

IF YOUR RIGHT HAND CAUSES YOU TO SIN: TEN BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS ON MASTURABATION

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Sexual intimacy within marriage is a beautiful gift from God. It's an outlet for play and passion, and it nurtures closeness with your spouse, supplying a unique context for giving and receiving love. But as with all God's good gifts (1 Tim 4:4) the devil seeks "to steal and kill and destroy" (John 10:10). His perversions are deeply grieving, and the scars can be lasting.

As a father, I long for my children to enjoy the bond of marriage without the baggage of past sexual sin. Yet as a church leader and a college and seminary professor, I know full well how rarely people maintain purity.

Glorify God in Your Body

Honoring God with our bodies must be the pursuit of every believer. As Paul asserts in 1 Cor 6:19–20, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body."

Masturbation involves the stimulation of genitalia (usually with the hand) for sexual pleasure and in a way that often climaxes in orgasm. My focus in this article is to clarify biblically why engaging in such activity outside the marriage bed is sinful and should, therefore, be avoided. Whereas there may be a place for masturbation in marital love-making, my use of the term here is restricted to independent acts apart from one's spouse.

Many medical professionals treat masturbation as a natural part of human development, and some church leaders have attempted to supply practical and theological reasons to masturbate. From a biblical perspective, however, I do not believe this approach pleases God, and I have seen the devastation that such a practice brings to both singles and marrieds alike.

Christ Purchased the Power for Purity

We cannot defeat sexual temptation in our own strength. But *with God's help*, all things are possible (Mark 9:23; 10:27). In the Old Testament, God promised to give his redeemed people a new heart (that is, new desires, longings, and thoughts) and to "put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules" (Ezek 36:26–27).

This is our plea and our confidence in the new covenant light of Christ: we can overcome with God's help! In Christ, we become a new creation. "The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17). Now, he who is in us "is greater than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). The one with "*all* authority in heaven and on earth" is forever with us (Matt 28:18, 20). We stand fully forgiven for all time (Heb 10:17–18), clothed in the righteousness of Christ (2 Cor 5:21). "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom

8:1), and with God working for us, we can now “hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering,” certain that “he who promised is faithful” (Heb 10:23).

Controlling Our Bodies in Holiness and Honor

With the blood-bought, Spirit-empowered, new-covenant work of enablement in mind, I offer the following thoughts about the practice of masturbation in the life of a believer. These are for the pursuit of holiness, that we might know how to control our own bodies in holiness and honor (1 Thess 4:3–4). May God, who has called us to holiness, and given us his Spirit, help us (1 Thess 4:7–8).

1. Raising up godly offspring is a primary way to make disciples. Masturbation belittles God’s passion for global praise.

One of the greatest ways to fulfill the Great Commission of making disciples of Christ (Matt 28:18–20) and to fill, multiply, and subdue the world with imagers of God (Gen 1:27–28; cf. Rom 8:28; 2 Cor 3:18) is for married Christian couples to bear and train children in godliness (Ps 78:5–8; 127:3; Mal 2:15; Eph 6:4). Specific seasons in marriage may warrant using certain types of birth control. However, those for whom masturbation is the norm, and who view children as unwanted burdens, are likely minimizing the Great Commission and God’s passion for global praise.

- “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion.’” (Gen 1:27–28)
- “Did he [God] not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth.” (Mal 2:15)
- “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt 28:19–20)
- “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” (Eph 6:4)

2. God purposed that all righteous forms of sexual expression be for the marriage bed. Masturbation hijacks intimacy.

Sexual expression manifest in orgasm is a good gift of God (1 Tim 4:2–5) that husbands and wives are to enjoy only in the context of marital intimacy (Gen 2:23; Song 8:4–6; 1 Cor 7:2–3; Heb 13:4). When people reach orgasm outside the covenant-confirming act of love-making in marriage, the act becomes solely self-seeking, divorced from its purpose of creating intimacy. Sexual expression through orgasm should be an overflow of a desire for a spouse, not merely for a feeling or experience.

