

Masturbation and the Bible

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Introduction

Questions from my readers have spawned several of my articles. So, here is another. I decided to open this article with the e-mail exchanges that led to this. Other than my reader's name, I have only amended typos/abbreviations as he sent his messages via an iPhone. These e-mails are included more for my daughter's sakes than anyone else's - as you will see. Any dad who has worked to be volitionally respected by his children will understand this. Here goes.

E-Mail Exchanges

"Subject: Christian with questions.

Greetings,

How are you doing Sir? My name is H... and am 30 years old. I have enjoyed your free post books on the internet and they have helped me a lot and encouraged me. I however have a question that I would like you to help me with. I haven't heard anyone talk or address this issue in the Christian circles and yet many of us young people are confused about it and we also don't know what to tell those who look up to us.

Is masturbation acceptable before God and how does it affect us? Is it right or wrong?

Hoping to learn from you about this as I believe you are a man well versed with the word of truth. Regards, H ... Botswana, Africa."

After several exchanges, with an initial assurance of a quick response, I then said,

"Hi H...

As I got into this, I am debating on how much of my personal experience to bring in. All of us who are sexually active are confronted with this. I am making a response to you that I intend on making public (an article). I feel it is that important. But I have two daughters and am debating on how much of my personal history to include in this topic. So, if you will - bear with me. I do not want to make this just a bunch of declarations - but to candidly share my own journey through this matter. But, if my daughters one day read this, I do not want to demean myself in their eyes - so, I feel I must get this right for them as well.

Hope this makes sense. I am working on it. Robin"

And being the gracious brother he is, here was his response.

"Hi. I do understand and welcome that. Am also grateful if this would become an article because I know it will benefit others also. So, yes I have the patience in all the world until you release the article. I also think it's that important. So thank you for the time and experiences you're putting into it in all wisdom. Regards"

Now, To Get to It

In spite of misgivings, I am compelled to address this - theologically *and* personally. One, without the other, will make this less than what it needs to be. To begin, masturbation is either a moral hazard, or it is not. Some contend that the Bible is silent on this issue. Therefore, its rightness or wrongness is relegated to personal opinion and personal morals. Thus, masturbation is a **subjective** moral matter - not an objective one.

Subjective Sin Versus Objective Sin

Objective sin is always sin. The situation has no bearing on it. For example, any creature that takes God's name in vain, whether man or angel, in any place, culture or age, incurs sin for that action. But there are some sins that are dependent upon the situation. When Paul addressed the eating of meat that had been sacrificed to idols (1Cor 8), he stated that a stronger brother knows that meat is just fine, but a weaker brother believes it is unclean - and if he eats it, he sins. So, the eating of this meat is sin for one - but not sin for another. But Paul went even further in this potential sin scenario. He stated that if the stronger brother eats that meat, knowing the weaker brother will then stumble, the stronger brother sins by eating it! This is the clearest example of what I call, "*situational morality*." The **situation** determines if a particular activity is sin or not - thus, making some sins "*subjective*." Another passage that falls into this theological vein is found in Romans 14. "*I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, **to that one** it is unclean ... and whatever is not from faith is sin*" (Ro 14:14, 23).

So, does masturbation fall into the "*subjective sin*" category? James Dobson, a well-known Bible advocate in the United States, has made such a case about masturbation. He related a discussion he had with his father as a young man. The conclusion? Masturbation, as a single man, is not sin. James concurred with this, but then asserted that masturbation, once married, is sin (I can't remember if his dad said this or if he came up with this prohibition himself). So, masturbation's rightness or wrongness depends upon one's situation - being single or married.

This argument rests upon two assumptions. The first is that the Bible is indeed silent on this matter. The second assumption is that the passages cited above can be rightly applied to matters beyond the subjects Paul addressed. Paul was specifically referencing meat sacrificed to idols, diet choices (being able to eat "*all things*" versus "*vegetables only*"), and the observing of "*special days*" (those who institute high and holy days versus those who regard every day the same). But, before embracing the position that masturbation falls into situational, subjective morality ... is the Bible actually silent on this issue?

