

The Question of Masturbation

This is an excerpt from *Redeeming Sexuality*, an Ezer curriculum study from Grace Church, Greenville, South Carolina.

One of the questions most frequently asked by Christians when dealing with the subject of sex is, “What about masturbation?” Men and women alike have a number of genuine questions surrounding this topic: Is it an acceptable way to deal with temptation and physical desire? Is it a sin? What does the Bible say about it? Within the church, men are much more likely to openly address the topic of masturbation than women. By and large, the issue of solo-sex is not discussed during women’s luncheons or Bible studies, but many women will pose the question if given an opportunity to ask anonymously.

Before we begin to explore this topic, we must remind ourselves of the overarching theme of the rest of this book. The role of sex is to serve as an expression of and a pathway to oneness within the marital relationship. Any sexual expression that falls outside this original design is a corruption of God’s good gift of sex.

With that said, there is still much debate in Christian circles over this topic. Some believe that since masturbation is not specifically forbidden in Scripture, we are free to engage in it. They argue that masturbation is a perfectly acceptable way to manage your physical desires as long as you do not indulge in lustful fantasies or incorporate pornography. It is even touted as vital to healthy sexuality and a celebration and enjoyment of the human body. Now that many Christians are getting married well into their late twenties and early thirties, the idea of waiting until then to experience sexual release is declared unrealistic, and so masturbation is viewed as an appropriate way to enjoy sexual pleasure while still maintaining sexual purity. While this point of view rightly understands sex as good and as something that should not be rejected, underneath it lies a sense of entitlement and self-gratification that runs contrary to Scripture.

Other Christians believe that masturbation is inherently sinful and therefore should be avoided. They argue that it is impossible to masturbate without lusting, and that masturbation is selfish and addictive. One oft-quoted passage in the argument against masturbation is that of Genesis 38. This chapter tells the story of Judah’s two sons, Er and Onan. Er marries Tamar, but he is evil and so the Lord takes his

life. After Er dies, Judah commands Onan to marry Tamar and produce an heir for Er, in accordance with levirate law (Deuteronomy 25:5–10). So Onan takes Tamar as his wife:

But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his. So whenever he went in to his brother’s wife he would waste the semen on the ground, so as not to give offspring to his brother. And what he did was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and [the Lord] put him to death also.

—Genesis 38:9–10 (ESV)

Contrary to the popular argument, this is not a passage about God’s condemnation of masturbation. This is not even a passage about masturbation. Onan is having sex with Tamar. He pleasures himself with her, but without fulfilling his responsibility to provide her an heir. Rather than risk getting her pregnant, he spills his seed on the ground. What God condemns is Onan’s blatant disregard of the levirate law and his unwillingness to fulfill his duty.

While this side of the debate rightly believes in the sanctity of sex and our call to holiness as Christians, the undercurrent implies that pleasure and enjoyment of sex is worldly. Sexual pleasure is not bad, however; God created our bodies to give and receive pleasure. To reject sex and its attendant pleasure is to reject a good gift that God has given us.

So what is the truth? What is a biblical understanding of masturbation and how should we as Christians live in response to that understanding?

Defining Masturbation

Before we go any further, it is important that we define masturbation and discuss an important distinction. *Merriam Webster* defines masturbation as touching or rubbing one’s own sexual organs for sexual pleasure. In its very essence, masturbation is a sexual act for sexual pleasure. Therefore, to say that it is a way of helping oneself remain chaste—which by definition means to be pure, and not having sex—would be inaccurate.

Here is where we must make a significant distinction. In some marriages, couples incorporate masturbation into times of sexual intimacy. It may be used as a precursor to intercourse, as a husband and wife playfully arouse themselves and one another. In this way, masturbation is used within the context of marriage and for mutual benefit. As the couple directs

their sexual energy toward their marriage and one another, intimacy and pleasure increase rather than decrease. However, the goal is not personal fulfillment alone; it is mutual love, servitude, and pleasure. If both parties are not in agreement, it should not be pursued.

