

Dealing With Masturbation and Pornography as a Christian

How do you handle the solo sexual stuff? How do you deal with masturbation and pornography as a Christian?

I'm writing about this because you asked. You send me questions about this almost every week, and you deserve an answer. As both a medical doctor and doctor of ministry, I'll do my best to offer you both truth and hope on this topic.

For starters, if the gospel isn't big enough to have answers for this kind of sensitive stuff, what good is it? There is no problem in our lives for which God does not have an answer. The answers may not be simple or easy, but that's why we're talking about it.

Pornography and masturbation are not the same. I don't believe God judges them the same. I'm addressing them together because they often go together: masturbating while watching pornography.

If you're struggling here, I encourage you to read all the way to the end of this article. I'll share with you a dramatic story of how one person found amazing freedom from her private sexual hell. I know Jesus can do the same for you!

How You Are Affected

Here are some of the people I've heard from:

- The husband whose wife is physically unable to have intercourse, feeling guilty for masturbating occasionally
- The single woman feeling an overwhelming spiritual oppression that keeps her compulsively masturbating
- The wife who feels lonely and rejected because her

husband spends hours watching pornography in the basement instead of spending time with her

- The husband filled with shame and guilt because of watching pornography while sleeping in a separate bedroom from his wife
- The Christian minister struggling to stay free from pornography while he and his wife wrestle with marriage issues
- The single woman addicted to pornography, wondering if she is the only one
- The man wondering if it's a sin to masturbate as a way to relieve sexual tension because his wife is unwilling to engage in sex
- The couple struggling with sexual intimacy who want to try viewing pornography together to see if it would improve their relationship

These are real people with real names to whom I have either spoken or from whom I have received written messages. Your story may be different, but it's certain you are not the only one wrestling with the issues you are facing.

I answered each of these individuals personally, and my answer was not the same to all of them. I hope you'll see why as you continue reading.

What's the Problem?

Here are the primary issues pornography and masturbation bring up for you as a Christian.

Shame and Guilt

There's not one person I've heard from on these issues who is not wrestling with some measure of shame and guilt about them—some more, some less. This fact in itself should confirm that we need to bring the gospel to bear here.

But simply saying "Ask God to forgive you, and don't do it

anymore" is not enough. You've tried that, and nothing changes. You desperately want-need-forgiveness, but you need something more, too.

The world's answer is, "Just don't feel guilty about it. This behavior is normal."

Yes, there is true guilt and false guilt. But if you're reading this, I don't have to tell you that saying "It's all OK" doesn't satisfy. And it's certainly not what God would say.

So what's OK? What's not OK? What's sin in this area? What's normal? What can God bless? What does He realistically and truly expect? And what do you do about it?

I'll attempt to answer those questions below.

Sexual Needs

God built into human beings a biological/psychological drive for sex. He must have thought it important, because He certainly also knew how much trouble we would experience over our sexuality.

The Bible is clear: God intended sex to be ravishingly enjoyed by one woman and one man in a life-long commitment in marriage. Sex outside of that boundary brings all kinds of trouble including guilt, pain, broken hearts and more.

But not everyone is, can be or wants to be married. And not every marriage is sexually healthy. What are God's children to do in those circumstances?

If you're wrestling with masturbation and/or pornography as a way to deal with sexual needs, keep reading.

Addiction

The research is clear, and your stories are clear. Pornography

and compulsive masturbation have the power to insert their claws deep into your brain, controlling you without regard for your well-being. They make an exceptionally cruel taskmaster.

Not everyone who masturbates occasionally or comes across a pornographic image becomes addicted. I believe there is a biologic propensity here that leads some people to become almost instantly addicted, while others are not.

It's not unlike alcohol. Some people can celebrate with an occasional glass of wine and leave it at that. Others cannot. Like Donald Trump refusing to take even one drink, if you're at risk, the only safe thing is to not even try it.

That said, if you think you can control your consumption of pornography, you're fooling yourself. This is one reason I believe viewing pornography is always sinful. (There are other reasons also.)

If masturbating has become compulsive, you also know the power it can hold over you. (More on that below.)

Intimacy

Pornography damages marriages. Pornography damages your soul and spirit. Period.

Pornography provides an experience of sexual stimulation and release without connecting with another human being. It's always taking rather than giving. That's another reason I believe pornography is always sinful.

Each experience viewing pornography lessens your ability to become sexually aroused by and connect with a real, live person: your spouse. Regular use of pornography before marriage can lead to seriously failed expectations with one's spouse when marriage does happen. Using it while married takes away from the sexual intimacy your spouse deserves and from your determination to pursue your spouse. Viewing it with your

spouse does not bring you closer together physically, emotionally or spiritually.

Compulsive masturbation does the same when it lessens your sexual connection with your spouse and makes sex only about meeting your own physical needs.

I can hear some of you right now: “My spouse refuses (or is unable) to engage in sex. So I’m not taking anything away. Intimacy is impossible.”

If you’re married, your job is to continually seek to connect with your spouse—over and over and over again. That holds true regardless of how “cold,” unreasonable, or frustrating that becomes. Your spouse’s refusal or inability to engage in sex is absolutely no excuse to indulge in pornography.

If you’re wrestling with whether your marriage is too destructive to save, check out this article. If you need some help to re-connect with your spouse, this Resource Guide may be helpful.

What’s Sin? What’s Not Sin?

You’ve realized by now that I believe pornography is always sinful. On a practical level, here’s why.

- Pornography always exploits someone. The person photographed/videoed is always being used for the sexual pleasure of someone with whom they have no relationship.
- Pornography damages your ability to connect with your spouse, taking the sexual/emotional energy you should invest in them.
- Pornography is seriously addicting. It makes you do things even when doing so harms yourself or others.
- Pornography sears your brain and damages your soul.

