



## **Biblical Counseling** **Is Masturbation a Sin?**

By Pastor Brad Bigney

Let me say first that there is no Bible verse that says masturbation is a SIN. Therefore we are left with the need to draw from biblical principles and think through whether or not that activity is best, and does it violate any biblical principles. The Roman Catholic Church tried to make a case for it being sin by using the story in the Old Testament where a man named Onan 'spilled his seed on the ground' instead of having sex with his brother's wife and God killed him (The O.T. law said if a man died and had no son his brother should take his wife and raise up offspring for him to keep the family going). Clearly the man was killed for violating a clear command they had back then. This is a weak argument to use in reference to the question of whether or not masturbation is a sin.

I don't have a huge problem with Dobson and others who allow some license for this with the understanding that it is most certainly SIN to fantasize about other women (that is adultery! or for a single young man it is fornication) and it is sin to use pornography for the same reason. Sex in the mind outside the bounds of God's directives is still sin... and it leads to acting out sins in the flesh. It really does matter what we think. 2 Cor. 10:5 tells us "taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ." Rom. 12:2 "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" Eph. 4:22-24 "That you put off the old man with its deceitful lusts and put on the new man created in righteousness by the renewing of your mind." So... where does that leave us?

I think several principles can guide us in this area:

**1. Sex and our sexuality were not created by God primarily for our own pleasure** but as a wonderful gift that is to be given to our life partner... this gift bonds us together in a special and intimate way. It is something God meant for us to experience in relationship to another human being... not primarily as a wonderful rush to experience by yourself. When we use it that way we have twisted something wonderful and there are some dangers that then enter in. Here's some Scripture for using sex to give pleasure to your mate: **I Cor. 7:3** "Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her body, but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his body, but the wife does." Our bodies and our sexuality are not our own to selfishly use for our own pleasure. They were given to be enjoyed in the context of a loving marriage relationship. In fact, God says regarding sexual relations between husband and wife, "Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time... then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you..." **I Cor. 7:5**. Masturbation deprives your spouse of something they are supposed to get from you, and you then leave them open to temptation from Satan. We are also supposed to find our sexual satisfaction in our spouse...not other people or things. **Prov. 5:18-20** "May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth... may her breasts satisfy you at all times, may you be captivated by her love..." Masturbation leads you to find satisfaction somewhere other than your spouse... and can often lead your affections away so that you're captivated by something or someone other than her.

2. Another principle that would bear on this issue is the **sin of selfishness**. We are all prone to selfishness by nature and this activity seems to fan that flame. It also tends to isolate us. We withdraw and focus on ourselves. How do I want it? What would be good for me? What really turns me on? All of this thinking breeds an attitude that is contrary to biblical love. Biblical love is giving for the needs of another expecting nothing in return. Love is giving not getting. The activity of autoeroticism by nature is a 'getting' activity rather than a giving activity. And it doesn't cause us to bond with others. We begin to think we don't need another human relationship in that area. Yet this gift was intended to be some of the 'glue' that would knit us to another person rather than ourselves. The activity in question runs counter to that and feeds selfish isolationism. **I Cor. 13:5** says "love does not seek its own". This activity most definitely seeks it's own. **I Cor. 10:24** "Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others." **Rom. 15:2-3** "Each of us should please his neighbor (your spouse is your closest neighbor) for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please Himself." **Phil. 2:3-4** "Let nothing be done from selfish ambition... let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others."

3. Another danger is that it can be used as **an escape or a refuge other than God**. Any of the good things that God has given us (food, drink, sex, work) can become sinful if used as a place of refuge instead of turning to God. I think masturbation often gets used in that way especially with young people. It's quick, easy and gives fast gratification. That in itself should send off some danger signals... because habits may be forming so they will want to run there when things don't go their way or they're feeling down or bored or whatever and just want a rush. The area of sexuality is very much like food, drink, and drugs. Something good that God gave, but can, like everything, be abused and lead us into bondage. God is to be our refuge... not sex or anything else. So there's the danger of allowing this to get rooted in your life as an idol... a false god. **Psa. 73:25** "Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You. My flesh and my heart may fail; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." **Psa. 32:7** "You are my hiding place" **Psa. 16:11** "In Your presence is fullness of joy" **Psa. 119:114** 'You are my hiding place and my shield. I hope in your word." **Psa. 91:2** "I will say of the Lord, 'He is my refuge and my fortress; my God, in Him I will trust.'" Masturbation can easily and insidiously become a substitute for a relationship with God and others.