For the purposes of this discussion, I am referring to masturbation only in terms of solo-sex: sex by oneself for the purpose of personal sexual fulfillment. This kind of masturbation can occur whether you are single or married. Some married men and women who find themselves sexually unfulfilled use it to meet their own physical desires. Those who are single may use solo-sex in the same way—as an avenue for meeting their own physical and sexual desires or for staving off temptation.

What the Bible Says

The Bible does not specifically address masturbation, but it does address sex, and masturbation is a sexual activity. It is having sex with oneself. Therefore, we must take a systematic approach to the topic of masturbation in Scripture—that is, see what the Bible has to say about sex, sin, and God's will from beginning to end—and then synthesize that information in order to gain clarity and direction.

As we explored in Chapter 2, God created sex. He created the distinction between male and female, our sexual organs, and sexual pleasure. He created it all and declared it good. Then he presented it to Adam and Eve in the garden and told them to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:28). From the very first chapters of the Bible, sex is seen within the context of marriage, and children are the fruit of that sexual union.

The Bible does not distinguish between the physical and spiritual aspects of sex. Through the physical coming together of their bodies, a man and a woman experience oneness that is both physical and spiritual (Genesis 2:24, 1 Corinthians 6:16, Ephesians 5:31–33). A wife's body belongs to her husband, and his body belongs to her (1 Corinthians 7:4). They are bound to one another in a one-flesh union, caring for and loving each other's bodies as if they were their own. Sex, as God designed it, is about self-giving—serving and loving someone else with your own body (1 Corinthians 7:3–4). This act of selflessness and generosity produces intimacy that enables a marriage to flourish. The very essence of sex is relational, and it is intended to mirror the intimacy and oneness of the Trinity. To remove sex from its relational context is to void it of the very purpose for which it was created.

But is there any acceptable sexual outlet for those who are single? We again must look to Scripture. In 1 Corinthians 7:1, Paul states that it is good to live a celibate life, but he gives the following concession:

[B]ecause there is so much sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman should have her own husband. The husband should fulfill his wife's sexual needs, and the wife should fulfill her husband's needs. The wife gives authority over her body to her husband, and the husband gives authority over his body to his wife.

Do not deprive each other of sexual relations, unless you both agree to refrain from sexual intimacy for a limited time so you can give yourselves more completely to prayer. Afterward, you should come together again so that Satan won't be able to tempt you because of your lack of self-control. I say this as a concession, not as a command. But I wish everyone were single, just as I am. Yet each person has a special gift from God, of one kind or another.

So I say to those who aren't married and to widows—it's better to stay unmarried, just as I am. But if they can't control themselves, they should go ahead and marry. It's better to marry than to burn with lust.

—1 Corinthians 7:2–9 (NLT)

Paul's answer to unfulfilled sexual desire? Get married. His statement is clear: rather than burn with lust, rather than engage in sex outside of God's design, and rather than seek other ways to fulfill your desires on your own, get married. For Paul, marriage is the one legitimate outlet for sexual desire.

So what can we conclude from Scripture as it pertains to masturbation? Sex was created by God to take place between a man and a woman, to be shared in the context of marriage for the purpose of creating a one-flesh union that produces not only the fruit of intimacy between the husband and wife, but also other image-bearing children. All of this reflects the Creator, who is three in one—sharing holy intimacy between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as well as Christ's union with the church. Through this intimate act, a husband and wife may bring glory to God. With all of this in view, it seems we can conclude that masturbation does not fall in line with God's design for sex.

As followers of Jesus, we now must determine if we will seek to submit ourselves to his authority where this issue is concerned. Will we continue to use masturbation as a way to satisfy our own needs, or will we look to God in our unmet desire? Will we bring that desire to God and allow him to use it in our lives to mature us and make us look more like Jesus?

Why Women Masturbate

Loneliness

For many women the temptation to masturbate is not first and foremost about addressing a physical, sexual craving. It is instead about a desire for relational connection and intimacy. Though a woman's desire to masturbate can be about purely sexual desire, whether brought on through fantasy or romance or attraction, more often than not it is borne of her desire to be loved, affirmed, nurtured, and connected to a man. At the root is often loneliness. This loneliness can be present in marriage or in singleness.

