**Self-satisfaction or self-control?**

**by Piet Guijt**

We live in an oversexed and a lust-satisfaction-orientated society. In the media, masturbation has become mainstream and there is an increasing support for it as being a supposedly healthy activity. In addition, there are alarming developments going on, e.g. that at some schools children are taught at an early age how to masturbate. Piet Guijt analyses these developments and puts them in an ethical Biblical perspective.

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**Literature1. Introduction**

We live in an oversexed and a lust - satisfaction - orientated society. Partly because of the internet, many people have become addicted to watching porn sites and partly because of that they have also become addicted to masturbation (self-satisfaction, solo sex). In the media, masturbation has become mainstream (1) and there is an increasing support for it as being a supposedly healthy activity. In addition, there are alarming developments going on, e.g. that at some schools children are taught at an early age how to masturbate (7). How serious it is to tempt children to sin, is to be read, amongst others in Mat.18:6.

Everyone shall understand that this is a delicate and precarious issue, but nevertheless it’s a good thing to identify and address this issue with the questions and problems that exist, in a fair and well-balanced manner and to search for solutions, instead of denying or concealing it (12). Therefore, for us as Christians, it is all the more necessary to have a Christian view on self-satisfaction that is based on God’s Word.

1. **What is it?**

Masturbation or self-satisfaction is the stimulation of one’s own genitals in order to reach sexual excitement, often up until one or more orgasms result from it (16). A so-called wet dream (nocturnal emission), a spontaneous orgasm during sleep, is something else than masturbation. The question remains, what is the background to that dream? We’ll get to that later.

1. **Biblical view on sexuality**

To begin with, we will look at the (positive) view of the Bible on sexuality. Because we are created in the image of God, our sexuality also has a profound meaning, which will have an impact on each practical application. Because of this aspect of our personality, God shines a unique light on what it means to be His image bearer and on the depth of His love for us. Briefly said, when God created us in His image, He created the two genders (sexes) man and woman (Gen. 1:27). As image bearers, men are supposed to live in a loving relationship with one another to reflect the love of the Creator (1). That applies to both married and unmarried people.

The Bible indicates that *sexual*intercourse is reserved within marriage. It is designed to be inherently *relational*, an aspect of deep knowledge and intimacy with someone of the other sex. In that context, the goal is to give yourself wholly to the other person by giving the him/her joy in the most intimate deed of mutual vulnerability (Songs; 1 Cor. 7:3-5). The New Testament makes clear that the focus of intimacy in marriage should be, to serve the spouse out of love and make one another happy, so *not* to put their own personal pleasure at the front.

In this way our sexuality should reflect the general call of discipleship to self-denial and love for others. God’s intention with sexuality is also to teach us what it means to be created in His image and what’s even more important, what it means to be in relationship with Him (1). That means: to be able to love perfectly.

Many passages in the Bible indicate that the Christian life ought to be free from selfishness. We live first and foremost for Christ and in the second place for loving others and being a blessing to others (see Gal. 2:20; 1 Cor. 13:5; 2 Cor. 5: 14–15; Phil. 2: 3–4; 1 Pet. 4: 1–5). Jesus says that when we live according to this pattern, we find *real* life (Mat. 10:39; Mk 8:35; Lk. 9:24 and Jn 12:25).

Living for ‘ourselves’ is bound to lead that the true life and the true peace will be out of our reach. This applies especially to our sexuality. Eph.4:17-20 indicates that living for our sexual desires, may cause that we turn ourselves away from God, which leads to an ever-increasing depravity and sexual insatiability (1).

1. **What does the Bible say about self-satisfaction?**

There are no Bible texts that *explicitly* condemn masturbation. Sometimes people do refer to the seed wasting by Onan (Gen. 38:9), but that has got nothing to do with masturbation, because the sin of Onan was that he refused to conceive an offspring for his sister in law (14).

