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THE FLESH: MASTURBATION AND FANTASY

In describing the Anatomy of Lust (Chapter 7), the final step in the lust process was orgasm. This is the payoff, the fulfillment—and at the same time, the abrupt end—of the lust process. Most of the time, for most men, this is achieved through masturbation, the exceptions being, of course, sex with another person. But even in many situations where another person is involved, such as in sex with a prostitute or with a woman you picked up that night, where personal sexual gratification is the be all and end all of the process, we are dealing with something more akin to masturbation than to the loving sexual intercourse of a husband and a wife. But, this chapter will deal specifically with self-gratification through sex with one's self.

SEXUAL FANTASY

Masturbation is almost always accompanied by sexual fantasy. When referring to sexual fantasies, I am not speaking of the brief images that are a part of temptation, but rather our taking those images and holding onto them and manipulating them to bring prolonged sexual pleasure. These are the “videos” that Chris ran through his mind on the drive to the home office, and as with Chris, we are usually the male star in the fantasy.

A few men may masturbate regularly without fantasy, but working with men over the years, I have found this to be very rare. Many try to do it, and a few are briefly successful, but for most, the heat of passion invites the fantasy images with an almost irresistible force. As masturbation is discussed here, assume that I mean masturbation with fantasy

IT IS A PROBLEM WITH CHRISTIANS

Some humorist said that surveys reveal that 80% of all men masturbate, and that the other 20% lie. Although we know this is not true, there is no doubt that it is a widespread practice, and that many Christian men do masturbate, and most of those who do, feel guilty about it.

Masturbation presents a unique problem for many Christian men, a problem not present with fornication, adultery or homosexual behavior. Scripture never directly mentions it. This leads some Christian men to question whether or not the act itself is *always* sinful. The sinfulness question doesn't come just from men seeking to justify their lusts, but rather, from men who are wholeheartedly truth seekers. Their questions reflect the situations in which they find themselves:

- From a single guy: What if there is no fantasy, if I blank out my mind while I do it so that there is no lust? Isn't that okay?

- From a married man: How about when I am away from my wife for an extended time, can I masturbate, imagining that I am with her?
- From someone seeking to overcome homosexuality or other type of perverted attraction: Can I masturbate imagining that I am having healthy, normal sex with the woman who will become my wife?
- From the man deeply into acting out with others: Won't it be okay if it keeps me from going out and finding some woman to have sex with?
- From an adolescent boy: Isn't this a part of learning about my sexuality?
- From anyone, especially a long-term single man: Don't we serve a God of grace? What kind of God wants to deny me this little bit of pleasure?

If it is not always sinful, then many men may be feeling false guilt. But if it is always sinful, then those who masturbate and don't feel guilt about it, should.

THE AUTHOR'S VIEW

Absent any specific Scriptural guidelines, we can look to three sources to guide us on the sinfulness question: what we believe the Bible *infers* about masturbation, what it appears the Holy Spirit has been saying to the church down through the ages, and what we believe the Holy Spirit is telling us individually.

I believe that our strongest inference from the Bible that masturbation is sinful comes with the several listings of sins in the New Testament that include "impurity" (uncleanness is some older translations): (Galatians 5:19-21, Ephesians 5:3, Colossians 3:5). Uncleanness or impurity is listed with other *sexual* sins which would indicate impurity being addressed is sexual impurity. For the Jews, there were three primary sources of uncleanness or impurity: certain foods, touching a dead body, and bodily discharges. For the Christians no foods were unclean, and touching dead bodies didn't seem to be much of an issue, so bodily discharges is all that remains. True this could be referring to having sex with a woman during her menstrual period (which is mentioned specifically), but the number of times that impurity is mentioned, and how common the temptation to masturbate is, it is certainly reasonable to think that masturbation is the primary sexual impurity being referred to.

As regards what the church has taught, the Roman Catholic Church, today, as it always has, teaches the masturbation is always a sin. As far as we can determine, this was the stand of most Protestant churches until some time in the twentieth century. and as I speak with evangelical pastors and other Christians, most seem to believe, with varying degrees of certainty that the act of masturbation is itself sinful.

In our ministry, even at those times when we have felt uncertain about what to tell others about the sinfulness of masturbation, in our own *personal* lives since we have been Christians, at every stage of our lives, married and single, there has never been a time when we felt it was permissible for us to masturbate.

So, looking at all three sources, I have come to believe that masturbation is always a sin. We can find great support for this belief in our total view of sexuality as expressed earlier in this book.

With respect to married men, it is easy to see why masturbation is a sin. We married men don't have first claim on our bodies. In fact, we stand in third place. First, our bodies belong to the Lord, and He has told us how we should use our sexuality (one man, one woman...). Second, our bodies belong to our wives (1 Corinthians 7:4). Whenever a married man uses his sexuality for his pleasure alone, he is depriving his wife of what is meant to be hers. We men stand in third place as regards our claim to our own sexuality.

