

Poker and the Game of Life
Address to 1st Annual Texas Hold 'Em Tournament
Phoenix, AZ April 11, 2007

Introductory Testimony

I've had a long history with poker, long enough to have experienced some tough times. For example in College at UC Berkeley, I used to play all of the time in the Student Union, and then go over to somebody's apartment for an all night game. I remember one night having the worse feeling inside after staying up all night only to lose a lot of money and facing the prospect of still having to go to class. Because of playing poker, I was living a loser's life. One of my many low points came after I lost my girlfriend's (now my wife) life savings in a poker game. She got so disgusted that she broke up with me. Later on, I convinced her to marry me and we went to Lake Tahoe, Nevada for our honeymoon. There, in the casinos, I lost all of our wedding money in blackjack and at 2:30 in the morning convinced her to let me drive to the South Shore to use what little we had left to try to win it back. Fortunately (or perhaps unfortunately) I got all but about \$80 back. However, as we drove back to our hotel as the dawn was breaking, my wife must have known that she had just made a big mistake.

Nine days later, I was shipped off to Germany to serve time on a Hawk Surface to Air Missile site before getting my turn in Vietnam. After about 16 months of immaturity and self-centeredness on my part, my wife announced that she was leaving me and returning home to the States. It was then that my life turned around when a couple, he from Lexington Kentucky and she from Hanford California, took us into their home and shared with us the story of Jesus Christ. At that time, I was hit by the thought that God actually loved me and wanted a relationship with me. This was especially poignant to me because my own father, did not love me and deserted our family when I was 3 years old. Anyway, my life turned around in an amazing way after I became a Christian in Giessen, Germany, 35 years ago this month. You may chalk it up to coincidence, but if I told you the story of my life, you would think you were hearing the Chinese version of Forrest Gump.

Throughout these years, however, I have never lost my interest in gambling. Maybe it's in my Chinese Blood, but I have always had it. Now that I am a Christian, I see gambling from the perspective of God. You would be surprised to learn that one cannot find a prohibition against gambling in the Bible. Now the Bible says that the *love of money* is the "Root of all Evil" (I Tim 6) but money itself is not evil, it is neutral. The Book of Proverbs seems to condone craps when it says: "Man throws the dice but God makes the spots come up!" (Prov 16:33).

Furthermore, stories from the Bible seem to show that God loves risk takers. In fact, all of life is constructed so that we must continuously make decisions in the face of uncertainty. *Being a winner in the game of life is like being a winner at the game of poker. It is not only about playing good cards – it's also about making good decisions.*

The biggest decision we must all make in this life is whether or not there is a God and whether or not it matters to your bottom line to follow the precepts of His Son, Jesus Christ. The Christian religion is not a religion of certainty, but a religion of faith. In fact in the Book of Hebrews, God says that without faith, it is impossible to please Him. The best definition of faith that I have come across is "*commitment before knowing*". Doesn't that sound like what we do when we play poker? The stakes are high, but I believe that a correct decision about God yields favorable returns both in this life and the life to come. I can testify to you today that this has been true for me. The Bible says in the same verse that I quoted before – "*that he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him*".

Tonight, at this first annual Phoenix Invitational Christian poker tournament, I would like to talk to you about the relationship between being a Christian and playing "**Texas Hold 'em**" poker. Some might frown over my attempt to bring the seediness of my background into a message about the value of becoming a Christian, but to me, my story is an example of how God is in the business of taking "**rags**" & "**garbage**" and turning it into a hand full of "Hope" and "Purpose".

Believing in God is a bet

I am not like most Christians, because I don't think one can be certain there is a God out there. Therefore I like to think that believing in God is like making a bet. Oh sure we all have heard people talk about God as if they are so certain but I don't see how one can be certain about an invisible God. Besides, if there is a God, why is there so much bad things happening in the world? Actually, most people think that it is a riskier bet to be an atheist. The reason why I am calling it a bet is because there is risk associated with being wrong. The bet, whichever way you bet it, does cost you something, if you lose.

For example, if the “sucka” who believes in God and orders his life to try to be good in a “dog eat dog world” *is wrong*, then he is going to be “walked all over”, probably miss opportunities to get ahead, and certainly miss opportunities for a little elicit recreation. I think elicit recreation is fun.

On the other hand, if the skeptic who does not believe in God, lives his life as if there is no payback in eternity *is wrong*, then he is going to hell for all eternity. Actually, come to think of it, the risk/reward ratio of these two bets is quite unbalanced.

Furthermore, the more you put into the “**pot**” the more you stand to gain or lose so it is not just a simple “either or” situation. For example, one can play the Christian game in an “**aggressive**” fashion so that it becomes your whole life, or one can play it in a “**penny ante**” fashion as if it did not matter much. Just like in playing Texas Hold ‘Em, the amount of gain or loss that can be expected is commensurate with the amount one is willing to risk.