A woman who is lonely and desires intimacy may view masturbation as a valid way to meet her need, but instead it tends to leave her feeling emptier, lonelier, and more vulnerable and disconnected than before. She becomes achingly aware of the lack of someone to care for her heart, mind, and body. The act of masturbation is often accompanied by shame, which only increases her pain. So rather than fulfilling her, it deepens the gaping hole in her soul.

But as we discussed a few paragraphs earlier, Paul's solution to this loneliness and desire for intimacy is marriage, not masturbation. This brings us to an important point. For many women who deeply desire to be married but do not see the prospect of a husband on the horizon, hearing this statement from Paul feels like pouring salt in an open wound. An unfulfilled longing for marriage brings with it a deep sense of powerlessness. As a woman often plays a more passive role in the pursuit of marriage, she may legitimately feel that she has no control over this aspect of her life, and Paul's solution seems only to exacerbate those feelings.

So how should a woman in this situation rightly interpret Paul's command to marry? Is she to become the pursuer in order to be able to righteously satisfy her desires for sexual intimacy? Is she to be more aggressive, actively moving her relationships toward marriage? Or should she continue to sit idly, waiting and hoping for the day her longings will be fulfilled?

We find an answer by returning to 1 Corinthians 7. In verse seven Paul says that "each person has a special gift from God, of one kind or another," which in the context of this passage is either marriage or singleness. Paul views singleness as a gift from God that carries with it experiences, circumstances, and opportunities unavailable to someone who is married. In fact, he sees it as preferable to marriage (v. 7a).

A single woman is able to love and serve the Lord wholeheartedly, with an undivided attention and devotion that a married woman cannot. In the busyness of caring for a husband and family, a woman's heart can be lured away by the distractions and needs of each moment. But the heart of a single woman, in her loneliness, is directed back to God. As the authors of the book *Altered* state:

Loneliness sticks, but it need not devour. Loneliness can instead be the quiet current that over and over again turns our hearts to God, bringing us to the feet of His Son who loves us more deeply, more significantly, and more abundantly than anyone we will find in this life.¹

And each woman is to be faithful with the gift she's been given, whether singleness or marriage, for however long she has it. For a single woman who wants to be married, the challenge is to not allow her loneliness and desire for marriage to consume her to the point that she is no longer able to be faithful where she is, in her current season. Rather than rejecting God's gift of singleness, she can receive it with open hands, an open mind, and an open heart because she trusts him.

When a woman is freed from her debilitating loneliness and efforts to control her circumstances, she is able to focus on cultivating herself and serving others in love. As a result, her relationships will be characterized by selflessness and self-giving rooted in the abundance of God's love, rather than by selfish consumption of others in an effort to fill the aching void.

Physical Desire

Some women may battle physical desires for sexual release. These can be experienced or brought on in a variety of ways, including hormonal fluctuations, relational connections, and external stimuli. Though women must guard their hearts, their minds, and their eyes lest they become consumed with desire, these physical cravings are legitimate and are not always indicative of moral failure.

As Christians, we are prone to hyper-spiritualize in ways that are unhelpful and at times even self-defeating. The belief that you wouldn't struggle with sexual desire if your heart were right reflects an inaccurate understanding of God's gift of sex and how he created you to experience it. God designed our bodies with the ability to give and receive pleasure. These desires are meant to draw a husband and wife toward one another, to bind them together in a one-flesh union that allows intimacy to flourish. This was part of his plan from the very beginning. In this case, what is important is not that we have sexual desires, but how we express or channel those desires.

There are, however, ways in which we may awaken or arouse desire that are sinful. Jesus warns us to not be cavalier in our battle with lust, but to take drastic measures to avoid awakening desires we cannot righteously satisfy. That may mean not allowing yourself to get into situations where you are alone with a man having deep, emotional conversations or even sexual, flirtatious ones. It may mean being more mindful of the choices you make when it comes to movies, books, television, music, and magazines. It may mean you have to cut out some of your favorite forms of entertainment because they incite desire in you that tempts you to seek release through masturbation.

Regardless of whether the desire comes about naturally or through external stimuli, God's direction to us remains the same. We must flee sexual temptation instead of seeking to meet our own needs in our own way in our own time.

