



## Is Masturbation a Sin?

### Question:

"I don't see anyone in the Bible being called a sinner for masturbating. Also, Jesus said that if a man even looks at a woman lustfully he has already committed adultery with her in his heart. What does it mean to look at her lustfully?"

### Answer:

The Bible doesn't specifically condemn masturbation, nor does the Bible specifically condone it. This tends to be one of those "taboo" subjects that people don't often talk about, but if it's a sin then it's important for us to know that. I have tried to deal with this subject carefully, but please forgive me if anything I say makes you uncomfortable. Personally, I don't believe that God cringes at the subject of masturbation (or any other subject), so we should try to set our fleshly reactions aside for a moment in order to seek God's view on the matter. Possibly you will be surprised at my conclusions (I certainly was!), and perhaps you'll disagree with me, but it's important that we don't allow our **feelings** to dictate our beliefs.

Everyone has biases, and personally I always assumed that masturbation was probably a sin. But instead of trying to defend my bias, I wanted to find out what **God's** view is towards masturbation. Here's what I discovered when I studied the Christian arguments against masturbation and compared them with the Bible.

### Onan

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Some people say that Onan masturbated in the Old Testament, and they say that God killed him for his wickedness. Here's what the Bible says about Onan:

Genesis 38:6: "Judah got a wife for Er, his firstborn, and her name was Tamar."

Genesis 38:7: "But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the Lord's sight; so the LORD put him to death."

Genesis 38:8: "**Then Judah said to Onan, 'Lie with your brother's wife and fulfill your duty to her as a brother-in-law to produce offspring for your brother.'**"

Genesis 38:9: "**But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so whenever he lay with his brother's wife, he spilled his semen on the ground to keep from producing offspring for his brother.**"

Genesis 38:10: "**What he did was wicked in the Lord's sight; so he put him to death also.**"

It was Onan's duty to marry (or to sleep with) his dead brother's wife and to provide offspring who would carry on his dead brother's name. Notice that Onan did not masturbate, but rather he slept with his brother's wife as was his duty. However, because of his wicked and greedy heart, he deliberately prevented her from

being able to conceive a child, which meant that Onan's dead brother would have no heirs. This is the sin for which the Lord put Onan to death, it had nothing to do with masturbating. Here are some things that Bible commentaries say about the above passage:

"By the custom of the levirate (from Latin *levir*, "husband's brother") law of marriage, the second son, **Onan**, was to marry **Tamar**, the widow of his **brother**, and raise up **offspring** for his brother. However, **Onan** repeatedly used that law for sexual gratification. He took advantage of the situation, but refused the responsibility that went with it. So God took his life too." (*The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Old Testament edition), Walvoord and Zuck, Dallas Theological Seminary, p.88, emphasis in the original)

"Moses here uses a word not common for marriage, but which was peculiar to the marrying of a brother's wife according to a law given in his time: it appears to have been a custom before, and which the patriarch might be directed to by the Lord, in such a case when a brother died, and left no issue, for the sake of multiplication of seed, according to the divine promise, and which in the time of Moses passed into a law, see Deu\_25:5 ... For this law or custom was partly political, to continue the paternal inheritance in the family, and partly typical, to direct to Christ the firstborn among many brethren, Rom\_8:29, who in all things was to have the preeminence, Col\_1:18; and this was not taken from the Canaanites, among whom Judah now was, but from the ancient patriarchs, which they had no doubt from divine revelation, and was taught in the school of Shem, and handed down from father to son; for as to this being a law among the Egyptians in later times, and which continued to the days of Zeno Augustus (q), it is most likely they took it from the Jews." (Gill's Exposition of the Bible, from <http://www.e-sword.net/commentaries.html>, Genesis 38:8)

"The original word means to act as a husband to the widow of a deceased brother who has left no issue. Onan seems to have been prompted to commit his crime by the low motive of turning the whole inheritance to his own house." (Barnes, from <http://www.e-sword.net/commentaries.html>, Genesis 38:8)

"The sin of Onan has generally been supposed to be self-pollution; but this is certainly a mistake; his crime was his refusal to raise up seed to his brother, and rather than do it, by the act mentioned above, he rendered himself incapable of it. We find from this history that long before the Mosaic law it was an established custom, probably founded on a Divine precept, that if a man died childless his brother was to take his wife, and the children produced by this second marriage were considered as the children of the first husband, and in consequence inherited his possessions." (Adam Clark's Commentary on the Bible, from <http://www.e-sword.net/commentaries.html>, Genesis 38:10)

Notice that Onan **knew** that the children from this marriage would not be considered as his children (instead, they would be his brother's children). This was an established custom or law, as the above commentaries point out, and it was Onan's **duty** to marry (or sleep with) his dead brother's wife. Onan was not masturbating in the above passage, but instead he was having legitimate sexual intercourse according to his duty. However, he was rebellious against his duty by not providing offspring for his dead brother. He was evil in God's sight because of his wicked and greedy heart, not because of masturbating.

Therefore, Onan's crime does not help us determine whether or not masturbation is a sin.