Nocturnal Emission

When God gave the law to Moses, He said, "*If there is among you any man who is **unclean** because of a nocturnal emission, then he must go outside the camp; he may not reenter the camp. But it shall be when evening approaches, he shall bathe himself with water, and at sundown he may reenter the camp*" (Deut 23:10,11). If God considered a man "*unclean*" for a nocturnal emission, what about the man who is masturbating while wide-awake? Such a one is clean? One who is asleep may not even remember the stimulation leading to the emission, but what about the one who is wide-awake? When masturbating, is that person's mind ... a blank slate? This leads directly to one of Jesus's declarations. He said, "*You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery'; but I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart ... And if your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to go into hell*" (Matt 5:27-30). This passage is followed by discussing divorce, so it is not a stretch to believe all of this material is referencing one's sexual behavior. Why is He talking about one's "right hand" for a sin in the heart? But, even though He issued this admonition, He knows that physical mutilation cannot cure a heart issue. Other tools must be employed if any type of sin is to be overcome. A "*slave of sin*" (Jn 8:34) is bound *internally* - and internal deliverance is required. Read on!

Spiritual Common Sense

One time, I used this phrase in a seminary term paper. The instructor went nuts. I obviously hit a nerve, and though aghast at such a phrase, the instructor never explained the reason for the horror. Maybe it was because Systematic Theology has no category for this theological vein of thought. But, the preceding paragraph was an argument from, "*spiritual common sense.*" Let's continue proceeding in this path and see where else it might take us.

When we do something - really almost anything - we should stand back and ask ourselves, "*Does God deem this ... an act of righteousness?*" Or, try this. "*If Jesus returned when I am in the middle of this activity - do I want this as my final act in this age?*" Well, ... what do you think? "*Do not go on presenting them members of your body to sin as instruments (weapons) of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead and your members as instruments (weapons) of righteousness to God*" (Romans 6:13). While masturbating, are the members of one's body being presented as ... weapons of righteousness - to God?

Here is another spiritual common sense approach. "*The one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked*" (1 John 2:6). Behaviorally, we are to imitate Jesus Christ. He is our example and it is our task and duty to learn of His behaviors. So, do I think Jesus masturbated before the Father? Would this be part of His fulfilling the Law? Quite honestly, contemplating this makes me want to throw up. And even if we find Jesus had no sexual desires while here, that still would not release us to pursue our own devices. Since He, by His Spirit, resides in the saint, the assessment of what He would do still fully applies to our sexual appetites and activities. Now, for some personal material.

I became a Christian when I was 23. I was living with a woman and had pursued an immoral life with others before her. I was also involved in pornography. When I became a Christian, I knew the sex would have to end - unless we married. We went separate ways. For the next year and a half I struggled with masturbation. I then went on staff at a Christian drug rehabilitation center and it was there I decided I had to gain dominance over this practice. All I can say is that I earnestly sought God for assistance and, for my part, I avoided entertaining anything that led to that activity. We must purpose things in our heart (Dan 1:8) but, even so, the subjective, unseen hand of God must be working for any sin to be dominated. For over three years, God granted dominance (I have now been married since 1982). A year and a half of that life chapter found me on staff at a street gospel mission on the Fort Lauderdale beach - a highly sexualized environment. Wet T-shirt contests regularly blared over loudspeakers in surrounding bars. Street girls frequented our mission - some quite aggressive with their sexual missions. Female announcements of, "*Whorehouse!*" came from hotel windows echoing through the street late at night. As I reflect back on that time, it is amazing to me the victory in which I walked.

As an aside, one afternoon a group of us decided to do some open air preaching at the beach. We took turns, and at one point, as I was standing to the side, a big, burly fellow brushed past me and snarled, "*Masturbator!*" Internally, I experienced a confident joy as his charge had no merit. But for our discussion here, isn't it interesting that an unsaved aggressor had no doubt in his mind that masturbation would be sin for a Christian? Think about that. What if I had said to him, "*You err, friend. God doesn't mind if unmarried Christians masturbate as much as they want/need to!*" What do you think his reaction to such a claim would have been? I can tell you. He would have either broke out in laughter at such self deception, or else he would have cursed me for such stupidity and idiotic hypocrisy. And yet learned Christians ... believe masturbation can be in concert with personal holiness? Thus ends my appeal to your ... spiritual common sense.

Spiritual Common Sense Versus “A Biblical Principle”

Do not confuse spiritual common sense with “*a biblical principle.*” Spiritual common sense takes *known* Bible information and places it upon some current teaching or action to see if that particular matter lines up or not. Some might refer to this as “*a smell test.*” On the other hand, “*a biblical principle*” is a declared pet doctrine or practice where one reaches back into the Bible to justify it. The principle is then presented as having the weight of God behind it. You can see these two concepts flow in totally different directions. The Bible **informs** spiritual common sense as it moves **from** the Bible to the questioned matter. Biblical principles flow **backwards** - and those who hold them will not allow, or entertain, proper use of their selected Bible passages (or others) that undermine and/or refute their “*biblical principle.*” The most obvious, and vicious, example of this is seen by those who promote tithing for the Christian. They not only change God’s tithe - from food to cash money - from thin air (even under Law, money was never offered as a tithe), but they also misrepresent Abraham’s tithe, Jacob’s tithe, and the tithe Jesus discussed in the New Testament. But all that does not matter. The declared “*biblical principle*” trumps all, even if it can be demonstrated that actual Bible content does not inform that “*biblical principle.*” But now I think we should ask another question.

