

God's Truth on Your Secret Sexual Sin

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The Bible is not silent on the subject of masturbation. It does not leave us guessing. It's true that Scripture never mentions masturbation specifically. However, because the Bible does speak thoroughly and explicitly about sexuality and sinful lust, it doesn't have to speak explicitly about something so closely related as masturbation.

Let's look at two ways we can know that the Bible speaks to masturbation without ever naming it.

First, consider that if masturbation is extremely common (as are most sins), and nearly always associated with sinful lust, we can safely assume the same was true in the ancient world. So think of Jesus delivering the Sermon on the Mount. He essentially said "to imagine having sex with a woman is a kind of adultery" (Matt. 5:28). Don't you think masturbation is a clear application and exactly the kind of action He was thinking about?

Second, consider that the Bible never refers directly to abortion. Yet because Scripture speaks clearly about the value of human life and the sin of murder, we are right to conclude that abortion is sin. In almost precisely the same way, because Scripture speaks clearly about the power of sexuality and the sin of lust, we can conclude that masturbation is nearly always sinful. In each case the specific action is so closely linked to the larger category of sin that the connection and shared moral status are simply obvious.

The Damage Done

Why, exactly, is masturbation sinful? Most importantly, just like any other sin, because it violates God's holiness. Masturbation is against God, against His ways and His purposes for how men and women are to relate to one another in a marital union that reflects the relationship of Christ to the Church.

Masturbation is also sinful because it compromises us. We are made in God's image. We are meant to glorify Him in every aspect of our lives, and masturbation hinders us in this mission in two principal ways—by polluting our minds and by inclining us to isolation.

Mind Pollution

Sexual gratification, of course, is not merely a physical act, but one that engages the mind, often quite intensely. During masturbation, pornographic images, whether seen externally or visualized internally or just plain imagined, nearly always provide a kind of fuel. Indeed, the vast majority of the time, these fantasies are nearly impossible to separate from the masturbation itself. This type of fantasy can be dangerous in at least two ways.

First, as most adults have learned the hard way, reality is rarely as wonderful as fantasy. Many people create expectations for sex that reality cannot meet. In fantasy everything always works, the other person is always willing and able to participate. In other words, it is nothing like real life. And in that way fantasy eventually and inevitably forms unhealthy and unrealistic expectations of sex.

Second, just as sex scenes in movies rarely involve married couples who can, before God, legitimately enjoy sex, fantasy will rarely revolve around legitimate sexual partners. In theory, it is perfectly fine for a woman to dream of a sexual encounter with her husband, but beyond that God gives us no right to fantasize, even about a pretend husband or a person who may one day be a husband. Masturbation, even under those circumstances, may encourage any woman to fill her mind and desires and fantasies with thoughts of other men. And a single Christian woman, having no God-given partner with whom she can consummate sexual desire, simply has no legitimate reason for pursuing sexual fantasy at all.

Some will protest that when they masturbate it is merely a physical act, something done to relieve stress or boredom. They will insist that they do not succumb to thinking inappropriate thoughts. I am extremely skeptical of these claims, but I do not dismiss them, because I cannot see into anyone else's heart or read anyone else's mind. But even assuming, for the sake of argument, that a small proportion of women masturbate without any pornographic images or fantasies in their heads, there is still at least one powerful reason why masturbation is so harmful.

Isolation

A close examination of the Bible's teaching on sexuality uncovers no reason to believe that God ever intended sex to be a private pursuit. Indeed, the heart and soul of sexuality is the giving and receiving of sexual pleasure between two people—one husband and one wife. Sex is intended to be a means of mutual fulfillment, an expression of love in which a husband thinks foremost of his wife and the wife thinks foremost of her husband. It is a uniquely powerful means by which husband and wife can fulfill the Lord's command to esteem another higher than oneself. As they fulfill each other's needs, they also have their own needs fulfilled. It is a beautiful picture of intimacy! As any married couple can testify, the more selfless the sex, the better sex becomes. The more each spouse seeks to please the other, the more fulfilling, gratifying, and beautiful the experience.

This mutual giving and receiving, the heart of God's purpose for sexuality, is exactly what masturbation does not and cannot provide. Masturbation strips sexuality of its divine purpose of mutual fulfillment. Where legitimate sexual expression is meant to produce unity, masturbation produces isolation and division. Masturbation is inherently self-centered. An act meant to be shared toward two people is completely and exclusively about one person, all alone. Masturbation deeply undermines a woman's ability to deny and resist her most self-centered, sinful, isolationist tendencies.

Masturbation simply cannot fulfill God's design for sexuality, and thus has no place in the life of one who calls herself a Christian.

But What About the Guilt?

What about the shame that makes young girls fear being caught and found out and shamed? Should we try to just sweep the guilt away? In the name of preserving us from pain, too much of the advice we receive teaches us to ignore our moral conscience. Better to warp our souls, it seems, than to stress our psyches.

Speak honestly and openly to young people, however, and they do want to talk about their struggles with masturbation. They do want to be reassured that it is wrong and that they can and must overcome it. The guilt they feel is not irrational, but a manifestation of God's grace. Like a nerve ending that tells you to take a stone out of your shoe before you begin to bleed, such guilt is pain with a corrective purpose.

It's important to clarify what we should be guilty about in the first place. (As John Piper might say, "Don't waste your guilt!") Masturbation is obviously a very graphic act, so it can be natural to focus on that act as the essential problem. Young people generally feel bad because they have masturbated (or been strongly tempted to). But masturbation is really only an outward manifestation of an inner problem. There is guilt and emotional pain and a sense of being dirty within, because the act of masturbation has revealed the corruption continually dwelling within us. Yes, the act of masturbation is wrong in and of itself, as reflected in Paul's command to cultivate self-control. But the only reason it happens to begin with is because of indwelling sin. As Josh Harris writes in *Sex Is Not The Problem (Lust Is)*, "masturbation isn't a filthy habit that makes people dirty. It only reveals the dirt that's already in our hearts." So while masturbation does not make anyone filthy, it does take a mental and spiritual toll as girls struggle with feelings of guilt, remorse, and shame. Unfortunately, for most people, guilt alone is not enough to curb our sinful behaviors.

Sadly, though, for many Christian young women, guilt over masturbation can become so extreme that it begins to define their spiritual state. Some even begin to question their salvation, seeing themselves exclusively through the lens of this persistent sin. There is no doubt this is a serious sin, but it does not begin to deserve such prominence. "When we inflate the importance of this act," Josh Harris writes wisely, "we'll either overlook the many evidences of God's work in us or we'll ignore other more serious expressions of lust that God wants us to address."

If you struggle with this sin, know for certain that there is hope for you, hope for real change. Do not seek reassurance in the cold comfort that "everyone does it." The way to avoid the agony of guilt is not to ignore sin or make some vain effort to convince yourself it's innocuous. The solution to guilt is to focus on the finished work of Christ on the cross. Take comfort in the good news of the gospel. The blood of Jesus was shed for sins like this one, and the power of the Holy Spirit has been given to us so that we can overcome sin. Masturbation is not a sin beyond the power of God. You can be set free.