## Does the Possibility of Addiction Prove that Masturbation Is a Sin?

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Many people are struggling with addictions to pornography, sex, masturbation, drugs, alcohol, food, gambling, and so on.

It's the devil who wants to keep people enslaved by these addictions, so if you have any kind of addiction then you might consider reading my article called [How to Cast Afflicting Spirits Out of Your Life](#), which contains a procedure for renouncing things that might have given the devil a "foothold" in our lives. As you probably know, some of the wrong things that we or our ancestors have done (or some of the wrong things

that have been done to us) can open the door for the devil to attack us, and this procedure might help to break those attacks. Also, there are many Christian ministries which help people break free from addictions, so try searching the Internet for "Christian help for \_\_\_\_\_ addiction" (fill in the blank, and don't use quotes).

Now, sometimes people claim that masturbation is a sin because of the possibility of becoming addicted to it.

However, if we're willing to be objective then it's easy to see the flaw in this argument. Notice that if you search the Internet then you'll find numerous examples of married people who are in therapy for sex addiction.

With that in mind, carefully compare these two statements:

1. People can become addicted to masturbation, and therefore masturbation is a sin.
2. People can become addicted to marital sex, and therefore marital sex is a sin.

If the possibility of addiction proves that something is a sin, then statement #2 proves that sex within marriage is a sin. But the Bible says that marital sex is **not** a sin.

Therefore, the possibility of addiction does not prove that something is a sin.

Any addiction can be devastating to a marriage (or a future marriage), and an addiction to masturbation is no exception. Masturbation itself is not a sin, but if you have become addicted to it then it's important to recognize your addiction and seek help.

The bottom line is that if people become addicted to marital sex then it's the **addiction** which is wrong, not the marital sex. The Bible never says that marital sex is a sin.

In exactly the same way, if people become addicted to masturbation then it's the **addiction** which is wrong, not the masturbation. The Bible never says that masturbation is a sin.

## Does the Possibility of Using Pornography Prove that Masturbation Is a Sin?

Sometimes people claim that masturbation is a sin because of the possibility of using pornography.

However, if we're willing to be objective then it's easy to see the flaw in this argument. Notice that if you search the Internet then you'll find examples of married people who use pornography during sex.

With that in mind, carefully compare these two statements:

1. People might use pornography during masturbation, and therefore masturbation is a sin.
2. People might use pornography during marital sex, and therefore marital sex is a sin.

If the possibility of using pornography proves that something is a sin, then statement #2 proves that sex within marriage is a sin. But the Bible says that marital sex is **not** a sin.

Therefore, the possibility of using pornography does not prove that something is a sin.

Pornography can be very devastating to a marriage (or a future marriage). For example, would you be happy to find out that your spouse likes to look at pictures or videos or cartoons of people whose bodies are more impressive than yours? Would your spouse be happy if you look at such things? If you have become addicted to pornography then it's important to recognize your addiction and seek help.

The bottom line is that if people use pornography during marital sex then it's the **pornography** which is wrong, not the marital sex. The Bible never says that marital sex is a sin.

In exactly the same way, if people use pornography during masturbation then it's the **pornography** which is wrong, not the masturbation. The Bible never says that masturbation is a sin.

## Gratifying the Flesh

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Sometimes people claim that masturbation is a sin because it's done for the purpose of "gratifying the flesh."

However, this is a false argument against masturbation because the New Testament never says that "gratifying the flesh" is a sin. For example, when you scratch an itch then you are "gratifying the flesh." When a husband and wife make love and experience physical pleasure then they are "gratifying the flesh" in a sexual way. These things are not sins, so "gratifying the flesh" is not sinful in itself.

The sin is in the **method** that we use to "gratify the flesh" (such as adultery). If we can prove from the Bible that masturbation is a wrong **method** for "gratifying the flesh," then masturbation would be a sin. But the argument that masturbation is done for the purpose of "gratifying the flesh" doesn't mean anything because "gratifying the flesh" is not sinful in itself.

Notice that the Bible tells us not to gratify the **lusts** of the flesh:

Romans 13:14: "Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to **gratify the desires** [*epithumia*] **of the sinful nature.**"

Galatians 5:16: "So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not **gratify the desires** [*epithumia*] **of the sinful nature.**"

Ephesians 2:3: "All of us also lived among them at one time, **gratifying the cravings** [*epithumia*] **of our sinful nature** and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath."

In the above passages, the Greek word *epithumia* ("desires" or "cravings") means:

"a longing (**especially for what is forbidden**): - concupiscence, desire, **lust** (after)." (Strong's Greek Dictionary, emphasis added)

This is a Greek word for intense desire (or forbidden lust), such as when one person **lusts** for another person, or when a person **lusts** for wealth, or when a person **lusts** for fame, or when a person **lusts** for power, and so on.

Notice that the above verses don't say that masturbation is a forbidden lust. Instead, the above verses tell us not to **gratify** our forbidden lusts. We need to look elsewhere in the Bible to find out if something is a forbidden lust, and nowhere does the Bible ever forbid masturbation. Therefore, the above passages have nothing to do with masturbation because it's not a forbidden lust.