Indirectly, the Bible does say a lot about it as we can derive from the previous paragraph. The Bible presents sexuality in marriage as something very beautiful (Eph.5:28-32). Sexual relations outside marriage and even adulterous thoughts are strongly rejected (Mat. 5:28); Heb. 13:4). If we understand God’s intention with sexuality in combination with the nature of Christian discipleship, it is highly questionable whether masturbation is a legitimate sexual activity. For if we have a good understanding of God’s intention with sexuality, then surely it will become apparent that the Bible in principal leaves absolutely no room for masturbation in the life of a Christian (1). For sexuality is a gift from God, given and intended for matrimony between husband and wife. Every other ‘application’ (homosexuality, sexual intercourse with friends/girlfriends, or even with animals) and also masturbation, is an ‘abnormal’ use of sexuality (12), viewed from God’s Word.

In fact, masturbation falls short on two grounds. It is a solo activity that is not rooted in a relationship. There is no opportunity to deepen the intimacy and to learn to know the other person. Additionally, it is a snapshot of *self-centeredness* and *selfishness*. This behavior announces: “The most important thing is that *I*experience the utmost pleasure”. But that is radically in conflict with the call for discipleship (1). Paul warns us not to gratify the desires of the flesh in Romans 13;14 and 2 Tim. 3:2-4 speaks about self-centered people. See also Tit.3:3 (“enslaved to various lusts and pleasures”).

1. **Why masturbation?(1,12,13)**

There can be several reasons for masturbation. Because men are visually wired, watching certain (advertisement) pictures and especially watching pornographic pictures and movies may cause the sexual lust to increase and, as a result, stimulate masturbation (17,18). But it does not involve only men but also women, out of which 30% regularly watches porn or porna (a woman-friendly form of porn) (11). In fact, more and more women do openly promote and practice self-satisfaction. The current lust-orientated culture believes that it can justify masturbation by elevating sexual desires to a physical ‘need’.

Sometimes people, by habit, almost automatically seizes upon self-satisfaction when they are bored, lonely, disappointed or unhappy. Or to get rid of stress, frustration or sorrow, or pamper themselves and to find ‘comfort’.

But in all cases, the self-centeredness, the desire of satisfaction of own needs, the own self, is the basis of the act.

As understandable as it may be that a person does masturbate sometimes or often, the question is whether it is the right ‘solution’. The answer is: No! Compare it with drugs. It is addictive, meaning that one loses control over his actions. There is a better solution!!! We’ll get to that later.

1. **Problems and dangers**

Self-satisfaction leads to the I-focus and vice versa. So a vicious cycle can occur. The danger is, that pleasures and lusts may tempt our hearts to praise the pleasure instead of the Giver. Married couples should consider how God has intended sexuality in marriage and how self-centeredness and selfish desires are detrimental for the call to be a blessing for the spouse (1).

Although masturbation without pornography is possible, most pornography is focused on solo sex. It is of great importance to realize that internet porn is a new ‘monster’ that even secular researchers consider it to be very problematic. The destructive power of internet porn cannot be stressed enough (1,17,18).

Programmed by a constant flow of thousands and ever-changing ‘partners’ that are online available, a non-virtual, thus a ‘real’ woman/man (and also the own wife/husband) is apparently not so exciting anymore. A young man, who struggled with his tender marriage, described his use of internet porn as an à la carte menu: “This evening I’ll get a little bit of this and a bit of that”. Not one single individual man can compete with the totality of hundreds of ‘others’. And it creates a constant desire for finding even more stimulating pictures (1). That, however, has nothing to do with love, for it is purely about a selfish need fulfilment. One can no longer see it in a relationship with that particular person (8).

On top of all this, apart from porn, there is an abundance of ‘modern’ means with masturbation available, such as all kinds of vibrators, dildos, sex puppets etc. There are several companies that sell all these means and publish a magazine in which they tell how to masturbate. Also television programs such as ‘Spuiten en slikken’ (about sex and drugs) have been giving ‘instructions’ for years already to the young about the lust-orientated, but degenerated sex morality. With all the problems that it entails.