I like to think of becoming a Christian as a big bet because I think there is a “**monster pot**” to be won. That is, I believe that there are big benefits to being a Christian, not only in this life, but especially in the life to come. Now, I don't want to list the benefits that you get in this life, like good marriage, good friends, good kids, good experiences, because I think it is possible to get this stuff without being a Christian

(i.e. the Mormons seem to have a good family life and they are not Christians – different Bible). But according to Matthew Chap 6 and other places in the Bible, there are rewards in heaven for those who make the *various kinds of bets* on earth and win a payoff in the afterlife. If the rewards of betting on God in this life do not outweigh the cost of the bet, or the cost of being wrong, then it would not be a bet worth making. Since a big part of the payoff does not happen until after we die, the decision to become a Christian is quite a sizeable bet. If there were no life after death, however, I truly don't think it would be worth it to be a Christian in this life.

The Game of Life is like poker

The question of whether there is a God or not is actually not a simple bet. After calling the blinds, there is always the risk of a raise and then certainly there will be something to do after the flop. So it is with the question of God and the challenge to become a Christian. Most people can concede the existence of a God and I would compare this to “**limping in**” to a pot. But the bigger question is, what does this God want from me and does it make any difference to me how I live my life on earth? This is a more complicated issue and it calls for making another decision, especially when your initial bet gets “**bumped**”.

I like to think “**pocket cards**” as the hand that life deals you, things that you never get a chance to vote on. For example, we do not vote on what sex we are born, our race, the color of our hair, our height, our intelligence, what kind of parents we have or what time of history we are born into. When I travel to China and see all the Chinese people over there, I think about what caused me to be born and raised in America? I am grateful to God for the hand that I have been dealt.

I like to think of the “**flop**” as the circumstances you get handed at various times in life. People can face the same flop, but choose to deal with it differently. When 360 people got accepted to Stanford Business School in 1973, four of us decided to spend time in a little Stanford Christian Fellowship Bible Study while others drank a lot of beer. That time for me started my Biblical foundation which has helped me

throughout my life. When 6,000 fathers caught an Autistic Son card in 1975, some gave up their faith in God, some institutionalized the kid, and many got divorced. My wife and I decided to thank God for our son David and decided to play the card to the maximum Glory of God. Today, at 31 years old, David still lives with us and is one of the biggest blessings to not only us, but to many other people as well.

Anyway, suffice it to say that there are many ways to play a flop and the game involves a series of betting decisions. Although I do not have time to develop the analogy for each card, I think the “**turn card**” or “**4th street**”, is hitting mid-life decisions and catching the “**River**” card” can be seen as your last chance in life to make a rationale decision about God, that is, before the Judgment, or “**showdown**”.

The “All In” bet

The thing that makes Texas Hold ‘em the greatest poker game in the world and the game of choice to run the WSOP (World Series of Poker) in, is the “**All In**” bet. This “All in” Bet requires you to put everything you have in to the pot to call a bet and therefore is the key pivotal point of the game. It is nasty because theoretically, in a tournament, if someone puts you all in, you could be finished after the first hand. During the course of a game, if a player has built a “**big stack**”, he feels required to protect that stack thus, making it harder to call an “**all in**” bet during later stages of the game. It is a true test of your mettle to be able to call someone that puts you all in.

This is amazingly exactly how God plays poker with you. There will come a time, (I don’t think it happens in the beginning) when God will put you all in. In other words, He says to you, I want all of you or nothing. He says, that nothing short of total commitment and trust will be necessary for you to have a full and satisfactory relationship with Him. But unlike the poker moment of being asked to go “all in”, when God asks you to go “All In” it is actually a moment designed to give you a big win (or so I am betting). Even though God can read your “**tells**” and God always has the better hand, if He puts you All in and you Call Him, you are a certain winner, and a big winner at that.

Slow Playing the Hand

One of the most common distinctives of the amateur player is to “**slow play**” the hand, that is, to lay low and not bet the hand commensurate with its strength. The strategy here is to catch someone unawares and hopefully gain a big pot. However, most professionals say that slow playing is plain dangerous. It is dangerous because when you slow play, you give an opponent a chance to make a bigger hand at a minimal cost. This is absolutely true, because if a person wants to draw to a flush, the fact that you slow play the hand, can actually help him to decide to stay in when he might have otherwise folded. Also, as long as there is some chance for the other guy to make something, you must make him pay. Don’t allow your big hand to pay you nothing. The time people will pay to stay in the hand is during the early rounds before the flop and before the turn. So often I have slow played a “big” hand only to see everyone drop out when I finally get ready to bet.

So it is also with slow playing your hand with God. It is the wrong move. Most people don’t want to bet their hand, they just like to stay on the fence. They think that they can deal with the question of God later, and basically make up their minds to acknowledge his presence and the fact that they are dependent upon Him at a later stage in life. Maybe they want to have fun first, before getting their life straight. But this strategy is not only wrong, it is dangerous; dangerous not because God is going to pull a hand on you, He always has the “**nut flush**” anyway. It is dangerous because the chance to make a decision may not come again. You could get hit by a bus or be in the World Trade Center at the wrong time. Furthermore, in slow playing the hand, you actually get into the habit of slow playing and never get around to addressing the big questions in life: What is the meaning of life? Why am I here? What happens after we die? The best strategy is to play fast on the flop. Why wait on the chance to have a relationship with the living God. If He is out there, wouldn’t you like to know sooner rather than later?