4. Another concern is that it runs contrary to the **virtue of self-control** that we are commanded to be developing as Christians. This is such a strong area. Fighting in this area is an excellent opportunity to trust God and ask for His grace rather than feed the desires of the flesh. And I know it is hard. It can still be a struggle for a married person. Even when avoiding wrong (adulterous) thoughts while indulging, it still seems like you're not using self control and you're taking something away from your spouse just because you didn't say 'No' to the flesh and wait until you could be with your mate. In all honesty, sometimes you don't want the 'hassle' of having to 'perform' or make it good for someone else and you just want quick relief. And that's back to the issue of selfishness. When this area is allowed to run free in our life, even as a married person there is the danger then of comparison. In some ways, without working on it together and without communicating how can your spouse satisfy you as well as you do yourself? You know exactly where you want it and how you want it. So, if you allow this to be a regular practice you may actually find sexual relations with your spouse less satisfying and more frustrating because you've grown accustomed to doing it yourself. It can turn the bedroom into a selfish spot where you are wishing and thinking about how and what you wish they would do...like you do for yourself. Once again your focus becomes, 'What do I want?' and "What's best for me?", rather than, "How can I really please my spouse?" There's plenty of Scripture that shows our need to exercise self-control:

**Prov. 25:28** "Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control" Lack of self-control in the sexual area will certainly begin to bleed over into other areas, because it is a matter of saying "No" to the flesh... ruling the flesh. You are choosing not to be dominated and ruled by your passions. **1 Thes. 4:3-6** "It is God's will that you be holy; that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God..." **2 Tim. 1:7** "God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline."

5. This whole area seems to be **a flame that just can't ever get enough**. If you open the door and allow free reign in this area it seems that you need more and more to get the same level of satisfaction you did before. You will feel the need to move on to other things (pornography, fantasy, kinkiness) in order to get the same level of rush and excitement you did when you first experimented in this area. Rather than satisfying... it seems to only stir a thirst for more... and leaves one feeling very empty, and if you are a Christian... guilty on top of that. Because in your heart of hearts you're not really sure it is biblically acceptable anyway. **Jer. 2:13** "But my people have committed two great sins; they have forsaken Me the fountain of living water and have dug for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water." This whole area is often a broken cistern that cannot hold water. It leaks. To stay satisfied it demands more... more of the same and then variety... something new. You end up in a state of perpetual agitation and very little satisfaction.

6. Finally, it seems to bring **guilt and distraction** with it that **hinders our walk with God**. **1 Peter 2:11** "I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires / lusts which war against your soul." Very often when this area of physical lust is stirred up it wars against the spiritual side... and is not usually a time when we are hungry for God and really growing. This activity tends to draw us away and hinder our walk. We feel dirty and think we can't draw near to God. **Rom. 13:14** "Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature." Often this activity causes us to spend an inordinate amount of time thinking about it... leading up to it... what we'll do next time, etc. **Rom. 8:8** "those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God."

**Conclusion:** Based on Scriptural principles of biblical love and self-control, as well as the foundation of God's original design for sexual pleasure to be shared between husband and wife, it seems prudent to personally resist the temptation to masturbate, and it's seems important for us to teach our children the dangers of giving over to this temptation.

## **Masturbation: So What's the Way Out?**

### ***We Need to Understand that Every Act Starts with a Thought***

Someone struggling against masturbation doesn't just try to avoid masturbation; they learn to avoid the earliest thoughts that lead to it. That's why Proverbs 4:23 says, "Guard your heart [mind] with all diligence, for out of it flows the issues of life." As the mind goes . . . so goes our actions. Proverbs 23:7 adds, "... for as a man thinks in his heart, so is he." We have to guard against thoughts like, "I deserve a little pleasure." "Nobody appreciates me." "My wife doesn't respond to me the way I wish." We're the ones who decide where we're going to park our minds. Too many people are living their lives in an unconscious stupor, giving little or no attention at all to what's going on in their heart and mind, thinking it doesn't really matter unless they act on it. But, this way of thinking and living makes us very vulnerable—we're a high-risk candidate for serious sexual sin if we don't get a hold of our thought life and reign it in. That's why the Bible teaches that we have to take control of our thoughts, because those thoughts feed our emotions, and those emotions in turn drive our actions. That's why the Bible