Self-Affirmation

Still other women see masturbation as a way of celebrating and affirming their own sexuality. A woman who adopts this viewpoint may be suffering from wounds inflicted in previous romantic relationships, in her marriage, or by her own father. She self-protects by not placing herself in situations in which she would be vulnerable and by seeking to meet her own needs. Rather than risk appearing weak, frail, or in need, she cloaks herself under a false expression of confidence, power, and autonomy. She may be cold, callous, unapproachable, bitter, or frigid. She operates out of the mentality that she doesn't need a man and that she can take better care of herself than any man ever could, and so whether married or single, she makes true intimacy difficult and perpetuates her own isolation, frustration, and disappointment.

This same way of thinking may originate from an unbiblical, spiritualized view of the body and of sexuality. A woman who operates from this perspective may see masturbation as a celebration of her womanhood—as a way of getting to know herself, loving herself, and honoring her own body. She elevates, exalts, and even idolizes herself. This woman does not see sex as an extending of herself for the pleasure of another, but as the receipt of pleasure for herself, like a day at the spa being pampered and coddled. This is a corruption of nurture, in which the woman is both the originator and the recipient. It begins and ends with self.

Both of these views are a corrupt expression of sex and sexuality. God did not create sex to be experienced in the vacuum of self, but in the context of a living, vibrant relationship with one's spouse. Sex as God designed it requires you to be vulnerable, to experience pleasure and joy which causes you to forget yourself, and to extend yourself generously for the good of someone else. God-honoring sexual expression is selfless and focuses on honoring, loving, nurturing, and serving your spouse.

Practical Help and Direction

Whatever the reason you find yourself tempted to masturbate—whether loneliness, physical desire, self-affirmation, boredom, or the like—the goal is not to eradicate sexual desire altogether. On the contrary, desire is part of the human experience. The goal is, instead, to not burn with passion and to not satisfy those desires in ways that deviate from God's intentions.

If you struggle in this area, speak with someone openly and honestly about your challenges. Humble yourself and seek the direction of a trusted spiritual leader. Do not allow your desires to go unchecked. If you can't consummate your desire within marriage, then the challenge before you is to find legitimate ways to channel your energy, and to burn it off in a fruitful way. There are many healthy ways to channel youthful passions that produce the fruit of godliness, but idleness often leads to temptation and the fruit of the flesh. As J. C. Ryle states:

Idleness is the devil's best friend. It is the surest way to give him an opportunity of doing us some harm. An idle mind is like an open door, and if Satan does not come through it himself, it is certain he will throw something in to arouse bad thoughts in us.²

Healthy ways to channel your sexual energy are numerous and varied and may be informed by your own individuality and season of life. Cultivate some healthy, nurturing relationships. Spend time mentoring younger women. Develop a friendship with a spiritually mature, older woman. Spend time learning about who you are and how God has gifted you, and then seek opportunities to exercise those gifts in your church or community. Play a sport in a local recreational league. Adopt a lunch buddy through your local school system. Get involved in a small-group environment where you can be known, encouraged, challenged, corrected, and loved.

If you are married, channel your desires and energy toward your spouse. Rather than masturbating and robbing your husband of the experience of arousing you sexually, explore ways in which you can achieve that together. If you are experiencing challenges within your marriage, seek out a trusted advisor or counselor who can help you.

Again, the ultimate goal is not sexual fulfillment; the goal is holiness. As we seek to follow Jesus in all areas of our lives, we must align our will and desires with his own. This encompasses all avenues of sexual expression—including masturbation. But if and when you fail, you do not need to wallow in shame and despair. You can trust in Christ's perfect performance on your behalf. Jesus took on all of your sins and failures, bearing the punishment you deserved. And in turn God gave you Christ's perfect record, declaring you righteous, faultless, and blameless. Knowing that your peace with God has been determined once and for all, you can humbly receive comfort from the cross of Christ and pursue holiness without the fear of failure.

1. Claire and Eli, *Altared* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2012) 194.
2. J. C. Ryle, "The Duties of Parents" in oChristian.com, retrieved May 16, 2014, <http://christian-quotes.ochristian.com/Idleness-Quotes/page-3.shtml>.