The time to make a bet on the hand is right now. Dr. Francis Collins, director of the Human Genome Project said in his most recent book, “The language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief”: I had always assumed that faith was based on purely emotional and irrational arguments, and was astounded to discover that one could build a very strong case for the plausibility of the existence of God on purely rational grounds.

Actually, there is a time when it is OK to slow play the hand and that is if you “**flop quads**” or something like “**Aces full**”. Then you do want to slow play to give an opponent a chance to make some kind of hand on the turn or river. This is the way God seems to be playing His hand; He is always slow playing it! He always has the winning hand but he lets us stay in the game hoping that we will make the right decision for Him. But just because God is slow playing His hand, we should not mistake this for a sign of weakness.

Tells

A “**tell**” is a detectable change in a player's behavior or demeanor that gives clues to that player's assessment of their hand. For example, when a player takes a double look at his cards, or keep his hands over his cards in a protective fashion, it could be a sign that he has a big hand. Another sign of a player trying to disguise a strong hand could be disinterest, leaning back, casual conversation or otherwise acting meek or mild. On the other hand, if a player slams a stack of chips down forcefully and directly gazes at his opponent, it may be because he is hoping to discourage you from calling because he has a weak hand. A player gains an advantage if he observes another player's tell, particularly if the tell is unconscious and reliable. But watch out, because some players may fake tells hoping to induce you into making a mistake through a false reading.

God Himself also has many “tells” for those who are paying attention, but unlike shifty poker players who want to induce you to make a mistake, God does not give false readings about Himself. You can gain a big advantage for your self if you notice God’s tells.

Take our planet earth, for example, it has a lot of tells. It has the right kind of planetary rotation, the right kind of moon, the right kind of ozone layer, just the right amount of oxygen quantity in the atmosphere and the right electromagnetic field to sustain life. Carl Sagan when he was alive listed about 4-5 factors that were needed for life to exist on a planet, but today, scientists have identified more than 30 factors and counting, needed on a planet to support life. The chances of one planet having all of these conditions like earth has is something like 1 in a number with 5000 zeros. It is mathematically impossible. The earth is a life friendly planet because of the existence of the large planet Jupiter out there, so massive that it pulls meteorites and other space debris into it before it can hit the earth. If the earth were just 2% closer to the sun, we would all burn up; if just a little bit farther away, we would all freeze, etc. etc.

Another “**tell**” comes from seeing the small hidden world of Micro-Biology. Those scientists who are working to read the 3.1 billion letters of the human genome marvel at the elegance and complexity of the DNA as the information molecule of all living things. The answers to many of life’s mysteries are “tells” that point to a creator. Why does mathematics work? How did the universe have its beginnings? Why do humans, unlike animals have a moral sense?

God has left us hundreds of “**tells**” out there that point to Him, but the greatest “**tell**” of them all is the Bible. Written over a span of 40 generations, by over 40 different authors from various walks of life, it is an absolutely unique book in that it is not an anthology of stories, but one story about God’s love through Jesus Christ. The Bible has an inner life of its own, it speaks incitefully about relationships, talks about real life things such as sex and money and speaks about many unknown things like what happens after we die. Most importantly, those who read the Bible get changed by it, it is that powerful. It is the world’s best selling book.

But ultimately, in spite of all the “tells” about God, a bet still has to be made. But before you can make that bet, you need to learn how to fold your own hand.

Know when to Fold ‘Em

One of the hardest moments in Poker is going from the confidence of having a winning hand to being hit with the realization that someone has pulled something that can beat you. When you face a “**re-raise**” your gut tells you that you’ve lost, but you can’t toss ‘em in. Our pride screams at us to stay in the hand, but we can really get hurt if we don’t know how to walk away. The sign of a weak player is one that stays in the wrong game too long, throwing good money after bad.

So it is with the decision to become a Christian. Someone once said that our pride is the last thing to leave us and the first thing to come back. Pride is what keeps us from throwing in a losing hand and living to play another day. When we play cards with God, the best thing to do is to acknowledge His supremacy and not foolishly try to take over His position as number One. In fact, it does take a lot of faith to go “all in” with Him, but the counter intuitive thing is that folding your own meager “**rags**” results in an unexpected “**bankroll**”. Why not give your life to Him like I did? What is it about your life that you are so proud of? I would rather play the game of Life with God on my side than have to be “**drawing dead**” all the time.

Conclusion

The Christian life is not a boring life, but like a good poker tournament, it is full of exciting turns, surprises and adventure. Sure there are times when we run into the occasional rough patch but the important thing is to develop a solid mental approach to the game. Having a relationship with God helps you to focus your attention in productive ways and helps you to stick to your game plan even during the times when you are “**under the gun**”. The problem with many people is that they refuse to admit their sins and attribute their poor performance to bad luck. Instead, like being in the middle position of a betting sequence, you should study the “**betting patterns**” of those Christians who are ahead of you and make the right decision for God. If you do, you will discover over the long haul, that in poker as well as the game of life, luck has nothing to do with being a winner.