goes after the mind so much. Colossians 3:1-2 tells us, “If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.” *The Message* paraphrase says, “So if you’re serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ, act like it. Pursue the things over which Christ presides. Don’t shuffle along, eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you. Look up, and be alert to what is going on around Christ—that’s where the action is. See things from His perspective.” It was Patrick Morley who said, “Some people have spectacular failures where in an instant they abruptly burst into flames, crash, and burn. But the more common way people get into trouble evolves from hundreds of tiny decisions—decisions which go undetected—that slowly, like water tapping on a rock, wear down a person’s character. Not blatantly or precipitously, but subtly, over time, we get caught in a web of cutting corners and compromise, self-deceit and wrong thinking, which goes unchallenged by anyone in our lives” (*Man in the Mirror*).

### ***We Need to Understand that Masturbation and All Sexual Sin is Just a Counterfeit to Real Intimacy that Starts with God***

Apart from God’s redemptive work, we hide from Him... and from each other... longing for intimacy... but afraid to be known... Sexual encounters, private or shared, will never fill the God-shaped void inside every single one of us. It’s God we’re looking for. The sexual relationship was meant to demonstrate the intimacy and oneness that we have *first* with God through Christ; that’s why sexual relations in the Bible is described as ‘being known.’ Genesis 4:1 says, “Adam knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain...” With the private pleasure of masturbation who is really “knowing” anyone else? The isolation of masturbation itself is a tipoff that we’ve wandered from God’s original, good design for sexual pleasure. Back in 1943, C.S. Lewis gave a critique of the sexual confusion he saw in his culture, and you’d think he wrote last week. “The [sexual] appetite is in ludicrous and preposterous excess of its function... You can get a large audience together for a strip-tease act. Now suppose you came to a country where you could fill a theatre by simply bringing a covered plate on to the stage and then slowly lifting the cover so as to let everyone see, just before the lights went out, that it contained a mutton chop or a bit of bacon, would you not think that in that country something had gone wrong with the appetite for food?” (*Mere Christianity*, p. 75). Later Lewis paints a great word picture for this when he says, “You must not isolate sexual pleasure and try to get it by itself any more than you ought to try to get the pleasures of taste without swallowing and digesting, by chewing things and spitting them out again.” (*Mere Christianity*, p. 81). Imagine approaching food that way... just wanting to chew it for the taste, but then spitting it out again. There’d be no real satisfaction and benefit. Food would not be doing what God intended it to do, and the same thing is true for our sexual appetite. Private sexual pleasure and other sins of the mind are just cheap, false substitute for the real thing. They can’t deliver what God designed the sexual relationship to accomplish in the context of a loving, committed marriage. It’s like chewing your food and spitting it out again.

### ***Strengthen Our Relationship with God through Christ***

In a broken, sinful world our only hope for real intimacy and love starts with God. Only God can know us and love us completely. Jesus said in John 17:3, “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” Similarly, in John 14:19-23 Jesus said, “... because I live, you will live also. At that day you know that I am in my Father, and you in Me, and I in you. He who has my commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him... and we will come to him and make Our home with him.” There’s real

intimacy. There's what the God-shaped vacuum in our hearts is really longing for. Christ in our life can do more for us than a thousand sexual encounters, private or otherwise. In fact, trying to satisfy our sexual appetites is a dead-end without Christ. So we keep God and our relationship to Him through Christ in the forefront of our mind as we fight to stay sexually pure in a sex-saturated world. Dietrich Bonhoeffer had a telling comment about this great danger: "In our members there is a slumbering inclination towards desire which is both sudden and fierce. With irresistible power, desire seizes mastery over the flesh. All at once a secret, smoldering fire is kindled. The flesh burns and is in flames... Joy in God is in course of being extinguished in us and we seek all our joy in the creature. At this moment God is quite unreal to us, He loses all reality, and only desire for the creature is real... Satan does not here fill us with hatred of God, but with forgetfulness of God... The lust thus aroused envelopes the mind and will of man in deepest darkness. The powers of clear discrimination and of decision are taken from us... It is here that everything within me rises up against the Word of God" (*Creation and Fall and Temptation*, pp. 116-117). The first steps towards sexual sin are not hatred for God, just forgetfulness of God. Scripture warns us of this danger in Romans 1:28. "And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting."