

HOW SHOULD CHRISTIANS VIEW MASTURBATION?

“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.”
(Matthew 5:27-30)

Whether you’re a teenager or adult, married or single, our sexual desires can sometimes feel overwhelming. Fortunately, we serve a God who is for our bodies (1 Cor 6:13). He has designed sexuality for our good. He has also placed boundaries on it so we can say with Paul, “I will not be dominated by anything” (1 Cor 6:12). Even when purity is a battle, He gives us grace to fight well.

Though the Bible has no direct commandment about the physical act of masturbation, it speaks very clearly about the thoughts and fantasies which always accompany it. In the passage above, Jesus makes clear that our pursuit of purity extends to our thoughts. If we fantasize about something God has told us is harmful, we dishonor Him in our minds just as if we were actually doing it with our bodies. Jesus does not call us to simply repress sexual immorality such that it dominates our thoughts without leaking into our actions. He calls for the renewing of our minds, so that we love things He tells us will help us and hate things He tells us will harm us.

“But,” an unmarried brother or sister might reasonably respond, “what if I am imagining marital intimacy with the godly husband or wife who I hope the Lord will one day provide? Yes, I understand it would dishonor God to fantasize about intimacy with someone else’s spouse, or a beautiful celebrity, or to imagine doing something I saw in pornography. But what if I am imagining His good gift of marriage?”

Still, this must always involve fantasizing about something God hasn't seen fit to provide (at least, not yet). God calls us not to covet (whether possessions or people) and to be content with "the life that the Lord has assigned to him" (1 Cor 7:17). Whether we fantasize about a specific man or woman who God hasn't given us to marry or an imaginary, ideal spouse, we covet what God has not provided us. As the bride in Song of Solomon says, "I adjure you...that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases" (Song 3:4).

Similarly, those who are married must be careful not to distort God's design for sexuality by pursuing pleasure apart from intimacy. God designed sex as a "coming together" (1 Cor 7:5) to facilitate a marriage where husband and wife "are no longer two but one flesh" (Matt 19:6). Therefore, married couples should strive to use sexuality in their marriage for its God-designed purpose and not a self-focused distortion.

Though Jesus' teaching may sound extreme in a culture which cares nothing for guarding the mind, He reminds us in Matthew 5 of the eternal implications of our pursuit of purity. We must be willing to go to extremes, if necessary, to ensure that the lusts of our eyes and the works of our hands don't lead us off the narrow path. So we Christians joyfully forsake masturbation (even if it's a battle), because our lusts are not nearly as strong as our desire to live out God's good purposes, for this short life and for life everlasting.