## Does Masturbation Bother Your Conscience?

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Another argument that people sometimes make against masturbation is that it bothers people's conscience, and therefore it's a sin.

This is a good point, because if God is prompting you in your conscience about masturbation then He's probably telling you not to do it. This might mean that you should never masturbate, or it might mean that you should wait until another time.

In order to prevent getting out of balance, we need to consider two issues:

1. People can have a lack of "peace" in their conscience for a number of reasons. For example, next time

you're with some married people, try asking them to describe in detail what they do when they make love. Marital sex is not a sin, yet most Christians would probably have a lack of "peace" in their conscience when faced with this question. Similarly, since mainstream Christianity considers masturbation to be a sin, most Christians would probably have a lack of "peace" in their conscience when faced with the question of whether or not they masturbate (even when they're convinced that they're not sinning when they masturbate). Having a lack of "peace" in our conscience does not always mean that God is convicting us of sin.

2. Many Christians have never learned how to hear God's voice. Therefore, they can't really be confident that they're properly discerning what they feel in their conscience. To learn how to hear God's voice, see my article called [How to Hear the Voice of God](#).

Another thing to consider is that if you have any doubts about whether or not masturbation is a sin, then you shouldn't do it:

Romans 14:23: "But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin."

Consider that the New Testament neither condones nor condemns going barefoot. It's a non-issue in the New Testament. We're never commanded not to do it, and no-one in the New Testament was ever chastised for doing it. If we go barefoot without committing any sins (such as stealing while barefoot) then we're doing it in accordance with 1 Corinthians 10:31 ("whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God"). In exactly the same way, the Bible neither condones nor condemns masturbation. It's a non-issue in the Bible. We're never commanded not to do it, and no-one in the Bible was ever chastised for doing it. If we masturbate without committing any sins (such as looking at pornography while masturbating) then we're doing it in accordance with 1 Corinthians 10:31 ("whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God").

## Does the Possibility of Fantasizing Prove that Masturbation Is a Sin?

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Sometimes people claim that masturbation is a sin because of the possibility of fantasizing.

However, if we're willing to be objective then it's easy to see the flaw in this argument. Notice that if you search the Internet then you'll find numerous examples of married people who fantasize during sex.

With that in mind, carefully compare these two statements:

1. People might fantasize during masturbation, and therefore masturbation is a sin.
2. People might fantasize during marital sex, and therefore marital sex is a sin.

If the possibility of fantasizing proves that something is a sin, then statement #2 proves that sex within marriage is a sin. But the Bible says that marital sex is **not** a sin.

Therefore, the possibility of fantasizing does not prove that something is a sin.

The bottom line is that if people fantasize during marital sex then it's the **fantasizing** which might be wrong, not the marital sex. The Bible never says that marital sex is a sin.

In exactly the same way, if people fantasize during masturbation then it's the **fantasizing** which might be wrong, not the masturbation. The Bible never says that masturbation is a sin.

Sometimes people claim that sexual fantasies violate Jesus' command against looking at someone lustfully:

Matthew 5:27: ""You have heard that it was said, '**Do not commit adultery.**'"

Matthew 5:28: "But I tell you that **anyone who looks at a woman lustfully** [epithumeo] **has already committed adultery with her in his heart.**"

In the above passage, the Greek word *epithumeo* ("lustfully") means:

**"to set the heart upon**, that is, **long for (rightfully or otherwise): - covet**, desire, would fain, **lust (after)**." (Strong's Greek Dictionary, emphasis added)

This Greek word is sometimes used in the New Testament for "coveting" or "lusting after" something (e.g. Acts 20:33, Romans 7:7-8, James 4:2), and that's how Jesus used it in the above passage. The Greek word *epithumia* (which we saw in the section called "Gratifying the Flesh") is derived from this word.

In Matthew 5:21-44, Jesus explained the meanings and intentions behind some of the commands in the Law of Moses. Concerning adultery, His point was that the **intention** to commit adultery (i.e. setting one's heart on a person for the purpose of committing adultery, or coveting someone for the purpose of committing adultery, or lusting after someone for the purpose of committing adultery) is just as sinful as the **act** of adultery. In other words, if a man **intends** to commit adultery with a woman, then he has **already** committed the sin in his heart. Matthew 5:27-28 (above) doesn't justify the argument that sexual fantasizing is a sin, because that wasn't Jesus' point.

The New Testament doesn't give us any specific guidelines about sexual thoughts, but it does tell us to keep our thoughts wholesome and pure (Philippians 4:8, 2 Peter 3:1). So if you find yourself having sexual thoughts or fantasies, ask yourself if you would be comfortable describing those thoughts in detail to your spouse (or your future spouse). This might be a way to help keep your thoughts pure. However, looking at arousing pictures or videos or cartoons during masturbation or sex is essentially the same as viewing pornography, even if the pictures or videos are not pornographic themselves.

There are perhaps an infinite number of scenarios that people might want to fantasize about, so it's not really possible to give dogmatic rules which will cover every possibility. It would certainly be wrong to fantasize about a sinful situation such as adultery, but if a situation is not sinful in real life then perhaps it's not a sin to fantasize about it.