A great and real danger is that masturbation can lead to addiction, partly because a dopamine release occurs with the strong lust feeling of an orgasm. The temptation can arise that it will fill a void in one's life. The Christian Support Practice *Dichterbij Herstel* (Closer To Restoration) observes a solitary struggle with all kinds of sexual desires that have become uncontrollable (11), even among young Christian women. If anyone needs to satisfy himself/herself in order to get rid of nasty feelings such as stress, loneliness or sadness or to be able to fall asleep, then he/she is dependent on it (5,12). Often, after the act, there is a sense of shame and guilt too, because one knows (unconsciously) that it is not God’s intention, and partly because the person knows that he has surrendered himself to something that is stronger than himself. Instead of dealing with it and solving the actual problem, he searches for a contemporary ‘solution’ in self-satisfaction, which is not a smart idea, because it will not make him feel better permanently, and it will certainly not solve the problems (5). On the contrary.

Masturbation reinforces a self-focused sexuality, based on fulfilling ‘my needs’. But the emphasis on personal pleasure is exactly the opposite of what God’s intention is. His will is that married couples discover the intimate joy, without having selfish expectations of how my partner should make me feel.

Admittedly, couples also can grow in practicing a God-honoring, unselfish sexuality towards their spouses, but masturbation creates expectations and puts bachelors in a more difficult position when they marry later (at an older age) (1). Because they’re spoiled, and will therefore probably in marriage also will think about themselves for their own satisfaction. Therefore, it is questionable that some sexologists often justify masturbation under the guise of “Do it if it feels good, you’re supposed to enjoy it, right?” But the questions is always: how? And according to which standard do you live?

An inner fantasy world – especially when it is reinforced by pornography – degrades other people that are loved by God, down to objects for ‘my’ personal consumption. We ought to realize that there will be consequences for our relationships and interactions. The Bible shows that the invisible spiritual bonding that occurs in sexual behavior, has social consequences (1). We would also like to point out that a sex/porn addiction (whether or not as a result of masturbation) could not only lead to a separation between the spouses and to adulterous thoughts, adultery, divorce (with all consequences concerning the children), but also to incest, molestation, rape and prostitution.

1. **Masturbation within marriage?**

Often, people think that a term such as masturbation is especially associated with single people. But also in marriage it can happen, e.g. because one spouse (often the husband) has a greater ‘need of sex’ [Question: but isn’t it after all a matter of *giving* yourself to the other?] than the other. Or that, due to illness or temporary absence of one of the spouses, the normal sexual intercourse is not possible.

For a healthy sex life in marriage, *attentiveness for one another* is essential, which requires unselfish, emotional and spiritual ‘investments', as well as learning to physically serve someone who is far different than you are. Learning to give each other joy in a physical intimacy is an outer manifestation of how we can grow in our emotional and spiritual knowing about one another.

As it has already been mentioned above, masturbation takes the easy way of personal satisfaction in a selfish way, and that is at the expense of the deepening of unity and intimacy (1). Even masturbation by mutual consent is not the way that God has intended it to be. People could also ask the question: ‘Also  if the partner is not physically of psychologically able to have sexual intercourse?’  An occasional masturbation in the presence and by the consent of the other, sometimes may probably be a better alternative than satisfying oneself without the knowledge of the partner (15). The question thereby remains what the cause is for one to wanting to masturbate and whether there is not a better solution (see paragraph 8).

The above-mentioned already gives a dismissive answer to a very specific question, namely: “Is it lawful for married couples to use technology for ‘virtual sex’ while they are physically separated?” After all, it fundamentally changes and distorts the intention of selfless sexuality. The goal is to be *together*, physically united as you are emotionally and spiritually. God created sexual expression as a kind of relational glue in marriage. Only the husband/wife is able to offer this awesome pleasure. It is a unique gift that binds man and woman together, because mutually the one is dependent on the other.

