

Is Masturbation Sin?



Most people aren't willing to even say the word, much less willing to have a discussion about it. Two of our writers, Jesse L. Eubanks and Josh Hatcher, address the issues of lust, sexual immorality and ultimately whether masturbation is sin.

About the Authors

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Editor's Note: Comments are enabled at the end of the article ([page 2](#)).

Dear Josh,

Thank you for being willing to discuss a subject as taboo as masturbation. I'm hoping our conversation will lead both of us to a clearer understanding of the role (or lack thereof) of masturbation in the life of a Christian. It is my hope that nowhere in this discussion will Scripture be used out of context or become victim to personal interpretation, but instead will be the definitive and powerful source of

Truth that it is. Though neither of us approach Scripture with a scholarly background, we both approach it as common believers empowered by the Spirit who we believe will reveal truth to us if we seek for Him to do so.

I realize my opinion is not a popular one in Christian culture, but as I examine Scripture I would have to contend that it cannot be found anywhere that masturbation is a sin. Sexual immorality is a sin. (Ephesians 5:3, Colossians. 3:5, 1 Thessalonians 4:3) Lust is a sin. (Proverbs 6:25, Matthew 5:28, 1 Peter 4:3), **but masturbation, in and of itself, is not a sin. There are righteous, healthy ways in which it can take place and there are sinful**, unhealthy ways in which it can take place. I believe that most often people directly couple masturbation with lust and sexual immorality, but I do not believe they go together necessarily.

I believe that masturbation can take place without any lust or sexual immorality present. What is lust? In centuries past and even in the Old Testament, lust could be defined as a strong desire or craving, whether it be good or bad. In today's society however, and definitively in the Christian world, it carries a negative connotation. Lust means a few different things. It means to desire something that is not intended to be ours and it can also mean to desire something healthy and God ordained, but to desire it at inappropriate times or in ways that do damage to other areas of our lives. Lust is desire without restraint. Masturbation however, can take place without succumbing to these lustful infidelities.

There is no way around the fact the majority of Scripture that discusses sexuality does it in two ways — 1.) the celebration of sex within marriage and 2.) the inflammation of sexual desires from sources outside God's design of a man and a woman united in marriage.

I believe that masturbation can take place with a pure heart and mind. Lust is often associated with fantasy. I do not believe fantasy is deadly to our mind or is full of corrupt realistic expectations when these fantasies are based on healthy, potential realities. I believe that God granted each of us an imagination and the ability to dream. Masturbation coupled with fantasies about a loving future relationship with a long-term marriage partner can be healthy. They remind the single that we are sexually designed to be physically, emotionally and spiritually connected with someone else on an unparalleled human level, and that, even though we may not currently be part of such a relationship, we are already anticipating its coming day. I will not try to hide the fact that coupling masturbation with healthy fantasies is an extremely difficult task that requires discipline, grace and prayer. However, it is not impossible.

There are many, many contexts and situations in which masturbation becomes unhealthy, and more importantly, sinful. It is easy to couple masturbation with lust and sexual immorality. An image on TV, a thought from an old magazine, a complete stranger—they can all make their way into our fantasies. A boyfriend or girlfriend can also make their way into our fantasies, or our realities. Sex was designed to take place within a committed relationship with a single life partner. For the single, that committed relationship could begin long before we ever meet that special someone.

Addiction is always possible as well. Masturbation can be used as an escape. That's not always bad. Sometimes we need something in which its enjoyment greatly exceeds its physical demands. But when we begin to use it to regularly disconnect from the realities around us, it is no longer healthy. When we begin to take the realities around us and harm them, either by placing individuals we know in non-consenting, uncommitted sexual situations or from trying to escape our responsibilities, we have crossed the line into being mastered by something other than God. When we begin to depend on the chemicals that masturbation releases into our bodies, we must step back and seriously ask ourselves if we have become addicts.

Masturbation has no place in the life of a person who has taken the vow of life long celibacy. They will not be marrying and will not be engaging in sex. All of their fantasies would be based on non-potential, unrealistic ideas. It would be breaking the vow of celibacy for masturbation to take place.

Masturbation is not designed to be our drug of choice. It is not designed to bring sexuality into pre-marriage relationships. It is not even a necessary or unavoidable part of living. Our bodies naturally take care of themselves through their cycles. It is, however, a potentially enjoyable and intimate expression of our desire to love and be intimate with another human being. It is a natural way to respond to the sexual design of our bodies. Much as sex is symbolic of God's intimate love for His children, so it is also on a lesser level with masturbation.

