



The Put Off, Put On Principle *Christ-centered gambling recovery*

“Stop gambling and do something else. That sounds so simplistic, but trust me—it works. Many times ..., we focus our energies on trying not to gamble. But that isn’t enough”. —Wayne Burdick

“You have to fill your life with the positive, fill your life with the things that are of God, with the things that are responsible and wholesome. And then this [the addiction] will just be edged out.” —Dr. Wayne McDill

“God has given me some new kinds of behaviors, some new things to be doing.” —John

In college I had a friend named Mark. When I met Mark, he was in good physical shape. He ate healthy foods and exercised several times a week. After college, though, Mark’s health deteriorated. He gained thirty pounds, and his cholesterol level became too high.

Why did this happen? Mark adopted a lifestyle that was not good for him. With his new job and busy lifestyle, he stopped exercising regularly and started eating a steady diet of fast food and junk foods like ice cream, cake, soda pop, and chips. He also was not getting the sleep he needed.

Concerned about his health and at the advice of his doctor, Mark changed his lifestyle. He put aside his junk food diet and started eating healthy foods such as lean meats, breads, fruits, and

vegetables. He also started exercising more regularly and tried to get eight hours of sleep a night. In doing so, he lost thirty pounds, his cholesterol came down, and he felt better.

The secret to Mark's success was that he did two things. He *put off* his unhealthy lifestyle and *put on* a healthy lifestyle. A healthy life resulted.

The Put Off, Put On Principle

We call this idea of putting aside unhealthy behavior and replacing it with healthy and productive habits the “put off, put on” principle. If you are to overcome gambling, you, too, must implement the put off, put on principle. You must learn to *put off* gambling and all the habits associated with it, but you must not stop there. You must also *put on* healthy lifestyle habits.

Where does the put off, put on principle come from? It comes from the Bible. In Romans 13:12 we are told: “Therefore let us *lay aside* the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.” This verse tells us to put aside behaviors and actions that are wrong and to put on a lifestyle that is pleasing to God, who lives in the light.

Ephesians 4:22 and 4:25 also discuss the put off, put on principle. Ephesians 4:22 says we must “*lay aside* the old self.” The “old self” is the person we were before we knew Jesus as our Savior. In addition, Ephesians 4:25 says, “*Put on* the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of truth.” In addition to putting off your old ways of living, you are to put on the new life you have in Jesus Christ—the life that focuses on righteousness and holiness.

How does this put off, put on principle work practically? The apostle Paul tells us how. He starts with the example of lying. What if a person has a problem with lying? Ephesians 4:25 says, “Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with

his neighbor.” Do you see the point here? If a person has a problem with lying, he must stop all falsehoods and start telling the truth. In other words, he must put off lying and put on telling the truth. The person who has truly overcome lying is not the person who simply says, “I have not lied in a while.” It is the person who has stopped lying and has started telling the truth in all things.

Paul gives another example in Ephesians 4:28. This example involves people who are guilty of stealing. “He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good.” What must a person who is guilty of stealing do? First, he must stop stealing. Second, he must labor or work with his own hands. When people steal, they are wrongfully taking something that they did not work for. The answer for those guilty of stealing, then, is to stop stealing *and* start working. Both elements must be there.

The person who has truly overcome stealing is not the person who says, “Hey, I haven’t stolen anything in a while.” The person who has truly overcome stealing says, “Not only have I not stolen anything recently, I have learned to work hard for those things that I own.”

In some recovery programs, much of the emphasis is on getting people with addictions to stop a certain behavior, but not much is said about replacing that behavior with good habits. This approach, though, is not enough. Why is it not enough for you to simply focus on *not* doing something?

The first reason is that you may become more obsessed with the very activity you are trying to stop. As Dr. Erwin Lutzer points out:

If we focus on simply not doing something, we are probably going to do it. The very fact that we are drawn toward it and focusing on it increases the power of the temptation.

Dr. Lutzer also shared with us an example that will help you understand this point. We have paraphrased what he said:

If we say to you, “Think of the number 7,” you will naturally think of the number 7. Now, if we say, “Stop thinking of the number 7 immediately,” what happens? You will probably keep thinking of the number 7. Why? You cannot remove something from your mind by simply trying not to think about it.