It takes a husband/wife who gives himself/herself generously. Even if your spouse desires you to experience pleasure from a distance, you cannot escape the reality that you are alone in the room and in the end doing *yourself* a favor. Self-stimulation is by definition focused on yourself, even if your spouse is at the other side of the telephone or screen (1).

A question that’s very recognizable, is the question whether not *every* form of sexuality, even the one in marriage, is not also a form of selfishness? A difficult question with which many people struggle. That’s because we live in a world where because of porn (17, 18) etc. there is so much impurity and selfishness that we can hardly imagine how sexuality is meant by God and how to apply it.

Sexuality is meant by God as an expression of love within a marital relationship. You give yourself physically to another person because you want to make the other person happy. The result is that it makes you happy and grateful.

But also in a marriage, sexuality can be fulfilled wrongly (lustfully).

After all, practice shows that love and selfishness can be confused with each other. But that applies to all our doings. How pure are our motives? God wants to help us purify our motives through His Spirit.

Everyone will realize that God’s ‘standard’ is very high and that we too as Christians don't usually meet that standard or sometimes not at all. We just have to think about the worldly so-called ‘one night stand’, whereby the sexual intercourse is essentially nothing more than mutual lust satisfaction with the body of the other (‘égoïsme á deux’ = selfishness of both of us). But that may also be present in a marriage. In this context you may consider the text “*But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion*” (1 Cor. 7:9). Poor woman who married such a man. Then in such a marriage there seems to be rather a question of selfishness than of love, even though it is to be hoped that by the working of the Holy Spirit, a process of inner healing, cleansing and sanctification in that marriage may take place.

Regarding God’s ‘standard’, we can let go of it as too strict and unfeasible, or pray for help of the Holy Spirit in a process of spiritual growth and devotion to the Lord, to enable us to address and even attain compliance with God’s wholesome concepts of life. That’s not simple but God bestows upon us the glory that goes together with the life according to God’s intention. He wants us to be free men, ultimately completely free from sin and wrong lust(s).

A very familiar question is: “So, am I not allowed to enjoy myself?” To enjoy and to delight in the Lord is even a (holy) command, even though we know there is much sadness and pain. But then it should not be enjoying selfishly, but in a state of mind that He intended to and which belongs to a child of God. An important test is the question whether our dealings lead us to be connected with God and to thank Him (1). This way we can thank God when we are eating alone or with others or during a walk enjoying nature and the conversation.

Also, a married couple can thank God for the sexuality in their marriage. The question is: can we honor God with our dealings? However, it is hard to imagine that one would thank God during or after masturbation. The key point is with what motive and how and to what extent one does anything. One can eat and drink to empower the body, and enjoying it with thanksgiving, but unfortunately it is also possible that one is addicted to gluttony and drunkenness with all its adverse consequences. It is exactly when we eat and drink in moderation that we can enjoy the most.

1. **Solutions**

Sexual need can be different for each person, from no or little need to even severe addiction. In the latter case, the question is how one can be delivered from the problem of being controlled by sexual feelings and one is no longer able to control them (5,11).

First of all, it is important to acknowledge that one often cannot solve a problem alone (12). One can ask for help from reliable people at for example the church community, and surrender it to the Lord in prayer, alone or together. The best thing to do is, seeking God and seeking your fulfilment in your relationship with God and the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

When impure thoughts arise – out of nowhere or by sexual stimulation – one should immediately reject them, otherwise (the beginning and the completion of) the deed will follow very quickly (Jam.1:14,15). Well-known is the statement: *‘You cannot prevent the birds from flying in the air over your head, but you can certainly prevent them from building a nest in your hair.’* If you don’t chase away the wrong and evil thoughts or get them out of your head, you will quickly sin (12). Don’t buy and read wrong literature or watch porn. You will (almost) always succumb. And in case you have porn in your house, get rid of it radically. Shun fornication. In 1 Cor.6:18 it reads: “Flee sexual immorality” (amongst others in Mat.5:30; 18:8,9). Jesus warns us in these texts that sinning has very serious consequences.