I would comment on the role of masturbation in marriage, but I feel that because you're married Josh, I might hear your opinion on the subject first. Once again, thanks for being willing to share your thoughts on the subject. I eagerly anticipate your response. Grace and peace to you through our Lord.

Blessings,

Jesse

Jesse,

Well, we agree on many points, and I think that I should retouch them briefly to establish some common ground.

Our culture (especially our Christian sub-culture) refuses to talk about masturbation. Taboos are a dangerous social curse. We cannot have a healthy attitude about sexuality if we refuse to talk about it. The church is the first to ignore something that is uncomfortable to discuss. I think that the lack of healthy and honest communication about sexuality and its place in the lives of Christians is a large part of the pedophilia scandal and part of the reason that the national divorce rate is as high among Christians as it is among non-Christians.

We also agree that sexual immorality is wrong, that lust is wrong, and that masturbation in the lives of those called to celibacy is wrong. Sexuality does have its place in all our lives, but along with that comes a lot of warning labels, and some of them glow in the dark like the Mr. Yuk stickers that tell you which bottles under the bathroom sink are poisonous. But every now and then, we come across a scenario that is not as clearly written in stone, and we must turn on our spiritual goggles and tune in to the word of God to determine what is safe.

For as much common ground as we have, every debate must have a topic that is debate-able. I will have to say that I can't separate masturbation as an acceptable practice in the life of a Christian.

I don't think the question that we should ask is, "Is it possible to masturbate without lust?" because the answer of course is a resounding yes, with the proper conditioning, anyone can do a mechanical bodily function and keep a completely clear head.

The questions we should ask are, "What is sexual immorality?" and "Does masturbation fall into that category?" and "Is masturbation really a healthy practice, considering the fine lines of lust, and addiction that surround it?"

Josh

Dear Josh,

In Scripture, sexual immorality is sometimes discussed in terms of specific behavior (Leviticus 20:10-21). However, sexual immorality was perhaps so well understood in the Hebrew culture that the authors of many of the books of the

Bible had little reason to define it. We find it used most often in a very broad ways—language that implies the recipients already understood the expected behavior (1 Corinthians 5:1, 1 Corinthians 6:18, 2 Corinthians 12:21, 1 Thessalonians 4:3-6). Now though, we live in a society and world far removed from those days, where sexual immorality has been defined time and again, now leaving us with a muddy picture of unclear outlines. In the books where sexual immorality is outlined more clearly, it dives into the realm of who to sleep with or who not to sleep with (Leviticus 20: 10-21). God instructs his people not to have intercourse with animals (Leviticus 20:16). God tells men not to have intercourse with women during their menstruation period (Leviticus 20:18). Jesus talks of lust (Matthew 5:27-30), Paul of sexual offenders and adulterers (Ephesians 5:3, 1 Corinthians 6:9-13).

Sexual immorality is not completely outlined for us in Scripture. I offer the previous verses as pieces to the picture. They show us some of the things that are clearly black or clearly white, but they also remind us that much of the specifics we search for are somewhere in the gray area. They also leave room for the extremely unpopular belief among modern Christian culture that there are some cases where things are not universal—some actions are sinful for some and not sinful for others.

I do not see evidence that the sexual practice of masturbation necessarily falls into the category of sexual immorality for everyone. I am no fool though. I do see that it walks a fine line—a fine line because of the necessary discipline of the mind it requires. And the thoughts of the mind should not be questions of, "How far can I go?" but rather seek the desires of "Lord, I want to offer you all of my being." Anything desired more than God himself, any sin we are willing to commit knowingly to obtain something, any thought that if committed would be a sin, is still wrong and contrary to God's commands for his people. It is sin.

How does this relate to masturbation? Any fantasy or thought that comes into our mind must come under the question, "If I really did what I'm thinking, would it be sinful?" If we answer yes, then our mind and heart have faltered and we must seek forgiveness and repentance. If we find compulsion or "need" beginning to attach itself to our relationship to masturbation, then we have strayed from Paul's command telling us that we should "not be mastered by anything" (1 Corinthians 6:12).

