

Is Masturbation Sinful?

Let us start off with a working definition of masturbation. For the purposes of this paper, masturbation will be defined as self-pleasuring¹ which is not done within the confines of a marriage. A husband or wife manually or otherwise stimulating his or her spouse seems to us to be perfectly acceptable and perhaps even alluded to within the Scripture.² We have no reason to believe that self-stimulation done in isolation while merely “thinking” about one’s spouse is appropriate and thus this too would fall under our working definition of masturbation.

If one was to scan the horizon of current evangelical thought he or she would find a number of conclusions on the matter of masturbation. There are some who would claim that it is inherently neutral or even innately good and thus would teach that it is an appropriate way to express gratitude for sexual desire. Others would say that it is a veiled form of homosexuality,³ or that it is a clear violation of God’s law and thus always sinful. The spectrum is wide and the positions are quite varied.

Scripture never overtly addresses the issue of masturbation⁴ and thus any non-careful treatment of this topic must be avoided. If we define sin merely as transgression of God’s law then we might conclude that since Scripture does not explicitly prohibit the particular act of masturbation, it must therefore be non-sinful. However, sin is not merely transgression of the Scriptures, but also a transgression of the character and intent of God.⁵ As marriage is the only God-ordained means of expressing sexual intimacy, it would seem perfectly acceptable to declare masturbation a sinful act. This paper will seek to specify some common wisdom regarding masturbation and then commend a few questions which must be considered to faithfully examine the act.

Relevant Principles:

- **Sexual immorality is specifically declared to be sinful.**

See the other resources on sexual immorality for a more thorough treatment of the prohibition of *porneia* within the

Scriptures. Sexual immorality is defined as “every kind of extramarital, unlawful, unnatural sexual intercourse.”

- **Lust is specifically declared to be sinful.**

Particularly instructive are Jesus’ comments in Matthew 5:27-30: You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

Sin is very serious and lust is explicitly deemed to be sin. Therefore, lust is very serious.

- **Masturbation does not typically quench sexual desire, rather it intensifies it.**

As with most things, the more you feed it, the more it grows. In general, masturbation becomes habit forming and enslaves us to desires for greater sexual relief through greater self-indulgence rather than greater self-control. While the Spirit produces in us the fruit of self-control, the flesh desires indulgence and release. Self-control is not ascetic discipline, but is instead the response of a proper understanding of God’s creative design for our bodies.

- **Masturbation is outside of God’s intended design for sexual relations.**

Sex was created to be experienced between a man and woman who are joined together into the one flesh relationship of marriage; masturbation is taking the sexual desire reserved for this relationship and seeking to fulfill it through our own means. Masturbation sets a very destructive pattern for marriage. It places the emphasis on self-pleasure rather than the desire for two to experience the fulfillment

¹ Being manually or otherwise stimulated by another (non-spouse) would not be considered “masturbation.” Rather, it would be appropriately deemed as another form of sexual sin, covered under the broad banner of *porneia* or sexual immorality.

² See Song of Solomon 2:6; 5:4-5. Both are used by a number of popular pastors to highlight the appropriateness of manual stimulation of one spouse by the other.

³ See particularly the insightful booklet “Reforming Male Sexuality: A Frank Discussion on Pornography & Masturbation For God’s Men” by Mark Driscoll, pastor at Mars Hill Church – Seattle.

⁴ Use of Genesis 38:9-10 for this argument butchers the text. Onan’s sin was not in the act of “spilling seed” itself, but in the fact that he was disobedient to the command to give offspring to his brother’s wife in order to allow his name to continue.

⁵ This is the essence of falling short of the glory of God which Romans 3:23 teaches.

of sexual union together. Scripture states that when you are married your body is no longer your own but now belongs to your spouse (1 Corinthians 7:3-4). The focus is to put your spouse's desires above your own, to please him or her and love him or her more than you love yourself. Masturbation feeds into our selfish natures by seeking sexual pleasure through self-gratification. The focus is on self rather than God and others. It is self-centered, self-directed whereas the Scriptures prescribe self-denial (not mere asceticism) and self-control.

- **Masturbation is typically lustful – whether that be overt lust direct toward another or a lustful desire for relief.**

Lust is clearly described as a sinful disposition of the heart (Matthew 5:28). If the purpose of sexual desire is to lead us to marriage, self-gratification really does not fulfill that desire, it merely temporarily exhausts it.

- **Masturbation does not typically stir our affections for the Lord, rather it robs them.**

The Scripture teaches that all things are to be done to the glory of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:31) and that even non-sinful things should be excluded from our lives for the sake of our joy and sanctification.⁶

Relevant Questions

1. Can you masturbate without lusting?
2. Can you masturbate with a clear conscience, without shame?
3. Can you masturbate to the glory of Christ?
4. Is your masturbation not merely⁷ permissible, but also profitable?

Conclusion

It seems to the pastors and elders of The Village Church that masturbation is prohibited for a couple of reasons. First, we would prohibit the act based upon the provision of marriage as the only appropriate institution in which to express sexual intimacy. If you burn with lust or desire sexual intimacy, get

married (1 Corinthians 7:9). Such is the gracious and holy prescription for sexual desire, the only prescription afforded by the Creator of all good desire. Second, we would counsel abstinence due to the overwhelming and innate relationship between masturbation and lust. Lust is extremely serious and not to be taken lightly, dismissed, or played with.

While we are cautious about universally calling all masturbation sinful in all instances, it seems abundantly clear to us that such a stance should be the default position. Pastorally, we would strongly recommend abstinence⁸ in this area and encourage any who are struggling, addicted, or concerned to get involved in **Recovery Groups** at The Village.

Pertinent Scriptures

- **1 Corinthians 6:18-20** *Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.*
- **Romans 6:12-14** *Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.*
- **Colossians 3:5-6** *Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming.*
- **1 Thessalonians 4:3-4** *For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor...*

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⁶ See Hebrews 12:1 which says to lay aside both sin AND every other encumbrance which prevents us from running toward Jesus.

⁷ Twice in the book of 1 Corinthians (6:12; 10:23) Paul writes that even if certain things are lawful, the fact that they are not beneficial to one's love for God or others should cause him or her to reconsider. As has been discussed, the Christian is called not only to avoid sin, but even those neutral activities which are not in accordance with the absolute call to glorify God in all things.

⁸ By abstinence we do not mean the mere stoic suppression of desire, but a posture of glad and hopeful dependence upon God to provide a spouse with whom those desires might be fulfilled to the glory of our Lord.