Is the Actual Vocabulary of the Bible Truly Silent in Reference to Masturbation?

I do not know if Biblical Hebrew and Greek have a specific word for “*masturbation.*” For example, I have assumed the Hebrew translated “*nocturnal emission*” (Deut 23:10) occurred while sleeping. But, for all I know, the Hebrew might actually be a reference to wide awake masturbation at night. And as far as this activity’s inception, it may have started with ... Adam. After losing her home in Eden, and also realizing her husband allowed her to be a guinea pig in eating that fruit, Eve may not have been ... to accommodating at all times. Who knows? My point? Masturbation has been around for a long time.

Concerning Koine Greek, again, I do not know if there is a word for “*masturbation.*” I do know it would have to be discovered in some document outside of the New Testament. But, I would not be surprised if a careful study of the words that are in the Bible (including the Hebrew words), coupled with cultural nuance and understandings, might reveal that masturbation is encompassed in the vocabulary. For example, “*akatharsia,*” is usually translated “*uncleanness.*” Several times it is found next to, or in the middle of, other words that are addressing sexual immorality. In Galatians 5: 19, we find “*adultery, fornication, **uncleanness***” listed in that order. In Colossians 3:5, Paul said, “*(T)herefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, fornication, **uncleanness**, impurity, passion ...*”. Ephesians 5: 3 says, “*fornication, and all **uncleanness**, or greed.*” Having said this, it is also obvious this word is found in clearly non-sexual contexts (Mt 23:27, 1Thes 2:3, etc.). So, I am not saying this word means, “*masturbation.*” But, I would not be surprised if “*akatharsia,*” in the right context, might have been understood by the writers (and readers) as an “*umbrella word*” for all kinds of out-of-bounds sexual activity - including masturbation.

To discover the accuracy of this suspicion, an appeal to a Hebrew or Greek language scholar will not suffice. Many “*scholars*” claim years of experience in a particular language, but, in truth, have one year of knowledge ... many times over. Even the true Hebrew or Greek scholar, who has not specifically delved into this matter, still could not be relied upon as authoritative. An honest and thorough vetting of the entomology of all biblical words pertaining to sexual activity (including how those words were used in secular writings of the time) would be the first step. Personally, I have not felt the necessity to investigate this matter in this way.

Based upon my preceding common sense points, I have come to my position without the need for the entomological investigation herein described. But that is not meant to discourage you, or anyone else, from such a study. Go for it and let me know what you find.

The Sex Drive

I do realize the position I am presenting is very difficult. I can assure you, my flesh would gladly accept an easier route. And that leads directly to my next point. The New Testament regularly uses the phrase, "*lust of the flesh*" or something similar (1Jn 2:16, Eph 2:3, Ro 13:14, etc.). I take this quite literally. I believe our flesh desires things. One thing, for most of us, is the craving for sexual activity. The word for "*lust*" in the New Testament is "*epithumia*" - a morally neutral word. It indicates a strong drive or desire for something and the target of that passion may be righteousness *or* sin. Jesus lusted ("*epithumia*") for the final Passover dinner with the disciples (Lk 22:15). Another time, He told them, "*Many prophets and righteous men lusted (epithumia) to see what you see, and did not see it; and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it*" (Mt 13:17). Context determines if the lust we experience is sin or not. Even in the sexual area, if our lust/desire is directed toward our marriage partner - that is not sin. "*Rejoice in the wife of your youth...let her breasts satisfy you at all times; be exhilarated (intoxicated) always with her love*" (Pr 5:18,19). This is talking about sex. Our flesh "*turns on*" when something stimulates it in this area. Have you ever been loping along through life - quite happy and relaxed - to then turn around a corner and see some sexually stimulating object and immediately find yourself in a spiritual war zone? No time to think about it, question it, or wonder about it - the battle is on. Often, when I get through to the other side, I sigh, take a deep breath, and say to the Lord, "*This sex thing sure has a lot of power.*"

Many would say the reason for such a reaction is because I/we have created, and then fed, illegal sexual desires. While I will be the first to acknowledge that we can pursue activities that confirm such a stance, I do not believe those activities have created our sex drive. That is a creation of God and for those of us who have it (not celibate) the challenge is to funnel it in the right direction while at the same time put to death any waywardness. And it is also clear to me that the intensity of that drive is not created equal. I have often said that those who have the gift of celibacy have a great gift in this life. That person is free in some very substantive ways. But each of us have our own things that make us who we are. Paul said, "*Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts ...*" (Ro 6:12). **Sin's** lusts are what we are to oppose. But desires/lusts that are not sin are not a problem.

