



The Marriage Bed

Sex and Intimacy for Married Christians

Is Masturbation a Sin? For teens and their parents

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Guest Author

The following article was written by Dale Kaufman, a married father of two boys a youth pastor of over 20 years, and a member of The Marriage Bed's board of directors. This article was originally written in response to a question from a mother of teenage boys, who wished to help her sons with the issue of masturbation. The article was subsequently published in a professional journal, where it caused some controversy. We are very thankful to Dale for letting us add this outstanding article here.

IS MASTURBATION SIN?

Masturbation is perhaps one of the most debated--yet rarely solved--subjects in the church. The views and opinions about masturbation, its effects, and consequences (especially spiritual) have been swirling through the church probably since it first began. This paper is an effort to add another voice to the mass of opinion. In reality, it cannot be clearly said that the act of masturbation is in itself a sin, for the Bible never uses the word, nor does it imply or hint about the act of masturbation. Obviously, the Bible does deal in some depth with sexual immorality, perversions, and the like, but masturbation is never spelled out as belonging to any particular category. So, since Scripture is silent about it, should masturbation be classified as a sin? Or if not, are there ways in which masturbation may be used to the glory of God and the building of His Kingdom of souls?

The questions beg an in-depth answer. Throughout the history of the church, various voices have arisen, either decrying masturbation as self-abuse and onanism, or simply calling it something which may not be the best God has to offer, but is certainly not the worst either. Both viewpoints, I believe, are flawed. And it is in the wake of questions to which there seem to be no solid answers that teenagers, especially boys, have long been struggling. It is to the children who are struggling with this issue (and to the parents and other caring adults trying to help them) that this paper is addressed. If I can bring a fresh voice to the debate and cause serious believers to take an honest look at this issue and perhaps help a young person struggling with questions of their sexuality, then the effort will not have been in vain.

ONANISM? THE BIBLE AND MASTURBATION

Scholars have debated for years whether the sin of Onan as recorded in Genesis 38:8-10 was masturbation. It becomes clear from a careful reading of the text that what Onan practiced as a form of birth control was not masturbation but rather withdrawing himself from Tamar before orgasm. The reason Onan was put to death was for not fulfilling a solemn duty of the brother-in-law to provide children for the woman. This would later be laid down as a part of the Mosaic law (see Deut. 25:5-6).

There are no Biblical passages which specifically address the issue of masturbation, and so, as with other issues (such as food, drink, entertainment choices, etc.), God has allowed a latitude within certain boundaries. Within those boundaries, masturbation could (and I believe, should) be seen as a healthy way of relieving sexual tensions which build up in those who do not have the option of marital relations as a way of easing the physical need. For purposes of this paper, we will be focusing our attention on the use of masturbation as a God-given way for teenage boys to release the buildup of sexual tensions within their bodies, and as a help to controlling their thought life and honoring God with their minds and bodies. But it should also be noted that the principles about masturbation which are discussed here would also be appropriate to be applied to females as well as males.

TEENAGE BOYS: HORMONE FACTORIES

In a human male's lifespan, there are two times when the hormone testosterone is released by his body in large quantities. The first is prenatal, when a genetically determined testosterone release transforms the fetus into a boy. The other occurs roughly somewhere between the ages of 9 and 14. This testosterone release helps to transform the body of the boy into the body of a man. Because of the influence of the testosterone and other growth hormones, the boy experiences a growth spurt, broadening of the shoulders and other major muscular-skeletal changes, a deepening of the voice (which leads to the familiar teenage "cracking" of the voice), hair growth on the face and underarm areas, and maturing (in size and function) of the penis, testicles, and other sexual organs.

This testosterone "flood" is also largely responsible for the sudden interest in and discovery of a boy's sex drive. Not only is his body changing at a rapid pace, but also his mind is being drawn into areas that may have been previously unexplored or only hinted at in conversations with other boys. If they are not adequately prepared (which is a God-given responsibility of the parents and church to do-not the schools!), then the mind/body changes can be overwhelming and even frightening. For boys who have committed to follow Christ in their lives, this flood of emotions and thoughts and feelings can also carry with it a load of guilt and shame that they may perceive as coming from God-yet at the same time, since the sex drive is so strong and the physical tensions so great, they find their thoughts straying into areas that they know to be wrong, but which they cannot seem to stop thinking of. And a double burden can then be imposed when this Christian boy discovers the pleasures of masturbation and then feels guilty and ashamed for doing what he believes is a sin (since nobody ever told him otherwise), and yet which is something that he finds himself basically powerless to overcome.