Jesus too knows that temptation is painful. He, however, has always triumphed in all those temptations. This means that He precisely knows what grace you need in time of the temptation, and He wants to fill you with His Spirit to strengthen your obedience and steadfastness. The deeper reality is that you’re not alone. By His Spirit, Jesus is present to help you in your problems (1).

To have a desire for comfort and relaxation in certain circumstances is not wrong in itself. But it is better to search for it in ways that can facilitate a deeper fellowship with God (such as a walk in the woods, nice music, enjoying healthy and nutritious food, by practicing sports (1). God declares that He is the “God of all comfort” (2 Cor. 1: 3–4). He wants to meet us in our sorrow, loneliness and frustration (1). It is not a war against sin that we need to fight without God’s help. Praying and asking for God’s help is undoubtedly the better solution for problems. Let us not forget that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit that dwells in us (1 Cor. 6:19).

If you have once fallen into temptation, don’t reject yourself and don’t be paralyzed by feelings of guilt, but go with them to God and ask for forgiveness for your weakness and ask for help and strength in order to be delivered from it.

Even though it seems (certainly in today’s culture of permissiveness, tolerance and justification) a harsh education, surely it is better to get to the point where you no longer need masturbation, just like you no longer need to light up a cigarette or a joint to relax, etc.. Then you’re no longer a slave of a (burning) desire, but a free person. And when one is pure in his thinking and also in his sub-consciousness, after a course of time, an orgasm resulted from a wet dream will no longer occur.

1. **Our attitude**

It is important to ensure that we do not reject, condemn or embarrass those who struggle with loneliness and masturbation. We should therefore have much compassion with single people who want to live in faithfulness to Christ, and with married couples who are facing the challenge of different levels of desire (1). If we are honest, it is a problem which is familiar to all of us. We ought to show compassion because we can empathize, but we should never shy away from calling ‘sin’ (in the sense of missing the mark or what is contrary to what God has intended) what is not good and ultimately unsatisfying, and inviting people to return to their first Love, The One in Whose presence there is fullness of joy is (Ps. 16:11) (1).

1. Assessment

We live in a culture that encourages immediate satisfaction and which considers the renunciation of some forms of satisfaction to be foolish and which is to one’s own detriment (1). But pursuing sensual pleasures such as practicing ‘free’ sex and using drugs doesn’t lead to happiness but sooner or later to great misery as a result of addiction. Even if masturbation is not as God has intended and is therefore a ‘sin’, and we do feel guilty if we have done it, nevertheless, we may consider that we don’t have to lose our salvation through our faith in Jesus by committing sins. Otherwise the work of the Lord Jesus on the cross would not be sufficient (12). We may confess our weaknesses and ask for strength and start learning how to gain the victory. God’s Word calls us not to grieve the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30). For just because we as believers have learnt to know Christ (Eph. 4:20), our lives will (should) be totally different.

It is always about a choice, which is at stake in any addiction or bondage.

Either continue to 'muddle through' with ups and downs (Soft healers make stinking wounds), or be radical and become really delivered.

That seems harsh and is in fact harsh for the flesh, but will lead to a true deliverance. And that’s what God grants us.

If we have certain needs in this earthly life, then we may know that this present world is not our real home, and that we can always go to the Lord with our needs. The Bible always points us to what goes beyond our satisfaction in the now, and exhorts us to put our hope in the coming Kingdom. We then can still live, despite unsatisfied desires in the here and now, because we know that a day will come that we will have intense joy in eternity in the presence of God (1).

**Piet Guijt, February 2021.**

translation: Ursula Moestapa

This article is partly based on a translation and edition of the article *Masturbation and the Christian* by David White (see literature no. 1), and complemented with information from especially Dutch literature.

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