What would happen, though, if we said, “Tell me about your mother”? In the process of thinking about your mother and talking about her, you would automatically forget about the number 7. Why? By telling us about your mother, you would push the idea of the number 7 from your mind.

The same principle applies to gambling. When it comes to defeating gambling, you cannot simply focus on not gambling. Doing so will probably make you more consumed with it. You will need to get your mind on other matters.

There is a second reason why it is not enough to simply focus on not gambling. When you initially stop doing an activity like gambling, you create a vacuum or a gap in your life. For example, if you usually go to the casino for three hours on Wednesday nights and then stop, there is a three-hour vacuum that needs to be filled.

What you do with these three hours is important. If you just sit around the house and do nothing but think about how much fun you would have if you were at the casino, you will probably end up going back to the casino eventually. Why? You have not replaced the vacuum in your life with something productive and good. If you don’t fill that gap correctly, you will end up going back to your old gambling ways. By nature, we are creatures of habit. We usually tend to fall back on old behaviors if we do not consciously establish new behaviors to take their place. You must fill the vacuum.

Applying the Put Off, Put On Principle

Putting off your gambling habits and replacing them with productive habits will probably not be easy at first. After all, you have

adopted a lifestyle of destructive thoughts and habits that have continued for some time now. Old habits, including gambling habits, are hard to break. That is why you must have a specific plan to put the put off, put on principle into action.

In implementing the put off, put on principle, we are asking you to do two main things. First, evaluate your thoughts and actions that contribute to and are part of your gambling problem. Second, come up with healthy substitutes for them.

Now let's get specific on how you can do this. You will need to use the put off, put on principle in three areas: (1) the *activities* you do, (2) the *people* you see, and (3) the *thoughts* you have.

Activities

First, let's start with the *activities* you do. To overcome gambling, you must put off activities associated with gambling and start doing activities that will help you as a person. For example, if you normally go to the local casino on Wednesday nights, try replacing that activity by going to church programs instead (many churches offer programs and activities on Wednesdays). Or, designate Wednesday night as family night at home. You can help your children with their homework, help your wife with the garden, or just hang out with your family, talking with them and discussing how they are doing. Consider coaching or helping out with Little League baseball practice at the local ball field. These are just a few examples of productive things you can do.

Remember, you need to replace gambling with productive activities. These new activities may not give you the rush or excitement that gambling brought, but they are healthy and are good for you and your family. Plus, as you get into the habit of participating in healthy activities on a regular basis, you will eventually begin to enjoy them.

At this point you may be saying, “This sounds good in theory, but does it really work?” The answer is Yes. Just ask Andy. Andy was a compulsive gambler whose life was torn apart by gambling. Over a fourteen-year period, Andy lost about \$100,000 at the racetrack. Andy, though, is a living example of a person who found peace (and fun) by replacing gambling with healthy activities:

I got involved with community service and events at church. I love to cook, so I've been involved with several cooking events. Our church had a Thanksgiving dinner with 200 people. I walked out of the kitchen dead tired, but inside I felt good. I also get joy out of putting chairs away after the Sunday service. I help out the custodian so he does not have to do it all himself. There's a little sports program in the summer for youth that I coach at for one week. It just gives me a great, great feeling inside knowing I'm doing these things. The more I give, the more I get. I've been real excited to serve in ministry as a small group leader—to do lots of events at my church, which are just voluntary activities.

People

Next, you will also need to apply the put off, put on principle in the area of the *people* you associate with. If you have a gambling buddy or if you associate with any person who tempts you to gamble, you may need to cut off that relationship at least for a while. The Bible says, “Bad company corrupts good morals” (1 Corinthians 15:33). The general truth in this verse is that it is hard to overcome the company you keep. If you hang out with people who are doing unproductive or unhealthy activities, they will often influence you. Put simply, if you want to overcome gambling, you cannot hang around people who gamble or people who tempt you to gamble.

