

IS MASTURBATION A SIN?

By Denver Cheddie

Is masturbation a sin? Whoever has never had a "lustful thought", be the first to say yes. How do we deal with such thoughts? In the light of Matt. 5:28, believers seem to be walking a tight rope everyday of their lives. But I believe lust is a very much misunderstood word and concept. It is precisely such a misunderstanding that caused Christians in the past to seclude themselves to living in caves apart from civilization. Perhaps this misunderstanding still prohibits Catholic priests from marrying. And it is this misunderstanding that leaves believers with the condemnation that they commit adultery every day of their lives.

I will argue, in this article, that

1. masturbation is not a sin,
2. lust means desire not thought, therefore erotic fantasies are not necessarily the lust Jesus spoke of in Matthew 5:28.

Common Misconceptions About Lust

When asked if masturbation is a sin, most "experts" would reply that the act is not wrong of itself, but the thoughts associated with it are (Matthew 5:28 is usually quoted at this point). **Therein lies the first misconception concerning lust - equating lust with thoughts. *Lust does not mean thought.*** The most common words translated as lust in the Bible are

epithumeo, epipotheo, and orego. They all mean to desire, to covet, to long for intensely, to set one's heart upon. The idea of intent or volition is strongly present. Consider 1 Tim 3:1

*If any man desires (**orego**) the office of a bishop, he desires (**epithumeo**) a good thing.*

Clearly both Greek words are being used interchangeably i.e. they are synonymous. No one who desires to be a bishop, sits and fantasizes all day about being a bishop. He actively pursues the calling. He does whatever he has to do to achieve his goal. The NIV translates **orego** here as "**sets his heart on**". And since **epithumeo** means the same thing, in this context, the word lust means "**to desire with intent**". It does not mean "to form mental images". It's the same word **epithumeo** that appears in Matt 5:28, which will be discussed later. Essentially, someone who has erotic thoughts may not necessarily be guilty of lust.

Others say that masturbation is an act that flows from an evil heart of lust. **Therein lies the second misconception - that lust is always bad.** Suffice it to say at this point that the driving force that motivates people to masturbate is the same driving force that moves husbands and wives to have sex with each other. Let's face it, lust (sexual desire) is a very important part of sex. Lust is actually used in a good way in Matt. 13:17; Luke 22:15; 1 Tim 3:1; Heb. 6:11; and 1 Pet. 1:12. It is also used in a bad way in Matt. 5:28; Rom. 7:7; 13:9; 1 Cor. 10:6; and James 4:2.

Anything we desire is a lust. **What makes it good or bad is the object of that desire.** If we desire to be ministers of the Gospel, that is a good lust (1 Tim. 3:1). If we set our hearts on our neighbor's wife, then that is a bad lust

(Rom. 7:7; 13:9 cf. Ex. 20:17). Lust is actually the same word as covet in the Greek (Ex. 20:17). We can covet our neighbor's stuff, or we can covet earnestly the best gifts (1 Cor 12:31). Just like adultery and fornication are perversions of God's gift of sex, lust is a perversion of the sexual desire God gave us. Just like sex is only wrong if we have it with the wrong person, lust is wrong if we desire (covet) someone who is not our spouse.

Matthew 5:28

The most pertinent scripture in this discussion is Matt 5:28.

*whosoever looketh on a woman to lust (**epithumeo**) after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart. (KJV)*

The NIV translates this verse,

anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

The NIV's is an unfortunate translation because the word **epithumeo** appearing in the verse is a verb (to lust) not an adverb (lustfully). The operative word is not look, but lust. Jesus is not talking about how a man looks at the woman or thinks about a woman, but about a man lusting after a woman (looking being an instrument of lusting). That makes a world of a difference in the true meaning of the verse, the true meaning intended by Jesus. He is addressing lust not fantasy.

In Matt. 5:28, I do not believe Jesus was speaking to teenagers who were at their sexual peak and were entertaining many erotic fantasies. That simply does not fit the context of the sermon on the mount. It is hardly likely that

Jesus, in the middle of his tirade against the Pharisees, would throw a punch at teenagers. He was primarily addressing married men who had desires for women other than their wives. That same desire should have been directed toward their own wives (Prov. 5:19, 20). The lust Jesus spoke of was a determined desire to attain some outside woman, not a mere fantasy. Some of the Jews divorced their wives for this very reason. The very desire to do it was as bad as the act itself, Jesus said.

The IVP commentary on Matt. 5:28 defines lust as "the deliberate harboring of desire for an illicit relationship." It goes on to say that "Jesus refers not to noticing a person's beauty but to imbibing it, meditating on it, SEEKING TO POSSESS IT" [emphasis mine]. The idea of purposeful intent is present.

Matthew 5:28 is very similar to Proverbs 6:25.

Lust not after her beauty in thine heart; neither let her take thee with her eyelids.