People sometimes ask me what kind of fantasizing would be acceptable, but I can't answer that question because the Bible doesn't answer that question. To help you discern the Lord's guidance about masturbation and fantasizing and so on, please see my article called [How to Hear the Voice of God](#).

## Christ in Us

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Another argument that Christians sometimes make is that we're supposed to be conformed to the likeness of Christ (Romans 8:29), and that we shouldn't offer the parts of our body to sin (Romans 6:13) because Christ lives in us (Colossians 1:27). Essentially, the argument is that we can't imagine that Jesus ever masturbated, and we shouldn't offer our bodies to sin by masturbating, and we shouldn't cause "Christ in us" to masturbate.

But if we're willing to be objective then it's easy to see that this argument starts off by **assuming** that masturbation is a sin. This argument doesn't actually prove anything for or against masturbation.

For example, how do we know that we shouldn't cause "Christ in us" to commit adultery? We know it because the Bible specifically says that adultery is a sin. In other words, the "Christ in us" argument doesn't **prove** that adultery is a sin, it only says that **because** adultery is a sin then we shouldn't cause "Christ in us" to commit the sin.

Now, is it a sin for a wife to cause "Christ in her" to make love to her husband? We know that this is not a sin because the Bible specifically says that Christian husbands and wives should make love. Again, the "Christ in us" argument doesn't **prove** that sex is acceptable in a marriage. Instead, we must look elsewhere in the Bible to find out whether or not marital sex is a sin.

The point here is that **first** we must show that something is a sin in the Bible, and **then** we can say that we shouldn't cause "Christ in us" to commit that sin. The "Christ in us" argument by itself doesn't prove that anything is a sin.

So if we can't show that masturbation is a sin in the Bible, then it's acceptable to have "Christ in us" and to masturbate, just as it's acceptable to have "Christ in us" and have marital sex.

Similarly, if we can't show that masturbation is a sin in the Bible, then it's acceptable to masturbate even if Jesus never did it, just as it's acceptable to have marital sex even if Jesus never did it.

## "God Told Me Not to Masturbate"

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Sometimes people claim that masturbation is a sin because God told them to stop doing it.

Certainly it would be a sin for you to masturbate if God has forbidden you to do it, but it's not a sin for **everyone** unless the Bible has forbidden it for **everyone**.

For example, my favorite Christian recording artist is Rebecca St. James, and back in 2000 I bought her new CD called "Transform." To this day (ten years later), God has not allowed me to listen to it. He allows me to listen to all of her other CDs, but it's not yet time for me to listen to something on her "Transform" CD.

Notice that if I argue that it's a sin for **everyone** to listen to Rebecca's "Transform" CD because God told **me** not to do it, this is clearly a false argument. In the same way, if I argue that masturbation is a sin for **everyone** because God told **me** not to do it, this is a false argument.

If we can show that the Bible forbids masturbation, **then** we can say that it's a sin for everyone. However, the Bible never forbids it.

## Crucifying the Flesh

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Sometimes people claim that masturbation is a sin based on the following passages (and any similar passages):

Colossians 3:5: "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry."

Galatians 5:24: "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires."

Ephesians 5:3: "But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people."

The argument against masturbation is that we're told to crucify the flesh and put to death our earthly desires. But if we're willing to be objective then it's easy to see that this argument starts off by **assuming** that masturbation is a sin, yet the Bible never says or implies or hints that masturbation is a sin.

Another problem with this argument is that our earthly desires are not all sinful, so this argument is based on a false assumption.

For example, we have earthly needs and desires for oxygen, water, companionship, love, etc., but these are not sinful needs and desires because they were given to us by God.

The sin is in the **method** that we use for fulfilling our needs and desires. For example, God has given us the need and desire for food, so it's not a sin to eat food. The sin is when we eat food in a way which violates Scripture, such as gluttony. Notice that the above passages don't tell us whether or not gluttony is a sin, but instead we must look elsewhere in Scripture to find out if gluttony is something which needs to be crucified.

Similarly, God has given us the need and desire for sex, so it's not a sin to have sex. The sin is when we have sex in a way which violates Scripture, such as adultery. Notice that the above passages don't tell us

whether or not adultery is a sin, but instead we must look elsewhere in Scripture to find out if the desire for adultery is something which needs to be crucified.

In the same way, the above passages don't tell us whether or not masturbation is a sin, but instead we must look elsewhere in Scripture to find out if the desire for masturbation is something which needs to be crucified. Again, the Bible never says or implies or hints that masturbation is a sin.

## The Craving Gets Stronger Each Time

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Sometimes people claim that the desire gets stronger each time a person masturbates.

If you think about it, this doesn't prove anything for or against masturbation. Remember, the desire for sex was given to us by God, so there's nothing sinful in having a strong desire for sex. The sin is in the **method** that we use for fulfilling our sexual desires, and the Bible never says or implies or hints that masturbation is a sin.

The reason why people make this argument is probably to imply that masturbation might become an addiction, but we've already seen that the possibility of addiction does not prove that anything is a sin.