The goal here is not to end friendships or to be unkind to people. We are asking, though, that you do not put yourself in social settings where the presence of a particular person will tempt you or cause you to gamble. If the only relationship you have with a person is in a gambling context, you will need to end that relationship. If you

have a friend that you gamble with at times, kindly tell him that you are no longer going gambling with him and that you do not want to discuss anything related to gambling anymore. If this person agrees and does not present a temptation to you, the relationship can continue. If this person does not respect your request or still presents a temptation to you, it is best if the relationship is severed at least for a while.

Thoughts

Lastly, you will need to apply the put off, put principle to your *thought life*. You will need to replace thoughts about gambling with good thoughts. There are two Bible verses in this regard that you should heed. Second Corinthians 10:5 says we must “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” Next, you need to apply Paul’s instruction in Philippians 4:8: “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”

In looking at these verses, two points become clear. First, you must arrest or take captive any thoughts that come into your mind that are not pleasing to God. This includes all thoughts about gambling. Second, you must actively make yourself think about those things that are good and right.

For instance, you may have the thought, “I have this incredible urge to gamble; I have got to go play blackjack.” Or, “I’ve worked hard today; I deserve a little fun. I’ll just go gamble a little bit tonight.” How do you respond to these thoughts? You need to try to remove these thoughts and replace them with God-honoring ones. How specifically can you do this? When unhealthy thoughts occur, apply the following steps:

First, realize that tempting thoughts about gambling are normal, but you do not have to dwell on them or act upon them. If they come, don’t be too hard on yourself. You have been thinking about

gambling for so long now that these thoughts will probably not vanish overnight. What you need to do is try to remove them from your mind as quickly as possible before you act upon them. Steven, a former gambler, admits that he still has thoughts of gambling. He realizes these thoughts are normal, but he also relies on God to help him:

I think a person, an addict, always has those feeling and thoughts, and when you deny the thoughts, or you deny that you've got those feelings, then I think that you put yourself in jeopardy. I think you have to acknowledge you've got them, but then you've got to rely upon God and the Holy Spirit to give you the victory.

Second, realize that God has given you His power to overcome tempting thoughts. That is why Paul could say, "take captive every thought" and "think about such [good] things." Controlling your thoughts can be done. Don't say, "Oh, I can't help having these thoughts" or "I might as well give in to them." John Eades, a former gambler who now helps problem gamblers, refers to this type of thinking as "stinkin' thinkin'" He says, "Stinkin' thinkin' occurs when your mind is trying to move you toward gambling." It includes all the rationalizations and excuses you come up with so that you can gamble.

Third, take action to remove stinkin' thinking.' Refuse to dwell on the ideas related to gambling. Acknowledge that these thoughts are not healthy. Pray to God. Read or recite Bible verses. Flee the temptation by doing something else that will force your mind to focus on other things. If you have to think about gambling, think about the negative consequences acting out will bring, like shame, a sense of failure, disappointed family members, loss of money, etc. In sum, don't just give in to tempting thoughts. Have a plan for dealing with the temptation.

Fourth, in addition to having a plan to deal with negative thoughts, practice thinking about good things. Let's face it. The more you train yourself to think positively, the less opportunity there will be for negative thoughts and temptations to creep into your mind.

Romans 12:2 speaks about this when it says, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” As you renew your mind with good things, you will be transformed and act like a new person.

John Eades has specifically applied the truth of Romans 12:2 and has found his life and mind renewed. “I’ve been exposed to a lot of new material in my own life,” he says. “I think differently, and I look at things through a Christian perspective now.”

Do you want to renew your mind and have the same uplifting experience as John? The following are some strategies for filling your mind with the things of God. Do the following on a daily basis:

1. Read the Bible at least 10 minutes a day.
2. Set aside 5 minutes a day to pray to God (and pray to God at various times throughout the day)
3. Memorize Bible verses.
4. Focus on healthy and constructive thoughts related to God, family, church, and helping others.
5. Recite Bible verses when you have negative thoughts.

Putting On Constructive Behavior

At this point you may agree that you need to put off bad activities and thoughts and put on positive behaviors, but you may still be a little fuzzy about how to do this. We are going to help you identify ways to contribute to a healthy lifestyle.