I believe it is the responsibility of parents and the church to offer to these young men (and young women as well, whose sex drive can be just as strong) a sane and workable alternative to the question of masturbation-something other than a "Don't ask, don't tell" policy, and also something other than "just say no." We must help them see that what is happening to their bodies is designed by God and that what they are thinking and feeling and doing are acceptable to God within the boundaries He has set, and indeed, should be encouraged as a

means to regulate and control themselves so that they can glorify God with their bodies.

THE BIBLICAL BOUNDARIES

What are the boundaries which the Word of God sets forth for something like masturbation? In what contexts is the act acceptable, and when does it "cross the line" into a sinful activity? These are important questions that need to be answered with straightforward honesty if we are to give freedom to our teens to explore the sexuality which God has gifted them with, while maintaining the standards of holiness which His Word commands.

The first "boundary" Scripture is found in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20. Speaking in the context of sexual immorality (although any practice which harms the body could be defined here), Paul says, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body."

Since there is no Scripture condemning the act of masturbation as a sin, it stands to reason that it is an act which has the potential to be honoring to God and is in accord with the fact that the Holy Spirit lives in the believer. Solitary masturbation is not an act which harms the individual's body (and in fact, the release of sexual tension does promote the wellbeing of the body), nor does it involve the joining of one body and spirit to another as is the case with sexual intercourse. Through the releasing of sexual tensions (particularly in young men) it can act as a barrier to seeking release through immoral outlets such as pornography, prostitution, premarital sex, or homosexual activity. A part of honoring God with our bodies is doing whatever is necessary to keep our bodies under control-and in the area of sexuality, masturbation can be an effective way of doing so.

The second "boundary" Scripture is 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 this Scripture we have a boundary that deals with the mind and thought life. One of the difficulties with masturbation in the minds of many people is that it is automatically assumed that sexual fantasies must be used in order to gain the amount of stimulation needed for orgasm to take place. While it is true that sexual fantasies CAN be used, there is nothing which suggests that they MUST be used. The choice is up to the individual as to what they think about during masturbation. The body is designed by God to respond to sexual stimulation, but it was never designed to respond exclusively to impure thoughts. God has placed within us a wide capacity for response to various stimuli. It is no more necessary to fantasize about the cheerleader next door during masturbation than it is to fantasize about eating a steak while dining at McDonalds! Nor is it necessary to view pornography while masturbating. The viewing of pornography is actually detrimental to the experience, since the person looking at it knows there is no way of ever fulfilling the fantasies that he is locked into while using pornography. And since pornography is clearly a violation of the commandment not to lust after a person, such activity introduces the element of sin into an experience that should have been used for the glory of God.

So what can be thought about during masturbation? That brings us to our final "boundary" Scripture, found in Colossians 3:17: "Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." And a companion Scripture is found in Colossians 3:1-2: "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your

hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things."

It is clear from Scripture that our thought life is to be one of purity and joy and one that is characterized by its focus on God. This is no pie-in-the-sky theology. Either the Bible is eminently practical in how its principles can be lived out or it is not. It is possible to do everything with a spirit and attitude of thanksgiving to God, regardless of the task at hand. A person can focus their heart on Jesus swinging a hammer at a construction site just as much as they can when entering the sanctuary of a church. There should be no difference between sacred and secular thought. Each thought should be given over to the control of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5), and should be offered to God in a spirit of gratitude and joy. The only exception to this would be when the thought life has strayed out of its proper boundaries and has embraced sinful thoughts, such as the viewing of pornography or lusting after another person.

So, given the boundaries, is it possible to masturbate without straying into sinful thoughts? The answer is yes, for God, in designing the human body, has given it the ability to respond to physical stimuli without the necessity of embracing sinful thought patterns. And it is all right to enjoy the pleasurable feelings which accompany the activity. For example, when someone eats their favorite food, they are enjoying the pleasure of the feel and the taste of the food. Is it sinful to enjoy eating a chocolate bar? No. It only becomes a sin if the activity and the pleasure of eating become something which crowds out God, becoming an end to itself rather than being seen as a blessing from a loving God. At that point, any activity, whether eating, playing golf, watching a sunset, or masturbating, has been abused and the person has fallen into the sin of idolatry. Therefore, when a person masturbates, their body will respond to the pleasurable physical stimulation that it is being given--especially teenage boys, whose testosterone and other hormone levels are at an all-time high and whose physical need for sexual release is very great (in fact, they are quite capable of achieving orgasm without ever once thinking of having sex with the latest monthly centerfold!). And if the thought life is kept under control, the act becomes an experience of blessing from the Lord, rather than a shameful one. The sin does not come in enjoying the experience, but rather in abusing a gift that a loving and gracious God has given to His children.