Another problem with this argument is that it's simply not true that every person who masturbates will crave it more strongly every time. This is a false generalization.

## The Effects on Marriage

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Other arguments that people sometimes make against masturbation are based on the **assumption** that it will have a negative effect on marriage. For example, some of the purposes for sex between a husband and wife (according to these arguments) are for intimate companionship, for procreation, for giving and receiving pleasure, for being "one flesh," and so on. The concern is that masturbation is for self-gratification, and therefore it hinders these purposes for sex within a marriage. But how valid is this concern? Consider the following points:

- In many marriages, one spouse (usually the husband) has a more frequent need/desire for sex than the other spouse. If the husband repeatedly pressures his wife for more sex, this can cause resentments and arguments in the marriage. However, Christian wives (for example) have reported in blogs and forums that they are quite happy with their frequency of lovemaking, and it takes the pressure off of them if their husbands are willing to relieve their sexual needs by masturbating once in awhile (without pornography, etc.). If we're willing to be objective then we can see that occasional masturbation enhances those marriages by leveling out their different needs for sex.
- Married Christians who occasionally masturbate usually report that they would much rather make love to their spouses. Masturbation doesn't hinder them from making love to their spouses when the opportunities are there, it simply "curbs their appetite" until there's an opportunity to make love.
- Some men experience "premature ejaculation," meaning that they reach orgasm almost immediately after lovemaking begins. This can leave the husband feeling frustrated and embarrassed, in addition to being frustrating for the wife. Men have reported that they've been able to gain greater control over the duration of sex by using masturbation as a way of training their sexual responses. So occasional masturbation can enhance a marriage by helping to eliminate the frustration and embarrassment associated with premature ejaculation.
- People have pointed out that by masturbating occasionally in order to "curb their appetite" (e.g. on a business trip), they're not tempted to have sex outside of marriage. So occasional masturbation can enhance a marriage by helping to prevent the devastating consequences of adultery.
- People with an addiction to pornography have been able to break this addiction by masturbating **without** pornography in order to re-train their sexual responses. So occasional masturbation can

enhance a marriage if it assists in breaking an addiction to pornography.

- According to marriage counselors, sex is one of the top two things that married couples fight about (the other one is money). When the husband or wife is willing to masturbate occasionally in order to help level out their different sexual needs, this can reduce the arguing about sex. So occasional masturbation can enhance a marriage by helping to reduce one of the top two causes for fights in marriages.

People sometimes claim that masturbation is inherently selfish, but this isn't an issue in the Bible. In other words, the Bible never condemns masturbation for being a selfish act, or for being "sex with self," or for being "solo sex," and so on. It's certainly a selfish act in the same way as numerous other things that we do by ourselves, but doing something by ourselves in private doesn't mean that the act is a sin (e.g. taking a shower or bath by ourselves, or using the bathroom by ourselves, etc.). If we're willing to be objective then it's easy to see that the "selfish" aspect of masturbation is no more of a sin than the "selfish" aspect of taking a long hot bath, **unless** masturbation cheats the person's spouse out of the lovemaking that he or she desired. If masturbation is not depriving the spouse in violation of 1 Corinthians 7:3-5, then the "selfishness" of masturbation is no different than the "selfishness" of taking a long hot bath. Think about it.

Notice that the above points are not "worldly" issues, but rather they are real issues which affect Christian marriages. Therefore, it's important to be able to talk about these things in a Christian context.

What it boils down to is that in blogs and forums and so on, husbands and wives have testified that the intimate companionship, the procreation, the giving and receiving of pleasure, being "one flesh," etc., are not hindered by occasional masturbation. In fact, occasional masturbation can enhance a marriage in certain ways.

Keep in mind that the above comments only apply to occasional masturbation which is done without sin. Many people have become addicted to masturbation or pornography or fantasizing about the "ideal" sex partner (which no spouse can ever live up to), and this has devastated untold numbers of marriages. It's far better to give up masturbation entirely than to risk any harm to your marriage (or future marriage).

I've received emails from people who say that an addiction to masturbation devastated their marriages, and they're appalled that I'm not condemning masturbation. I've also heard from people who are grateful that I had the courage to examine these issues objectively, because their marriages have been helped by the knowledge that occasional masturbation doesn't need to be secretive or shameful. People have different experiences, but remember that we must not allow our doctrines and views to be based on **experience**. Instead, it's important to be thorough and objective when we study the Bible, with our only goal being to honor God by finding out **His** views.

## Touch No Unclean Thing

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Sometimes people argue that masturbation is a sin because it makes a person "unclean":

Leviticus 15:32: "These are the regulations for a man with a discharge, for **anyone made unclean by an emission of semen,**"

2 Corinthians 6:17: ""Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. **Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you.**""

2 Corinthians 6:18: ""I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.""

2 Corinthians 7:1: "Since we have these promises, dear friends, **let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.**"

In Leviticus 15:32 (above), is the "emission of semen" referring to masturbation? Is it referring to a "nocturnal emission" (sometimes called a "wet dream")? Is it referring to sex? The truth is, we really don't know for sure what the Bible means when it refers to "emissions of semen" or "nocturnal emissions." Therefore, this

argument is based on the **assumption** that Leviticus 15:32 (above) is referring to masturbation.