In this section we have listed four categories: (1) skills and talents, (2) home/family activities, (3) church service, and (4) community service. We want you to set aside about half an hour to think through your abilities and possible areas of where you can be of help.

Skills and Talents

By becoming consumed with gambling, you have probably ignored some of the talents and skills you have. It's time to become reacquainted with the abilities God has given you. What are you good at? Is it fixing cars? Gardening? Home improvement? Photography? Music? Singing? Coaching? Writing? Sewing? Basketball? Golfing?

Take a few minutes and evaluate what you are good at. Put down your top three or four healthy skills and/or talents.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Now think through some ways you can use your skills and talents. If you are good at gardening, is there some gardening that needs to be done at your house? If you are good at coaching, is there a Little League team in your area that could use your help?

List some specific ways you can use your skills and talents.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Home/Family Activities

As a problem gambler, you have probably ignored your family. One of the best ways to put on a healthy lifestyle is to be involved with your spouse and children. Some examples of home and family activities include participating in family meals, fixing the house, mowing the yard, taking your daughter to dance class, going to your

son's ball games, taking your wife on a date, discussing family plans with your husband, having Bible study with your family, praying with your family, having a game night.

What are some home-based and family activities you can participate in that will help your family grow together?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Church Activities

One of the best ways to be constructive and helpful with your time is to be involved with your church. At a minimum, get involved with the major church services on Sunday. Go to Sunday school. Go to the morning worship service. If your church has a worship service on Sunday night, go to that as well. Many churches have activities for the family on Wednesday night. Consider helping out and using your spiritual gifts at your church. Help in the church library. Volunteer to help clean the building. Help with kids' programs. Become a driver for the van ministry.

"I pray for God to present me with opportunities in the church, so I can help people any way I can," says Mike.

What are some activities at church you can be involved with? What are some ways you can serve your church?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Community Service

Think of ways you can benefit your community. Consider visiting nursing homes. Do yard work for elderly and disabled people. Get involved with schools, orphanages, health care, recreational centers, and community development projects. Take note of what some of our former gamblers have done.

“I have two sons, and we went and worked the soup kitchen over Christmas and it was nice,” says Jim. “It was great to see them pitch in and teach them the right things to do instead of having them say, ‘Hey, my dad’s a compulsive gambler.’”

“I do a lot of volunteer work. I help other people,” says Max.

“I’m gonna try and serve others unconditionally. That’s the way I want to live,” states Mark.

What are some community service activities you can become involved with?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Get Started

Do you see the point? Overcoming gambling means putting off gambling and putting on healthy lifestyle habits. It means using your skills and talents and getting involved with your family, church, and the community. Get so involved with good things that you don’t have time for gambling. This is what Tom did. “Now I often think, ‘How did I even have time to gamble?’ because of everything that’s going on in my life,” he says.

In this chapter, we have mentioned John several times. As mentioned in chapter one, John is a former gambler who almost took his

own life because of gambling. One day after losing at the casinos, John reached for a gun in the glove box of his car with the purpose of ending his life. Fortunately, the gun was not there and John lived. God has worked in his life, and John now knows what it's like to experience victory by having a relationship with Jesus and adopting the biblical principle of "put off, put on."

"I still have urges to gamble," John says. "I just now have a way of responding to those urges in a way that I had not known previously." How does he do this?

God has given me some new kinds of behaviors, some new things to be doing which have been very helpful. I became heavily involved with church. I took discipleship classes. I went to Sunday school. God told me that I needed to do something about the people around town that couldn't eat because they were so poor, so we developed a thing called Christian Café where we could start feeding people.

John's transformation has been so great that he has gone from being a problem gambler on the verge of suicide to being an author and a pastor. John is now the senior pastor at the Shiloh United Methodist Church in Tennessee. "I'm now a pastor. That blows my mind!" he says. "What a difference God can make in your life."

When you adopt the put off, put on principle, you too will see what a difference God can make in your life.

Excerpted from *Chance to Change: Christ-centered Gambling Recovery* by Mike Vlach, to be published in the future as a companion to the *Chance to Change* gambling support group program produced by Church Initiative. For more information, visit www.chancetochange.org or call Church Initiative at 800-395-5755.

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