Why This Is Important - My Deeper Purpose

It is important to address masturbation straight on. But there is much more at stake than just this activity. "*He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper. But he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion*" (Pro 28:13). If my position is correct - that masturbation is one of the sexual sins - then nothing good that can come from holding a contrary position. While I cannot be specific as to the actual negative repercussions that will come to each one holding error, I do know ... they will come.

Some sins are quite obvious. Cold-blooded murder is normally recognized by even the hardest sinner - as sin. But other sins are quite deceptive and because of a fallen nature we are easy prey. "*The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick. Who can know it?*" (Jer 17:9). Sins that bring pleasure, particularly physical pleasure, are among the most deceptive because our heart and mind are readily inclined to rationalize them as acceptable. I want to step

back for a moment and talk about the Christian and sin - any sin.

Spiritual Math

Christians are either growing, or are stunted in their growth, or are not growing at all. His/her growth is directly related to how he/she is relating to internal sin (sin generated from within) and external sin (sin generated by outsiders that affects the saint). Concerning internal, personal sin, the Christian has three options. One either confesses and forsakes it, or confesses and stumbles around in it, or rationalizes it, thus continuing in it. One's choice will directly impact that Christian's growth and witness. For the record, there is no Systematic Theology category ... for "*Spiritual Math*."

The Growing Christian

The word, "*confess*" in Koine Greek is "*exomologeō*." This is a compound word from, "*ek*" (a preposition indicating motion out of something), plus "*homo*" ("*same*"), plus "*logos*" ("*a word,*" or "*an account*"). So, to confess sin means that a person, from deep within, is saying the same thing about a sin ... that God says. When this occurs, that person is actually renouncing that sin as sin and the immediate fruit is a purposing to abandon it. For the one who then successfully does abandon that sin, here is the spiritual math. **Full agreement with God about a sin + abandonment of that sin = a growing Christian.** This is simple addition. However, there is a subcategory in this group.

The Stumbler

The true stumbler has accurately identified some particular sin and fully agrees with God about it. But, dominance over it has not been secured. Peter spoke of the Christian who is "*blind or shortsighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins*" (21:9). This is probably the primary problem for "*the stumbler*." He/she has temporarily lost sight of sin's destructive nature and has also failed to accurately analyze his/her behavior that has led to the stumble. The last part of the previous statement is key. For example, concerning masturbation, if you are doing this, there is a progression leading to it. It is precisely here that you must begin making preemptive strikes. This is subjective - in that each Christian will have differing stimuli that ends in masturbation. The difference between the victor and the stumbler rests in this preemptive activity. I also think proper analysis is a major factor in accessing assistance from God in overcoming sin. While God can instantaneously remove the desire towards some sin, I am not at all convinced this is His normal course of action. "*For the grace of God has appeared ... instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age*" (Ti 2:11, 12). The word translated "*instructing*" is "*paideuo*." It is a primary reference to child rearing - which involves verbal instruction as well as physical discipline (In fact, it is translated "*scourging*" in Luke 23:16,22). The one so trained then acts in an appropriate manner. "*But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil*" (Heb 5:14). The word for "*trained*" is "*gumnasi*" (n), and "*gumnazo*," (v) from which English gets the words, "*gymnasium, gymnastics*." When we are serious about overcoming sin, God assists us in developing new habits.

The Two Types of Stumblers

Nuance is often very important. In this instance, not all stumblers are of equal standing. There are two types of stumblers. The first type agrees with God about the sinfulness of the

particular activity, but has never - deep down inside - declared war against it. Why? This stumbler ... does not truly **hate** that sin. So, here is that spiritual math. **The stumbler + that sin + failure at personal honesty of one's attitude toward that sin (thus no true pursuit in corrective measures against it) = stunted growth.**

However, the second category of stumbler has no intention of repeating that sin. This stumbler gets back up with renewed determination to seek God for the tools to attack and destroy that sin. In such a scenario, here is this stumbler's math. **The stumbler + that sin + determination to conquer it = a growing Christian.**

