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation;*
- ³¹ *they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn,
that he has done it.*

The author still has faith. The author has hope that future generations will maintain their faith in God. The Psalmist refers to the offspring of Jacob, the son of Abraham. We are the spiritual descendants of Jacob. It's not really known when this Psalm was written, but certainly a good five hundred years before Jesus lived. The author of this Psalm holds out hope, faith that we will not succumb to

the corruption that has ensnared his society. It is up to us. I'm completely serious. We need to stick to our beliefs. We need to teach others what we know is true. We are not people who cast lots for the clothing of people who have just been killed. We do face a dramatic challenge. It's very hard to understand the global impact of what we do. But here is a very good metric that can be used to decide if we are living the way God wants us to live: does what we are doing today truly reflect our desire to model our lives on the life of Jesus?

I'd like to get back to my friend whose father liked to go to Las Vegas. I truly thought at the time that he went there to watch shows and relax. I was taught that gambling was evil, and I was a very innocent kid, and so it would never have occurred to me that he was going there to gamble. Let's call my friend Danny. It was a big family, with about five kids. They lived in a small house, with kids sharing bedrooms. I do remember that their car was often broken. When Danny's mother shouted that if Danny's father was going to go to Las Vegas he shouldn't come back, I noticed that Danny looked startled, even a bit scared. A couple of his siblings were there; they stopped what they were doing. No one said anything. Then Danny's father asked his wife if she really meant that. He sounded nervous – and I started to feel scared. She said, "Yes." Danny's father did not go anywhere. He stayed home. It was a while before the tension in

the house lessened, but by the end of that day, and I think it was a Saturday, Danny's dad was in the backyard playing catch with the two of us.

Let me say one last thing about gambling. Wendy and I have known one couple for over thirty years. Our grown kids are all about the same age. They are hard-working, extremely honest people who have raised their kids to live the same way. Periodically, the husband goes to Las Vegas, where he spends a very small amount of money entertaining himself gambling. That is obviously perfectly fine. What is wrong are all the people in our society right now who are making money fraudulently, exploiting people's weaknesses, and in no way making our society a better place for all of us to live. In the Gospel of Mark, just after he challenges us to follow him, Jesus predicts his own death, and says: ³⁶*For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?* This church is an extremely important place: it allows us to live according to that advice. Please pray with me.

God, help us live in this world without being corrupted by it. There are millions and millions of hardworking, godly people on this planet. But there are many who do not even believe they have a soul. Please lift them up and change them. Amen.