Proverbs 6:25-29 speak of lusting after a woman's beauty in one's heart. But even in this context, that woman is someone else's wife (vs. 29). This is talking about a strong desire to go out and have relations with someone. It is talking about the desires which eventually lead to the act of adultery. That lust is described as taking fire in your bosom and walking on hot coals. It is the kind of lust that **WILL** result in one getting burnt. That does not describe sexual fantasies. It describes something much much stronger than that. Sexual fantasies are merely thoughts with no intentions attached. The difference between fantasy and lust is the difference between imagining yourself driving a BMW and coveting your neighbor's BMW. They're not quite the same thing.

Proverbs 24:9 states "The thought of foolishness is sin (KJV)". But modern translations replace the word "thought" by "planning", "scheming", or "devising". Passive thoughts are not sin. It is intentions which are sinful (Acts 8:22). For example if I said, "I thought of going to the mall yesterday", that does not mean that mental images of me going to the mall flashed across my mind (passive thought), but rather that I planned to go to the mall (intent). It is the planning of foolishness that is sin, not the mere thought of it. Similarly the lust Matt. 5:28 discusses is a purposeful intent to have someone who is either not your wife or someone else's wife. This is what David was guilty of in 2 Sam. 11:2-4. David was not just fantasizing about Bathsheba, he had purposefully planned to get her. Sexual fantasy is simply not the subject of discussion in Matt. 5:28.

1 Corinthians 7:2,9

2) because of fornication, let each man have his own wife ... 9) if they cannot contain, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

Paul addresses single people struggling with sexual desires. Interestingly, Paul's answer to them was not to repent of their carnal ways, but to marry (1 Cor. 7:2, 9). If Paul had a problem with people masturbating, that does not come across in 1 Cor 7. He said that if they cannot exercise self control, they should marry, which is better than burning with passion (vs. 9). Paul never condemned them for lacking self control, but just gave them an escape out of it. But self control for what? The very same verse gives us the answer - self control to avoid burning passions. What is burning with passion? Burning with passion is that strong desire couples have to make

love to each other. Burning with passion is not the same as having sexual fantasies. You need self control to avoid getting too close physically in a relationship. If they could not contain themselves any longer, then they should marry. That ties in perfectly with verse 2, where he says that people should marry to avoid fornication. That was the problem with burning passion - it leads to fornication. Paul never said that they needed self control to avoid masturbating or fantasizing. It is burning passions they needed to beware of.

Questions to Ponder

I do not believe that masturbation, with all its related thoughts, is a sin. I believe that sexual fantasies are normal. Masturbation is merely a means of fulfilling that desire while not yet married. In the light of what the Bible teaches (or does not teach), I cannot honestly call masturbation sin. For single people struggling with temptation, I personally believe that masturbation is better than fornication. In fact masturbation releases sexual energy which builds up over time, and this in turn may make one less tempted to commit fornication.

Here are a few questions to masticate for those who still insist it's a sin to masturbate, even if it cannot be proven from the Bible.

- Why is it that over 90% of men masturbate, but that figure is significantly smaller for women? It is a fact that men are more

sexually aggressive than women. If masturbation is a sin, then God performed a great injustice to men.

- Why is it that a man's sexual desire is so intense prior to ejaculation yet virtually non-existent afterward? If the desire and the thoughts are so wrong, why not just masturbate and get rid of them? Some people "battle" with these thoughts incessantly without actually committing the act of masturbation. Aren't they just as "guilty" as those who masturbate?
- Why is it that the "experts" offer such impractical advice for "overcoming masturbation"? See for example <http://www.bible.com/answers/amasturb.html> where people are encouraged to confess this sin to their pastor. Who would seriously do that? See also <http://nowscape.com/mormon/mormast.htm> where "victims" are advised to sleep with one hand tied and to leave the bathroom door open during showers to reduce the level of privacy. Even Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* is recommended to help cure masturbation. I think these well meaning folk have not given the subject much serious study, and just allow tradition to blind them while using a few proof texts to back up their ignorance.
- Why is it that Paul never mentioned anything in 1 Cor. 7 about overcoming lust and masturbation? All he did was allow single people in such situations to marry. There is absolutely no doubt that for the situations described in Corinth, it was a relevant topic. This was a perfect opportunity for Paul to bring it up. In fact Paul seems to imply that the only people immune from sexual desires and needs are those with the gift of celibacy. Paul's solution to the problem was not self

control, but marriage - marriage to avoid fornication, not to avoid masturbation (vs. 9).

- Why does the Law have absolutely nothing to say concerning self stimulation? It condemns just about every sexual abuse imaginable - adultery, fornication, rape, incest, homosexuality, bestiality, orgies. There were some things I did not learn about until I read them in Leviticus. Why isn't masturbation on the list?
- Why does the Word of God generally have so little (if any at all) to say about a "sin" that affects over 90% of men and may even be the reason for them going to hell? Did the Bible miss something? If I had to give the benefit of any doubt, I would rather let God be true.

Conclusion

The belief that masturbation is a sin hinges on an presumed correlation with adultery, which itself hinges on a specious interpretation of Matt. 5:28. I have attempted to provide an alternative interpretation of that scripture which I believe is more in context with the Sermon on the Mount and the rest of scripture. The bible does not seem to think that masturbation is a serious issue.

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