But we're looking for something even more here. We are looking for a way to "redeem the experience," giving honor and glory to God for the gifts He has given us. One of those gifts is sexuality and the pleasure which God has made possible in our bodies. It therefore follows that the best way to masturbate is to focus the mind on God, giving thanks to Him for the pleasure which the person is feeling and for the gift of sexuality that He has given, as well as gratitude for the ability to gain a needed sexual release without the possibility of illicit sexual contact.

How would such a view of masturbation play out in real life? Let's take an example of Johnny, a 14-year-old boy whose body is undergoing the changes of puberty, and who is a Christian, trying to live his life right for God.

"Johnny is like most boys, intensely curious about his body and what is happening to it, and also about the thoughts he is beginning to have about girls he knows. He has heard all the guys' locker room talk, but everything is still pretty much a mystery to him. He's heard his youth pastor talk about staying pure until he is married, and he's committed to do that, even signing a purity pledge card a couple months before at a youth retreat. He's had sex ed in his public middle school, and at the time it seemed pretty gross and weird-not anything he'd want to get in to. But now, things are beginning to change. What once was unthinkable for him, he now finds himself dwelling on every day-many times during the day! A few months ago, he'd

had his first wet dream, and while he'd heard about them, when it happened it was still pretty scary, especially because the dream he'd had was something he would be totally ashamed of admitting to anyone about! The dreams had come once a month or so ever since, but each time the dreams had gotten a little more bizarre, and it was getting hard to hide the soiled pajamas and bedding from his mom.

It was while he was alone in his room one day dwelling on the latest dream that he discovered he could bring himself to a climax by rubbing his penis with his hand. It felt very good, but immediately afterward he wondered if this was something God would approve of. He had heard the other boys talking about "jacking off," but it had not crossed his mind before to try it himself.

As the days went by, Johnny found that the tension and need for another release would grow until it became almost intolerable. Although it felt so good, he just knew that what he was doing was dirty and he should hide it from his parents. This was something they could never know about-and if they did find out, he was sure they wouldn't ever understand! Johnny hadn't ever really seen any dirty books or magazines-his dad would never allow the stuff in the house-but nor had his parents ever taken the time to explain in a positive Biblical light what his sexuality was and what should be the best way to handle the thoughts, emotions, and desires for release.

It was at a youth group meeting that Johnny first began to realize there might be an answer to his problem. The topic was relationships and sex, and when the group split up into same-sex smaller groups, the topic of masturbation came up. Although there was a lot of snickering and laughing going on, the youth pastor was able to get the point across to the boys that masturbation was not something that was sinful in itself, it only became a sin when it was used in the wrong way.

On his way home from school a couple days later, Johnny got up the courage to stop by his youth pastor's office and ask him for some advice. After hearing about the boundary Scriptures and realizing that God wasn't going to condemn him for what he had done, Johnny began to come to a new understanding of how God wanted him to use even the act of masturbation to bring glory to Him. Johnny was amazed at the thought of how he could thank God for the pleasure he was experiencing, and how such a focus of keeping his eyes on Jesus and keeping his thought life under control--while at the same time enjoying the sensations and giving God the praise--would be a tremendous help to him, and would alleviate the false guilt he had been experiencing."

Such a view is generally not found in existent Christian literature, which tends either to condemn masturbation or to ignore it. Nor are a majority of parents or pastors comfortable discussing it. But I believe it is vital that we address this issue with our sons and our daughters. How much false guilt could we alleviate, how many dangerous sexual encounters would be foregone, how much distress and questioning of their sexuality and spirituality could we avoid, if we were simply open and honest with our children about how best to handle their emerging sexuality, and give them straightforward options and solutions to deal with their changing bodies and their changing minds? It is imperative that we let them know that masturbation can and should be used as a viable, God-honoring way to deal with the stresses of their newly acquired--yet unable to be fully explored--sexuality. With a sex-saturated society all around us, we as parents, youth pastors, and other caring adults, need to give our young men and women the ability to live Godly lives in the midst of a perverse generation. Masturbation, within the Biblical boundaries, helps give them that ability. It is time to stop standing on the sidelines, hoping that somehow our kids will get the right information and act

on it in the right way. We must be proactive, getting over our own fears and uncomfortableness and initiating discussions with our sons and daughters, doing what is our God-given responsibility as parents and youth leaders to help teens navigate the stormy waters of their sexuality. May God help us all to do so, in the right way and in the right time!

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