If Leviticus 15:32 (above) is talking about masturbation, then it means that masturbation caused a man to become "unclean" under the Law of Moses. But when people use this verse (or similar verses) to argue against masturbation, they're **assuming** that the word "unclean" means that the man had sinned. However, this is a false assumption from not understanding the Jewish background of Scripture. Under the Law of Moses, the Jews were not allowed to come into God's presence (e.g. into the Temple) if they were ceremonially unclean. This did not necessarily mean that they had sinned, because it was possible to become ceremonially unclean through events which were perfectly normal or good or proper. For example, touching a dead body made a person ceremonially unclean (Numbers 19:11-13), so Joseph of Arimathea became unclean by caring for Jesus' dead body (Matthew 27:57-60). It was **proper** for Joseph to care for Jesus' body, so Joseph's uncleanness did not mean that he had sinned. If a woman gave birth then she was ceremonially unclean for a period of days, even though giving birth is not a sin (Leviticus 12:1-5). Being unclean simply meant that a person must go through the specified purification ritual in order to become ceremonially clean again.

Here are some ways that people have described ceremonial uncleanness under the Law of Moses:

"The concepts of "unclean" and "clean" are not equivalent to "physically dirty" and "spic and span" ... The distinction between unclean and clean was not even a matter of "sinful" and "unsinful," for much of the ritual defilement came about through accident, illness, physical processes, and other actions that were proper and even commendable" (*The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Old Testament edition), Walvoord and Zuck, Dallas Theological Seminary, p.190)

"Perhaps a helpful way to grasp one nuance of the term's meaning ["unclean"] is by analogy. In designing a house, one does not put the dining room next to the bathroom. The activities of the bathroom do not complement those of the dining room. Neither bathroom nor dining room activities are, however, sinful, just incompatible." ([Jewish Laws of Purity in Jesus' Day](#))

"A Jew avoided ceremonial uncleanness because under the Law of Moses, it prevented him from entering the Temple-- in which was the presence of God. The Gentiles, who did not follow the Scriptures to maintain ceremonial cleanliness could never enter the Temple. For instance, at the time of her monthly period, a Jewish woman could not enter the Temple. Other things which made a person ceremonially unclean included contact with the dead, leprosy, sexual discharge, and child birth. Anyone unclean who did enter in was cut off from the community of Israel, excommunicated by God and expelled from His presence in the Temple--a fate worse than death." ([What Does the New Testament Say About Kashrut \(Eating Only Clean Animals\)?](#))

So under the Old Covenant, being "unclean" was **not** the same as being a sinner.

In 2 Corinthians 6:17 (above), Paul was quoting what the Lord said under the Old Covenant (Isaiah 52:11, Ezekiel 20:34, 20:41), and then he applied that principle to Christians by telling us to "purify ourselves from everything that **contaminates body and spirit**, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God" (2 Corinthians 7:1, above). So, does marital sex "contaminate body and spirit"? No, because the Bible never says such a thing. Does masturbation "contaminate body and spirit"? No, because the Bible never says such a thing. The Bible never says or implies or hints that it's a sin. It's unScriptural for us to claim that masturbation is wrong or sinful, because such a concept is nowhere to be found in the Bible.

Now let's look at a similar passage:

Ephesians 5:11: "Have nothing to do with **the fruitless deeds of darkness**, but rather expose them."

Ephesians 5:12: "For it is shameful even to mention **what the disobedient do in secret**."

People sometimes use the above passage as an argument against masturbation, but if we're willing to be objective then it's easy to see the error in this argument. Let's **objectively** apply this argument to marital sex and adultery in order to see why it doesn't prove that masturbation is a sin:

- When husbands and wives make love, they usually do it in secret (to hide it from their kids, for

example). But does Ephesians 5:11-12 (above) prove that they are doing a "fruitless deed of darkness" and being "disobedient in secret"? No, because Ephesians 5:11-12 (above) doesn't mention marital sex at all. In order to find out if they are being disobedient, we must look elsewhere in the Bible. Passages such as 1 Corinthians 7:3-5 tell us that it's proper for a husband and wife to make love, and therefore husbands and wives are **not** being disobedient by making love in secret.

- When people commit adultery, they usually do it in secret. But does Ephesians 5:11-12 (above) prove that they are doing a "fruitless deed of darkness" and being "disobedient in secret"? No, because Ephesians 5:11-12 (above) doesn't mention adultery at all. In order to find out if they are being disobedient, we must look elsewhere in the Bible. Passages such as 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 tell us that adultery is a sin, and therefore people **are** being disobedient by committing adultery in secret.
- When people masturbate, they usually do it in secret. But does Ephesians 5:11-12 (above) prove that they are doing a "fruitless deed of darkness" and being "disobedient in secret"? No, because Ephesians 5:11-12 (above) doesn't mention masturbation at all. In order to find out if they are being disobedient, we must look elsewhere in the Bible. There are no passages in the Bible which tell us that masturbation is a sin, and therefore people are **not** being disobedient by masturbating in secret (without pornography, etc.).