The Stagnant, Non-Growing, Or Even Regressing Christian

Truth and growth are two sides of the same coin. The Christian who embraces truth is growing - even the stumbling one who has made a determined course correction towards holiness. On the other hand, when a Christian embraces error, trouble follows. When in this embrace, the Christian is occupying an area void of God. Growth cannot occur in this sterile dirt - much less Kingdom expansion. Error in one's teaching, faith, and/or practice - lands one in a salt waste. Unfortunately, if others follow that errant one's determinations, they too proceed into that same salt wasteland. The best case scenario for these Christians is that they have not embraced error ... in every area. The areas where they have embraced truth spares them from a "no growth" category. So, here is that spiritual math. **The Christian + some particular area of embraced error, but other areas are still accurate = stunted growth or cockeyed growth.**

This math is extremely dangerous for this reason. The thinking leading to the "error embrace" is usually a *pattern* of thought. That template, or grid, is then applied to other matters of teaching, faith, and/or practice. The result? More errors. A good number of the saints in Corinth progressed to a place of no growth at all. They did not start out as "no growth" - but there reasonings "grew" them there. Read 1Corinthians 11 and you will find Christians that no longer listen to verbal truth/rebuke and the discipline required from God to separate them from their embrace of error ... required their physical life. And they were very active in church functions because the final straw is ... their abuse of the Lord's supper! Wow! For one to believe that human nature has changed - so that such a scenario is not possible for a Christian today - is a misunderstanding of the highest order. Times change, cultures change, languages change, but the heart of fallen man, in all its perversities and inclinations, remains the same. If you think you are exempt from being a Corinthian believer, abandon that lie now. Concerning the spiritual math for the Corinthian believer, I will leave you to that calculation. As long as your answer equals "**no growth**" your addition is correct.

The Calculator Is Coming

God alone will do all the calculations that apply to us - and He will then apply them to us. I am not sure how gracious God is ultimately going to be in reference to His bestowment of eternal rewards. He knows "*we all stumble in many ways*" (Ja 3:2). When I stumble (not, "if"), I can either stay on the ground or get back up. Satan wants us to stay down. "*A righteous man falls seven times, and rises again*" (Pro 24:16). Rightly or wrongly, I regularly apply that verse to stumbling over sin. "*The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Thy faithfulness*" (Lam 3:22, 23). It is not uncommon for me to wake up saying to myself (and to the Lord), "*Your blood is either powerful enough to take care of what I did - or it is not. Your mercy is either new every morning - or it is not.*" When thinking correctly, I choose the new start. The only backward activity is if I need to

go back and confess something to someone. Of course, they may, or may not, forgive me. But if God has - and if I have purposed anew to pursue His righteousness - that is all I can do. And that ... I can do. The humbling power by that grievous conduct should continue (as it was ultimately against the Lord anyway), but I cannot allow it to cripple, overcome, and paralyze all future activity. These stumbles will most certainly impact the spiritual math I will witness when I stand before Him, but those calculations I must leave entirely in His hands.

Back to Masturbation

I cannot tell you why our sexual activity is so important to God. But, it is. He even reaches beyond our physical sexual activity ... and into our heart's activity - assigning guilt for illicit sexual contemplations (Mt 5:27-30). Concerning masturbation, I have not presented an easy position here. And, I can assure you, I have no desire to go back to being a single man and reentering/repeating that chapter. But, regardless of the composition of one's path, we know it will conclude with us standing before the Judgment Seat of Christ. Let's fast-forward to that place and see how masturbation will fare there.

Remember the burly fellow that snarled at me, "*Masturbator!*"? Do you think Jesus will explain to him this charge was errant ... because liberty was granted to single Christians ... to masturbate? Here is another scene. When before Christ, will the Christian, who ceased from masturbation, be declared a "*weaker brother?*" The masturbating Christian was actually the stronger brother - with greater knowledge. "*I read one medical professional that said the buildup of unreleased sperm could lead to prostate cancer. So, to protect my body, the temple of God, I masturbated.*" Of course, I have no idea what case my sisters might make.

So, it is decision time. Be careful to whom you listen and what you adopt as truth from God. Your choice will affect your eternity. This is not a threat. But, as Christians, whether we like it or not, our decisions here will impact our position in glory. I do not believe masturbation is an act of righteousness. It is not sexual righteousness. "*All unrighteousness is sin*" (1Jn 5:17). Of course, you might come to the conclusion that I struggled against, and overcame, this practice as ... a weaker brother. The masturbator is ... stronger.

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In 1977, Robin Calamaio became a Christian. BA, Bus Admin (Milligan College '90) and Master of Divinity (Emmanuel School of Religion '92).