For both single and married men, masturbation falls outside the scope of God's purposes for our sexuality, but even more than that, it works contrary to those purposes. Remember in Chapter 3, connection, completion and creation were cited as being God's purposes for our sexuality. Look at how masturbation thwarts each of these purposes.

God gave us sexuality for connection, to draw us to another person. Masturbation isolates us. It has rightly been described as bonding with one's self. Rather than being an expression of man's outward focused nature, it feeds our self-love, our narcissism.

God gave us sexuality for completion, intending that once we grew into our manhood, we would find our greater completion in woman, real woman, flesh and blood woman, a woman created by God, not one created by us in the abstract fantasies of our own minds. Many of us cannot help but see masturbation as typically an adolescent act. Think of a teenage boy you know masturbating, and then think of a forty or fifty year old man you know masturbating. Doesn't the thought of the older man demean his manly image more than the thought of the boy?

Finally creation; our seed cast on our belly or the floor of the shower will never bring life. Surely, a whole array of sexual sins is contributing to the civilization threatening decline in births in western countries, especially Western Europe, but one wonders how much of this is rooted in men's finding sexual gratification in masturbation.

God never forbids anything arbitrarily. His restrictions, like the rules given by any caring and wise father, are rooted in His love for us. I believe that God has a great plan for us as sexual men, and that masturbation hinders the fulfillment of that plan. Ultimately, this is why He says no to masturbation.

TAKE YOUR STAND

As a Christian layman I have not been given the authority by any church body to pronounce doctrine or to tell you what to believe. I have shared with you what I believe God has shown me about masturbation in my own life and how I am to teach on the subject in our ministry, but I am not infallible.

You have to determine for yourself what you are going to believe and how you are going to try to live your life. But this I say emphatically: You need to take a stand.

If you are in a church which, like the Catholic Church, teaches that masturbation is always a sin, pay strong heed to this. It is a serious matter to act contrary to what those in spiritual authority over you teach. Even if you do it quietly, there is a way in which you are undermining the authority of the church when you live contrary to its teaching. And you certainly are weakening your capacity to “live under authority,” something that is spoken of highly in Scripture.

Pray about it. Then make your decision and try to live by it. By suggesting that men decide for themselves, I am not going off into moral relativism: “Well, there’s what’s right for you, and there’s what right for me.” Heaven forbid! That’s nonsense. No, there is a right or wrong in all moral issues, but with some issues a sincere believer, at a given point in time, simply may not know what is right and what is wrong. Masturbation can be such an issue.

But a decision needs to be made. I say this because I believe that as regards masturbation, *ambivalence is usually worse than being wrong*. I believe that taking a firm stand despite uncertainties is a proper approach for several reasons:

- When we make a decision and are wrong, often we are then better able to hear the Lord speak than we could when we were on the fence. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why God prefers us to be hot or cold, rather than lukewarm (Revelations 3:15-16).
- To not make a decision now, calmly and on the basis of the best understanding you have, means that you will debate the rightness or wrongness of masturbation every time you consider masturbating. That is not the time to enter into such a debate. Needless to say, our rational faculties and spiritual discernment are not at their peak at those moments when we are feeling the pleasures of sexual desire and arousal.
- If your bottom line is to please the Lord, he can bring good even out of your wrong decisions.

Your three choices are that it is always okay, always wrong, or allowed only under certain circumstances. I don’t see how any Christian can assume that it is right in every situation. If you conclude that it is always wrong, don’t be upset because you believe that total abstinence is impossible for you. Your decision, made at this point in your journey, may not find its fulfillment until further on down the road. That’s okay. We have confession and God’s grace to take care of such situations in the interim. Remember, it is God’s power that will work in your life, and your decision to always abstain may be the surrender that opens the door to your experiencing God’s power in this part of your life, perhaps now, perhaps later.

If you conclude that it is acceptable some of the time, be very precise about when you think it is acceptable. Write it down so that your limits don't start to slide in the midst of passion.

TO STOP MASTURBATING

If you are a Christian who believes that masturbation is a sin, then you should want to stop the practice. Needless to say, this is much easier said than done. In fact, among the men to whom we have ministered who have had a problem with regular masturbation, freedom is generally experienced a ways down the road on their journey towards sexual purity.

Basically, overcoming masturbation is a part of overcoming lust, as discussed in Chapter 8 and 9. What was written there certainly applies to overcoming masturbation. But there are some specific things that can be done to help with this particular part of the lust problem. Each man's journey in finding freedom is different, but here are five things that I believe can help many men:

- 1. Put masturbation in its proper place.** I believe that you will do better, unless God is showing you otherwise, if you view victory over masturbation as a part of your journey, and not as a goal in and of itself. Remember how it was said that a major result of the fall in men was their sexuality becoming broken off from the rest of them, and that our goal is to re-integrate our sexuality back into the total man. To treat masturbation like an isolated problem, is to perpetuate the disintegration. And in fact, as you read on you will see that masturbation is not an isolated problem. It relates closely to other sins, to our brokenness, and to the overall state of our hearts.