It’s difficult not to be exposed to pornography in some form. That’s not sin to the person who is unexpectedly exposed. It’s

the second look, the choosing to go back, that becomes sin.

Is masturbation sinful? I tread cautiously here. This is where true guilt and false guilt can become confusing.

There's no question that compulsive masturbation is sinful. It controls you, damages you and takes sexual/emotional energy from what you should invest in your spouse.

Dr. James Dobson recounts a conversation he had with his father as a young boy. His father told him (my paraphrase), "I want to relieve some guilt for you ahead of time. Masturbation is something you are certain to face. I could wish you wouldn't do it, but you will. I don't think it has that much to do with your relationship with God." Some will disagree with this, but it's an important perspective for you to know about.

Biologically, God created both men and woman with a way to relieve sexual tension outside of intercourse. Men may call this "wet dreams." Women may experience something similar. Occasional masturbation can simply be part of this mechanism.

Here's my bottom line as a "doctor-doctor": Periodic release of sexual tension through masturbation may be OK for the single person or the married person whose spouse is unable to engage in sex. Compulsive masturbation is a sin; periodic release of sexual tension when you don't have a spouse is not.

It's dangerous for me to say that because it's fuzzy. It risks lessening the guilt someone feels who is being convicted by the Holy Spirit that their compulsive masturbation needs to stop. Like alcohol, if "occasionally" works for you, OK. Just be aware that for some, "occasionally" turns into "compulsive."

It's also dangerous because it doesn't answer the question "How much?" Clearly, several times a day is dangerous, sinful and compulsive. Beyond that, I can't give you a number. I'll

leave the Holy Spirit to speak to your heart. Please let Him do so.

Someone feeling guilt over occasional masturbation needs to find freedom right here. Your guilt may be false guilt. If this troubles you, take it before the Lord. Let Him speak to you and heal you from false guilt.

Freedom from Pornography and Compulsive Masturbation

Jesus can set you free! That's always the case. And it's the case here.

Deborah was set free, and Jesus can set you free too. She gave permission to share her story (slightly edited for space), and I think you will find it inspiring.

I am from Senegal, born in a Muslim family. In December 2002 I came to America to study and met with some Christian friends, but I did not want to hear about Christ. Sometime later I started watching pornography and self-masturbating. As a result I started experiencing an ongoing daily supernatural and unwanted sexual relationship with a demon—a “spirit husband”.

One day, I was just sick and tired of my life and asked God to show me the way to follow for my life, even if it meant Jesus. I went to bed, and when I woke up I could hear, “Jesus,” “Jesus,” “Jesus.” My friend gave me the number of a pastor who used to be a Muslim. He led me to Christ that day, and I told him about that spirit husband. He prayed over the phone and commanded that spirit never to touch me again, and I have not had that kind of encounter again.

As soon as I said the prayer of salvation, I felt a huge load being taken off my shoulders. It was physical, like when you are carrying something very heavy on your shoulders and someone stronger just picks it up for you. The Lord delivered me effortlessly from so many fears. I now can look at tombs

without being afraid of death. What a relief! The Lord also delivered me from the spirit of pornography and masturbation. All these deliverances took place without me having to make any effort; I guess it just came with my salvation.

When my family found out I had become a Christian, they disowned me. For four years they completely ignored me, but Jesus has started to work things out. I have a much bigger family now since I joined God's family, so many people who love and care for me and I have never lacked anything.

Remember, what He's done for others, He will do for you!

How to Find Freedom

I hope Deborah's testimony makes you hungry for freedom.

You may wonder why you have not experienced freedom even though you've prayed for deliverance many times. Remember that God works in every person's life in a unique way. The important thing is that you don't give up.

Deborah is right: Freedom is part of salvation. Sometimes it comes over time, but it's there for you.

If you want deliverance from pornography or compulsive masturbation, know that God has it available. Here are three important steps.

1. Give God permission to work on your heart. Don't hold anything back. Nothing. No excuses. The most lasting change comes when God makes you fully alive—from the inside out. When He brings up something painful for you to deal with, face it. When He tells you to do something, do it. When the Holy Spirit puts His finger on something in your life, let Him have it.

Don't underestimate this step. You can't expect God to set you free in one area if you are rebelling in another. That means giving everything to him; your time, your money, your body,

your job, your future, your marriage—everything.

2. Get in community! Shame thrives in the dark. Bringing it into the light disarms its power. You do that by joining with other believers who are also committed to experiencing freedom.

If you're married, enlist your spouse. No secrets! None at all. But you must also connect with other same-sex believers who can understand and support you and help hold you accountable. If you have Christian friends whom you can be open with, do so. If not, here are a few more invaluable resources for finding community.

– A New DVD teaching series for men with a tried and proven battle for purity in a lustful and Godless world

Every Man's Battle – Resources to help men live with sexual integrity

Woman at the Well – Help for women struggling with sexual brokenness

Covenant Eyes – Internet filtering software to help protect you from pornography

3. Keep fighting spiritually. Finding freedom from pornography or compulsive masturbation is a matter of spiritual warfare. Jesus wants to set you free! And your role is to live out that freedom.

Plead the blood of Jesus daily over your mind, heart and life. You dare not take one more step without the covering of His blood. The enemy will try to shame you into giving up. By continuing to place yourself under the blood of Jesus and walking out His victory in your own life you are demonstrating to the enemy that Jesus has won—and that you are standing on His side.

I hope this has stimulated you to choose to fight for the

freedom from pornography or compulsive masturbation that Jesus has for you. Let me know—either in the comments below, or using this confidential form. I read each one personally.

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