Remember, our goal should be to honor the Lord in all that we say and do and believe. Therefore, it's important to be honest and objective when we study a doctrine so that our views are based on Scripture, not on our "feelings." This is the reason for comparing masturbation with marital sex and adultery when we're evaluating arguments against masturbation, because this helps us to be **objective** in our conclusions.

## Does the Bible Indirectly Mention Masturbation?

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The Bible never directly mentions masturbation, but it's possible that the Bible mentions masturbation indirectly (without condemning it). For example, I've heard that the Jewish expression, "covering one's feet," comes from the practice of standing up while masturbating in a private place. I have not been able to verify if this is true or not, but the euphemism, "covering one's feet," is translated as "relieving himself" in two places in the NIV. The first occurrence is in the book of Judges:

Judges 3:20: "Ehud then approached him [King Eglon] while he was sitting alone in the upper room of his summer palace and said, "I have a message from God for you." As the king rose from his seat,"

Judges 3:21: "Ehud reached with his left hand, drew the sword from his right thigh and plunged it into the king's belly."

Judges 3:22: "Even the handle sank in after the blade, which came out his back. Ehud did not pull the sword out, and the fat closed in over it."

Judges 3:23: "Then Ehud went out to the porch ; he shut the doors of the upper room behind him and locked them."

Judges 3:24: "After he had gone, the servants came and found the doors of the upper room locked. They said, "He must be **relieving himself** in the inner room of the house.""

Here's what a prominent Bible commentary says about this passage:

"the king's servants delayed outside his locked door, figuring that the king was relieving himself (lit., **"covering his feet," a euphemism for body elimination**; cf. 1 Sam. 24:3)." (*The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Old Testament edition), Walvoord and Zuck, Dallas Theological Seminary, p.387, emphasis added)

According to this commentary, "covering his feet" is a euphemism for body elimination. But "body elimination" can be a euphemism for several things, such as going to the bathroom or masturbating. The commentary doesn't clarify this for us.

The other reference to "covering his feet" concerns King Saul:

1 Samuel 24:3: "He came to the sheep pens along the way; **a cave was there, and Saul went**

**in to relieve himself.** David and his men were far back in the cave."

1 Samuel 24:4: "The men said, "This is the day the LORD spoke of when he said to you, 'I will give your enemy into your hands for you to deal with as you wish.'" **Then David crept up unnoticed and cut off a corner of Saul's robe.**"

Once again, "relieve himself" comes from the euphemism, "cover his feet":

"Saul's life was in David's hands as the king went to relieve himself (lit., **"cover his feet," a euphemism**, v. 3)" (*The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Old Testament edition), Walvoord and Zuck, Dallas Theological Seminary, p.451, emphasis added)

The argument that some people make is that if King Saul needed to go to the bathroom, then he would not normally seek out the privacy of a cave because soldiers of that time went to the bathroom at a designated spot outside the camp (Deuteronomy 23:9-13). But King Saul wanted to "cover his feet" (which refers to masturbation, according to this argument), so he wanted a place where he could have some privacy for awhile. Consider that if King Saul were simply going to the bathroom, it seems unlikely that David would be able to creep up and cut off a piece of Saul's robe without Saul noticing. But if King Saul were masturbating, it seems more likely that he would be mentally preoccupied enough for David to sneak up on him and take part of his robe. We don't know what King Saul was doing, but notice that if he was relieving his sexual needs then there's no condemnation of masturbation here.

The above two passages might be describing the simple act of going to the bathroom, but I have included them for the sake of thoroughness because they might be Scriptural examples of masturbation (with no condemnation attached to the practice). Sometimes people point out that Eglon and Saul (in the above passages) weren't God-fearing men at that point, so if they did something sinful then it wouldn't have bothered them very much. However, this doesn't change the fact that there's no condemnation attached to whatever they were doing, nor is there any condemnation attached to masturbation anywhere in the entire Bible.

Here are several passages which refer to "an emission of semen":

Leviticus 15:32: "These are the regulations for a man with a discharge, for anyone made unclean by **an emission of semen**,"

Leviticus 22:4: ""If a descendant of Aaron has an infectious skin disease or a bodily discharge, he may not eat the sacred offerings until he is cleansed. He will also be unclean if he touches something defiled by a corpse or by anyone who has **an emission of semen**,"

Deuteronomy 23:9: "When you are encamped against your enemies, keep away from everything impure."

Deuteronomy 23:10: "If one of your men is unclean because of **a nocturnal emission**, he is to go outside the camp and stay there."

Deuteronomy 23:11: "But as evening approaches he is to wash himself, and at sunset he may return to the camp."

In the above passages, there's no concern about whether this "emission" happened as a result of sex or masturbation or "nocturnal emissions" (sometimes called "wet dreams"). The "nocturnal emission" in Deuteronomy 23:9-11 (above) does not necessarily refer to a "wet dream," it could also be a reference to involuntary urination during the night, or it could be a reference to masturbation during the night. The Hebrew text is not specific enough for us to be certain. Still, no condemnation is associated with any of the above "emissions," no matter how they happened (remember, we saw earlier that being "unclean" does not mean that the person had sinned).