In our ministry we deal with quite a number of men whose primary—sometimes it seems exclusive—measure of their own spiritual state is whether or not they have masturbated, or how frequently they have been masturbating. True, some of these men come from horrendous backgrounds of sexual addiction, and masturbation seems to be the last vestige of their addiction, but I believe that an exaggerated focus on the sin of masturbation, by keeping them focused on this one sin, keeps them from sensing how the Spirit wants to guide them in other ways.

I cannot tell you how many times, in those periods in which I was struggling with lust, I have sensed God saying to me, not to focus on that today, but to deal with my pride, my judgementalism, with how I am behaving towards my wife, or some other of my long list of besetting sins.

We have men who come to us wanting help with their sexual struggles who treat their wives terribly, who are miserably slothful in providing for their families, who are completely detached from the day by day raising for their children, and the only problem they can see is that they masturbate three times a week. Our sexual sins are not always our worst sins, the ones that God would have us deal with first. It could well be that one of the reasons Satan likes sexual sin so much, is that it can so easily distract Christians from dealing with more important problems in their lives.

Here's a good way to prioritize our sins. As Christians we live primarily under the law of love. Jesus summarized the whole law and the prophets with the two great commandments; love God and love your neighbor. When dealing with your life, ask yourself, how severely is this behavior violating the law of love.

Of course, all sin violates the first commandment. God longs to see us whole and righteous men, sons in whom He can delight every day. Our sins hinder this from happening. But as regards loving our neighbor, a hierarchy of sins becomes quite obvious. In the area of sexuality, rape would be first (it does horrendous harm to the victim), adultery second (it betrays the wife's love and leads another woman into sin), fornication or pre-marital sex third (it leads a woman into sin, and maybe indirectly harms our future wife who will not know the joy of having a man who has known her alone), and masturbation would be last (it too could indirectly harm the wife or future wife).

I say all this to make the point that masturbation may be a lesser sin given the current state of our lives, and it may be best for our overall sanctification—and ultimately for our victory over masturbation itself—to put it in its proper place. Except for the fact that all sin separates us from God, all sin is not the same. If you are a rapist or child molester, all else in your life needs to be put on hold until this problem is dealt with. If masturbation is your problem, you can afford to let victory in this area take place in the larger context of becoming the sexual man God calls you to be.

2. **Recognize the deeper sins of idolatry, covetousness, pride, and rebellion.** The early church designated certain sins as “capital sins” because they lead to other sins. Lust was one of these capital sins, and its relationship to other sins is not difficult to see.

In the last chapter we looked at how closely idolatry and covetousness can link to lust. For the believer, the fantasies that accompany masturbation can easily become *idolatrous*. In fact the habitual act of masturbation can itself become an idol, something we love too much and we think meets our needs. The pleasure of arousal and masturbation, feeding the attraction, can make the act more and more frequent, becoming, in secular terms, obsessive, or in Christian terms, idolatrous.

Pride can be linked to masturbation. The voice that says, “I deserve...” is a voice of pride. The man who dismisses out of hand what his church teaches, implying that he knows better, can also be showing pride. Humility, the opposite of pride, seeks to submit to God's will and God's plan for our lives.

Then there is *rebellion*. It is hard to imagine how any Christian man who believes that masturbation is a sin could start to masturbate without first hearing a voice inside of him saying in effect, “This is not right. God's doesn't want me to do this.” If he proceeds with the act anyway, he has, in effect, told God to buzz off, or to shut up.

This is rebellion of the first order—knowing God wants us to not do something, and doing it regardless.

Confession and repentance are essential elements in gaining victory over any sin. It helps to see clearly just how we have sinned. Seldom does the sin of lust come unaccompanied by one or more other sins—sometimes more serious sins.

- 3. Make the decision to stop masturbating.** I discussed the decisions we make in Chapter 8 in connection with how our hearts are changed. This is such a critical matter that I am going to pick it up again here.

I served as an accountability person for Eddie for a number of years. Eddie had come to our ministry years ago as a young Christian who struggled with same-sex attractions. After a time, he just gave up and plunged into the gay life, frequenting bars, getting into relationships that would, as is typical, eventually fall apart. During this time, he never fully turned his back on God, nor did he ever believe that what he was doing was right in God's eyes. Eventually the Spirit convicted him and he left that life and came back to our ministry. Occasionally he would slip back and find some man to hook up with, but over time this stopped, as did his regular use of pornography. Finally, his sexual sins were almost exclusively related to masturbation.