The guidelines and warnings go on and on for why people should steer clear of this sexual practice. There are many who have chosen to abstain, and in many cases, they have made a very wise decision. However, masturbation can be healthy and acceptable for many others. Whether someone is married or single, they remain a sexual being. Whether they are able to have sexual interaction with another or not, they remain a sexual being. **Masturbation is an optional outlet for that sexuality.**

So, to answer your question, "Is masturbation really a healthy practice, considering the fine lines of lust and addiction that surround it?" There are many people that are over eaters. They eat too much. They are food addicts. That does not mean all people should shut down eating food all together because of the potential dangers involved. It means that we should guard what we eat and balance our eating habits with the rest of our lives. It means that those with eating problems should receive encouragement, help and support and continue to ask for God's grace and mercy. On a lesser level the same principles apply to sexuality. (I say lesser level because sexuality is not essential for survival and life in the same way that food is.)

We cannot stop being sexual beings. For many, masturbation is not an option simply because it could or has led to addiction. It is not an option for others because, for them, it is a sin. They cannot reconcile their hearts to God while having that practice in their lives. Just as any other activity has the potential for sin and discord, sexual activities have the same potential. Some greater, some less. **Masturbation has the potential to be healthy and even a continuation of worship in our lives.** It also has the potential to destroy life and fellowship with God. Yes, the line can be fine, which is why many choose not to walk it. **But many others choose to and are able to do so clear of conscience, with a pure mind and a heart eagerly seeking the presence of God.**

Blessings,

Jesse

Jesse,

What our whole debate comes down to, and what will be the subject of many message board debates is the age-old question regarding moral absolutes and where the fall in relation to life. The truth is, I waffle in my understanding of right and wrong frequently. I believe that there must be moral absolutes, or none of it makes sense. But to say it is always wrong to kill someone takes on a new

meaning when the lives of my family are threatened, or when our country must defend itself. So in procession, I need to define my own convictions and explain them in common sense. In other words, you will probably not hear me say, "The Bible says..." I do believe that the Bible is our standard, as God's holy Word. But the minute I start to comb through it looking for a verse that tells me to do or not do something, I have slipped in my understanding of "living by the law" versus "living in the Spirit." Paul's explanation is that all things are permissible, but not all things are beneficial.

According to your earlier explanation, people called to lifelong celibacy should not participate, married people should not participate, and people who struggle with it as a lustful practice or sexual addiction should not participate, so for the very select few people that fall into that category, this is my response.

In general terms, we are all sexual beings, and each of us has sexual desires and hormones that define our buttons for what turn us on and off. That is the way we were created. That cannot be changed. A large debate could be made specifically about the reason that sexuality itself was created, but to steer clear of another endless debate, lets just assume the common position that sex was created to bring a married man and woman closer together as one flesh. In that, there is also a picture that reminds us of Christ's level of intimacy and self-sacrifice for the church.

As a married man, there are a few things I have learned about women. One is that sexually, they have the same desire and need that men do. The second is that the similarities end there. It takes a bit more effort, and a lot of practice to get a sex life running smoothly than it does to masturbate. In fact, masturbation technically conditions both males and females to a particular neurological/physical path to easy orgasm.

When that conditioning meets a married relationship, look out. The man has conditioned himself in such a way that endurance is minimized, and the woman has conditioned herself to a certain rhythm or pattern, and the result is both parties are incapable of enjoying the same satisfaction as they would have had they not been conditioned.

Assuming that no patterns of lust or addiction have been formed, and masturbation as a mechanical body function is present in one or both partners before marriage, it is not beneficial to their sex life. Although the conditioning can be reversed and sexual behaviors re-learned, it basically builds walls that are dangerous to marital intimacy.

In the life of a single person, with no intent to marry right away, it may seem harmless and even enjoyable. However, it's like playing with fire. In proverbs, while speaking about an adulterous woman, the writer said, "Can a man scoop a fire in his lap without being burned?" And in common sense that applies to any dangerous activity. Can a man play Russian roulette without shooting his head off? Sure, if he's lucky.

I guess from a married perspective, seeing the end result of a pubescent pastime only reinforces to me that masturbation leads to destruction, rather than wholeness. Ultimately, the decision must be made between the individual and God. That is what living by the Spirit entails—individuals seeking God's direction one step at a time. Many claim to masturbate, with a clean conscience, and my mind cannot help but to ponder is the conscience clean, or seared?

Did we get anywhere with this debate? Basically I wonder if we did any more than get people to feel free to talk and think about it. That's the first step. Taking it out from under the covers and into the open. If we hold the whole thing up to the light, and examine it with a willingness to keep it or let it go, only then can we really see God's will on the issue. We have cloaked individual sexuality with such shame, that those who do struggle with sexual sin can't seek help. Millions of Christians struggle with sexual addictions, lustful attitudes and other sexual sin. There is hope.