The only other references to an "emission of semen" in the Bible are in Leviticus 15:16-18:

Leviticus 15:16: ""**When a man has an emission of semen**, he must bathe his whole body with water, and he will be unclean till evening."

Leviticus 15:17: "Any clothing or leather that has semen on it must be washed with water, and it will be unclean till evening."

Leviticus 15:18: "**When a man lies with a woman and there is an emission of semen**, both must bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening."

In verse 18, notice that there's no condemnation for an emission of semen which is associated with sex.

In verse 16, notice that it refers to an emission of semen which is **not** associated with sex, because otherwise verse 18 would not be necessary (plus there's no mention of a woman in verse 16 as there is in verse 18). Whether it's referring to a "nocturnal emission" or to masturbation, there's no condemnation for it.

There's one more passage in the Bible which some people believe might be a reference to female masturbation:

Song of Songs 5:2: "I slept but my heart was awake. Listen! My lover is knocking: "Open to me, my sister, my darling, my dove, my flawless one. My head is drenched with dew, my hair with the dampness of the night.""

Song of Songs 5:3: "I have taken off my robe-- must I put it on again? I have washed my feet-- must I soil them again?"

Song of Songs 5:4: "My lover thrust his hand through the latch-opening; my heart began to pound for him."

Song of Songs 5:5: "I arose to open for my lover, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with flowing myrrh, on the handles of the lock."

People have interpreted Song of Songs in different ways, and some people see a suggestion of female masturbation in the above passage. I don't know if that's the proper interpretation or not (personally I'm doubtful), but I have included it for the sake of thoroughness. Notice that if Solomon's lover was masturbating while he was away, this is not condemned as a sin.

## Conclusion

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Masturbation is one of those subjects which brings out strong emotional reactions in Christians, but it's important to guard against letting our feelings dictate our beliefs.

As we have seen throughout this article, the Bible never says or implies or hints that masturbation is a sin.

We saw that there are several passages which **might** be a description of masturbation, and we saw that those passages do not condemn or forbid masturbation in any way. Apart from those passages, the Bible never mentions masturbation at all. Try doing a computer search in any version of the Bible, and you won't find any form of the word "masturbation" anywhere in the Bible. Try looking in any New Testament Greek or Old Testament Hebrew dictionaries or lexicons, and you won't find any listings for any form of the word "masturbation." Try looking in any Bible concordances or topical Bibles, and you won't find any listings for any form of the word "masturbation." Masturbation is a non-issue in the Bible. It's never treated as a sin.

God condemned various forms of sex between a man and a woman (e.g. Leviticus 18:6-20), and between members of the same sex (see my article called [Is Homosexuality a Sin?](#)), and between humans and animals (Leviticus 18:23), but not once did He condemn or forbid masturbation.

After reading this article you might be saying to yourself, "*But I still feel that masturbation is a sin.*" If so, then ask yourself what Scriptural evidence supports your feeling that masturbation is a sin. There isn't any! The Bible provides us with no evidence at all to support the idea that masturbation is a sin. Therefore, your view is not based on Scripture, but instead it's based on your **feelings**. In other words, you have elevated your feelings **above** the authority of Scripture, which is a form of pride.

Remember, our goal should always be to honor the Lord in all that we say and do and believe. Therefore, we should always try to be prayerful and honest and thorough and objective when we study a doctrine. For some reason, masturbation is a subject which causes many people to allow their **feelings** to dictate their beliefs, but this is not honoring to the Lord.

We must elevate Scripture above our feelings and our reasonings, and we must **believe** what God has chosen to tell us. There's no Scriptural evidence whatsoever that masturbation is a sin. I certainly didn't expect to come to that conclusion when I began this study! But like anything else that we do, it's important to make sure that masturbation is not done in a way which might dishonor the Lord (e.g. becoming addicted, using pornography, improper fantasizing, etc.).

God did not think that masturbation needed to be addressed in the Bible. As Dr. James Dobson of *Focus on the Family* said, "It is my opinion that masturbation is not much of an issue with God." (*Preparing for Adolescence*, Dr. James Dobson, p.83)

All for Your glory, Lord Jesus!

## Modification History

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- 05/03/2010 - Added more information in the section called "Does the Possibility of Fantasizing Prove that Masturbation Is a Sin?" Added more information in the section called "The Effects on Marriage." Added a section called "Does Masturbation Bother Your Conscience?"
- 11/12/2008 - Re-wrote this article.
- 04/01/2006 - Modified the section on "gratifying the flesh."
- 06/07/2004 - Added Song of Songs 5:2-5, which some people believe might be a reference to female masturbation.
- 07/28/2003 - Added a comment concerning the character of a couple of men in Judges 3:20-25 and 1 Samuel 24:3-4.
- 12/07/2002 - Fixed an error in which I had used a passage from the Law of Moses in discussing the sin of Onan (who lived **before** the Law began).
- 08/21/2002 - Added a response to the argument that we should not cause "Christ in us" to masturbate.
- 08/17/2001 - New article.

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