Weekly, Eddie would confess to me that he had masturbated. I would admonish or encourage him, as I felt the Spirit lead, and we would pray, acknowledging the Lord's forgiveness. Always, Eddie would say, "I've got to stop this." Eddie was doing so well otherwise, that for a long while I hesitated to be too hard on him. Finally, I had had enough. I said, "Eddie, every time you tell me you've got to stop this, you are telling me you are *not* going to stop it now. I don't want to hear it any more. The next time we discuss masturbation, I want to hear you say, 'I'm going to stop masturbating.'"

Finally, he did, and it made a tremendous change in him. I wish I could say that he stopped completely, but he had wrestled with the issue, and his decision was an expression of his true *willingness* to stop masturbating. That's a huge step. I am certain that eventually he will achieve his victory over masturbation.

Man and woman are unique among all God's creatures in having been given a free will. Most Christians greatly underestimate the power that this gives us.

4. Recognize the pain killing qualities of fantasy and masturbation. Bret and his wife just had a nasty fight, a fairly bad one by their standards. She ended up storming out of the house, and Bret was left alone, angry at her, guilty for the harsh words he had spoken, frustrated because she hadn't seemed to hear him, and feeling stupid for not saying some of the things he could have said. Twenty minutes after she left, his heart was still pounding and his hands still shaking. So he went upstairs and masturbated.

Although many men can identify with what poor Bret did, our rational minds are apt to tell us that masturbating was a pretty stupid response to this situation. But it wasn't. Going upstairs and masturbating did accomplish something that was very important to Bret at that moment; it allowed him to escape from the pain and frustration that he was feeling. Lust, especially when it involves fantasy and masturbation, is a fantastic drug suitable for many purposes, including the relief of pain.

Alcoholics Anonymous has long recognized the pain-relieving quality of alcohol. That is why they use the acronym HALT to identify feelings that can make an alcoholic especially vulnerable to taking a drink. HALT stands for hungry, angry, lonely, or tired; all feelings of discomfort or pain that cry out for relief.

We can use sex in exactly the same way. When we are in pain, or simply experiencing discomfort, lust is one of the most powerful and most readily available drugs we have to bring relief. We don't have to go to the liquor store or the medicine cabinet to get it. We don't have to find another person or spend any money for it. All we need is right there in our mind. And for some of us, our mind is a virtual library or video store of unlimited stimulating resources. It is open 24 hours a day, and it doesn't charge rental fees. And if our mental storehouse isn't adequate, many men have ready access to almost unlimited images through the Internet.

Lust acts more quickly than any pain reliever on the market. It has the capacity to instantly relieve us of any consciousness of pain. Feeling lonely? Or weak or inadequate? Worried about something? Feeling angry? Tired, but you can't sleep? Can't stand who you are? Take a little lust and these feelings will vanish immediately. For some this may be lust's greatest source of power over them; its narcotic effect. Although men have a remarkable ability to do two things at once (like simultaneously listening to their wives as they watch football on TV), when it comes to lust, enter into it, and all other circuits shut down. Think of when you have used lust in this way. Didn't it totally block out every other thought or consideration? Is this the power masturbation and fantasy have over you?

Of course we know that the relief is only temporary. We know that our fantasies or masturbation solve nothing long term, and in fact, they often make things worse. We will feel even worse about ourselves tomorrow. It is a step backward when we've been trying to move forward. And we know that somehow, after we've given in, we will feel a little more distant from God.

But we want immediate relief, and as in many parts of our lives, the immediate exerts such a disproportionate power over us. We are all prone to trade off the greater long-term good for a lesser short-term benefit. Mankind prides itself on its rationality and objectivity, but the way we respond to our pains and passions makes one wonder how rational and reasonable we really are.

Recognizing the pain relieving power of sexual fantasy and masturbation, we can identify those times when we are most vulnerable, and we can develop other strategies for dealing with the source of our pain. In fact, just a prayer like, “God I feel lonely, angry, exhausted...” and seeking comfort from him can divert a man from that other way of seeking comfort.

5. Focus on who you are becoming. Here we come back to the positive approach to our journey. It is doubtful if many men who have written out their vision for the sexual man they are to become have pictured themselves as masturbators. I would hope that most of you have pictured yourself as men who never masturbate. This is a realizable vision. Many Christian men never masturbate.

Too many Christian men see masturbation as almost inevitable. In this they are somewhat in the position of children in our public schools who are being taught sex education.. Because the teaching comes with the subtle message saying, “Most of you are probably going to have sex anyway, so take precautions”, teenage promiscuity, pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease has increased enormously since such education became widespread. False messages of inevitability too easily become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Countless number of men—married and single—never masturbate. God had redeemed our flesh. He is taking it back to make our bodies and our sexuality the magnificent things they were created to be. Hold on to this truth.