- “[Liars] forbid marriage . . . that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.” (1 Tim 4:2–5)
- “Because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.” (1 Cor 7:2–3)
- “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.” (Heb 13:4)

3. Sexual intimacy between a husband and wife points to the love between Christ and his church. Those who substitute masturbation for marital intimacy undervalue God’s glory.

The most ultimate reason sexual expression manifest in orgasm is to be enjoyed only in the context of marriage is because the sexual drive that leads to sexual expression is given to picture the intimate “one flesh” nature of covenant love between Christ and his church (Eph 5:21–32). When masturbation is a substitute for marital intimacy, it minimizes the glory of God displayed in sexual expression by taking God’s good gift out of its God-ordained context of marital love (cf. Jer 31:31–32; Ezek 16:30–32; Hos 2:13–14, 16, 20).

- “‘A man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” (Eph 5:31–32)
- “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant . . . that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord.” (Jer 31:31–32)

4. Preserving sexual expression for the marriage bed nurtures intimacy and a heart of service for one’s spouse. Masturbation undermines both.

As noted, orgasm outside the marriage bed removes the relational, intimate nature of sexual expression, which is at the core of its purpose (1 Cor 7:3–4). Refraining from masturbation helps to purify one’s appetites (1 Cor 9:27). It helps to ensure that a person’s desire to make love with his or her spouse is for nurturing covenantal intimacy through service and honor, and through receiving love from him or her (Matt 20:28; John 3:14–16). It reminds couples that their spouse is not given as an object to be exploited, but rather as a covenant partner to be provided for, protected, and respected (Eph 5:25, 28, 33; see also Gen 2:24).

- “I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” (1 Cor 9:27)
- “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matt 20:28)

- “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her. . . . In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. . . . Let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.” (Eph 5:25, 28, 33)

5. Jesus urged his followers to guard themselves from lustful masturbation, and Paul called Christians to control their sexual parts in holiness and honor.

Only “the pure in heart . . . shall see God” (Matt 5:8). Jesus appears to link masturbation with lust when he declares that looking at a woman with lustful intent is sin, and then charges his disciples to take extreme measures with their eyes *and hands*, so that they will preserve themselves unto life (Matt 5:27–30). Similarly, Paul stressed that holiness seen in sexual purity was God’s will for every person, and then he urged believers to *control their sexual parts* in holiness and honor rather than in lust (1 Thess 4:3–5; see also Rom 6:19–22). “Without [such holiness] no one will see the Lord” (Heb 12:14).

Note that the ESV’s “members” in Rom 6:19 refers to “body parts,” and that the ESV’s “body” in 1 Thess 4:4 is literally “vessel” and may refer to a man’s penis (cf. 1 Sam 21:5 in the Septuagint, where the same Greek word is used).

- “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.” (Matt 5:27–30)
- “Just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.” (Rom 6:19)
- “This is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God.” (1 Thess 4:3–5)

6. Masturbation outside the marriage bed does not glorify God because evil desire always fuels it.

Whatever we do — including all forms of sexual expression — we are to “do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31). Whether tagged as covetousness, lust, or sensuality, misplaced and mis-timed desires do not glorify God, and failure to glorify God is always sin (Rom 3:23; 14:23). Paul’s charge is thus: “Glorify God in your body” (1 Cor 6:20).

In God’s good design, marital love is the *only* justified context for one to enjoy a sexual craving for orgasm, for only in this sphere does one glorify God by pointing to the beautiful union of Christ and his church (Eph 5:31–32). From this perspective, *evil* desire fuels all sexual expression outside the marriage bed, including masturbation, so we must treat all such acts as

sinful and as deserving of hell (Matt 5:29–30; Mark 7:20–23; 1 Cor 6:9–10; Gal 5:17, 19–21; Eph 5:5; Col 3:5–6).

- “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” (1 Cor 6:19–20)
- “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” (1 Cor 10:31)
- “For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.” (Eph 5:5)
- “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming.” (Col 3:5–6)

7. Paul declares that the answer to sexual desire is either the marriage bed or self-control, not masturbation.

The apostle affirmed that for those gifted with marriage, regular sexual relations with one’s spouse helps keep one faithful and guarded against demonic temptations (1 Cor 7:1–3, 5). For those able to remain self-controlled, singleness is a good option, but where sexual passion rises, marriage and *not* masturbation is Paul’s antidote (1 Cor 7:8–9, 36–38).

- “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman. But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. . . . Come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.” (1 Cor 7:1–3, 5)
- “To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.” (1 Cor 7:8–9)
- “If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry — it is no sin. But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.” (1 Cor 7:36–38)

8. Masturbation outside the marriage bed witnesses a lack of self-control and is therefore sin.

Self-control is a new-covenant fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23), a discipline that pleases God, nurtures hope for eternal life, and frees one from fear of future punishment (Rom 8:6–9, 13; 2

Tim 1:7). Lack of self-control is sin and enables greater influence by the evil one (Prov 25:28; 1 Cor 7:5). Intentional orgasm outside the marriage bed through masturbation witnesses a lack of self-control and is therefore sin.

- “The fruit of the Spirit is . . . self-control.” (Gal 5:22–23)
- “Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. . . . For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” (Rom 8:8, 13)
- “Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.” (1 Cor 7:5)
- “This is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God. . . . For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness.” (1 Thess 4:3–5, 7)
- “God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.” (2 Tim 1:7)

9. Forsaking the sin of masturbating can nurture greater God-dependence.

Every form of self-denial can function as a spiritual discipline, nurturing one’s dependence on God and helping a person find one’s satisfaction in God (1 Cor 9:26–27; 1 Tim 4:7–8). Denying the body’s cravings to masturbate can develop greater surrender to the control of the Spirit (Rom 8:13; Gal 5:16).

- “I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” (1 Cor 9:26–27)
- “I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.” (Gal 5:16)
- “Train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.” (1 Tim 4:7–8)

10. One’s thoughts and actions display what one treasures. It’s impossible to say, “Follow me in masturbation as I follow Christ.”

Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. . . . No one can serve two masters” (Matt 6:21, 24). Everything a person does expresses whose he is and what he hopes to be. So, we must ask ourselves, “Is Christ our Master, and do we truly desire to be conformed to his image?” (Rom 8:29; Col 3:10).

Furthermore, because we unceasingly should be modeling for our children, and to others, what it means to be a Christlike man or woman, we must consider, “Can I comfortably and

justifiably declare, ‘Follow me in masturbation as I follow Christ?’” (1 Cor 11:1; see also 1 Cor 4:16; Phil 3:17). Is such a lifestyle truly setting “the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity” (1 Tim 4:12)?

- “Those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.” (Rom 8:29)
- “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” (1 Cor 11:1; see also 1 Cor 4:16)
- “Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.” (Phil 3:17)
- “Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.” (1 Tim 4:12)
- “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.” (Heb 13:7; see also Heb 6:12)
- “Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God.” (3 John 11; see also 1 John 3:7–8, 10)

He Who Calls You Is Faithful

In light of these realities, I believe that anyone who masturbates outside the marriage bed sins and insults God’s glory in Christ. As men and women of God, therefore, may we not engage in it. Instead, may we look to our Lord for help and seek to honor him with our bodies by allowing our only outlet for sexual desire to be the covenant-nurturing intimacy of marital love-making (Job 31:1). May we also intentionally lead our children in such paths of righteousness for Christ’s name’s sake.

“Now may the God of peace . . . equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever” (Heb 13:20–21). May he “grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (Eph 3:16–17). And may he “himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it” (1 Thess 5:23–24).

“Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.” (Jude 24–25)