

Transcript 143

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast. As many of you know if you listen to the podcast regularly, back when we first started, we went through a series on the top 20 questions of all time on GotQuestions.org. Well, it was recently pointed out to me that there are two topics that we haven't covered yet. And I was aware of that and we weren't skipping them because we didn't want to cover them. We were, we skipped them because we wanted to make sure that we could handle them in the right way. So just be forewarned, the topic we're going to be talking about today is of a sexual nature. So if you if you're listening to this around other people, might want to save it for another time, especially when those people are or children or so forth. So today's topic is Umm, what does the Bible say about masturbation? The big question being is masturbation a sin? And truly between people reading the articles on Got Questions and actually submitting questions to us, we've probably been asked this question over 100,000 times. I mean, a lot of people wonder about this. Truly millions of people have read the articles on Got Questions.

Shea Houdmann

So joining me today is Gwen. Gwen is the associate editor of Got Questions Ministries focusing on compellingtruth.org and also managing our team of volunteers. And she also has her Masters degree in Christian counseling. And Jeff is the administrator of bibleref.com, our verse by verse Bible commentary. So, Gwen, Jeff, welcome.

Shea Houdmann

As I was preparing to talk today, I was I was reminded that the number of misspellings of masturbation that we have received in questions and then searches on Got Questions, its entertaining to say the least. But actually, masturbation is the second most misspelled word in the history of Got Questions. I actually had the time and looked this up, and Melchizedek, another word that starts with M, is the most misspelled word in questions submitted to us. So we've already kind of turned it into an inside joke here in the office that if we don't really want to talk about masturbation we were using Melchizedek as a code word. I hope Melchizedek is not offended, but we truly we do not need any offense. But before we go into this, again, let's let it be said that this is a question, this is an issue that a lot of people struggle with. A lot of people have questions about it. If I were to say or focus in on one where people say, I've always really wanted to ask my pastor this but I'm a little embarrassed about it. This is that issue, so let's just start out go direct to the point. So so Jeff, if someone asks you, is masturbation a sin according to the Bible? How do you answer that question?

Jeff Laird

My response would be to say that it's a little bit more complicated than to just give a yes or no answer. And the reason is because Scripture never has a statement that says something like do not do that. Now, as we've talked about a lot of other topics before that, does not in any sense mean that the Bible tells you it's good to go and do that. Just because it doesn't explicitly say don't do that in whatever modern terms we use, doesn't necessarily mean that it's getting approval. But it's a little bit of a of an interesting discussion because there is not really anything in Scripture that gets to that issue almost at all.

Jeff Laird

The only thing that we have in Scripture that's close close enough that people have used his name as a byword for masturbation is a character named Onan. And it's sometimes referred to as Onanism. And that comes from Genesis 38:4-9. Then the short idea of what that's about is Onan was responsible for a levirate marriage. He was responsible to give Tamar a child on behalf of his deceased brother. And the scripture makes reference to him wasting or spilling his semen or his seed on the ground. And people have interpreted that as a reference to masturbation. In reality, that's more a reference to what we would refer to as pulling out, as a contraceptive sort of thing. Basically, what Onan was doing is, he was using Tamar for sex, because once she had actually conceived, then his levirate responsibilities would be over and would be done with more or less at least in that sense. So he is using her to continue to be able to have sex with her. That's what God punished him for. There's nothing else in the Bible that gets directly down to the issue of whether or not masturbation is a sin in and of itself.

Jeff Laird

The bigger question, especially in the modern context, is all the things masturbation is tied to. And that's where really the idea of sin comes in is it's not necessarily about body parts and things like that. It has a lot to do with what's on a person's mind. What's on a person's heart? Is this involving lust? Is this involving improper, impure thinking. So spiritually that's really where it is. So if somebody asks, the answer really is you can't explicitly say absolutely all circumstances in every way as it is. Which you can say that what we read in Scripture tells us it's really hard to think of a circumstance when a person would be masturbating that doesn't involve sin. That's almost secondary to the act itself.

Gwen Sellers

Well, I think for me one thing that I come back to you also is God's design for sex. I mean, so, you know, at the beginning he created Adam and Eve. So you get male and female in a marriage and that is what sex is designed for. And so and that, you know, includes like the pleasures and all of that stuff that goes along with it. So I think sort of trying to simulate that on your own is it's just outside of God's best. And so that's just really never a good plan. I mean, we see other things that God makes allowance for in the Bible that are outside of his best that aren't explicitly named sin, polygamy is the one that comes to mind for me. And you know very clearly not God's design. And yet he lets it happen kind of without commentary. But you see that it just turns out very poorly. And so I think that's somewhat the same thing of masturbation is like this isn't really where this, like, sexuality was supposed to be experienced. That's supposed to be experienced in the marriage of one man and one woman and that's the best way to do it.

Jeff Laird

I think it's good that you brought up the idea of the best because that is something that comes up with the subject of masturbation. I mean, there's, there's the spiritual aspect of it, which is crucial because everything that we do has to have connection in our in our faith and our morals. But there is also sort of just the practical, psychological, physical aspects of it. And there are reasons why getting into that habit is not necessarily a good idea. It conditions your body to respond sexually in ways that another person, a future spouse, a current spouse, is not necessarily going to do. It changes your conditioned response to temptation and the way that you respond to that. Very much, the same way that somebody who is in a

certain circumstance, you know they have a meal or they wake up and they have an immediate urge to smoke a cigarette, not because that situation necessarily has anything to do with nicotine, but they've just their bodies programmed that this is the thing I'm expecting next. And if you train your body that as soon as I feel this attitude and or I get into this part of my day or this part of my situation, turns into an addiction. It turns into, and that's where things like shame and everything else like that come in. So there are things beyond just sin, not that that's not obviously the most important thing, but there are things that we can point to about this that say here are some other reasons that this is something that's worth saying, how do I? How do I treat this? How do I stay away from this? What am I supposed to do about it?

Shea Houdmann

I did a quick survey of some of the recent questions about it the other day is in preparation for this and this amazes me how many times we've received a question similar to I was looking at pornography for several hours and I gave in to the temptation to masturbate and I feel terrible. And what they're talking about and terrible about is the fact that they masturbated, not the fact they spent hours devouring pornography. When I think the Bible speaks a lot more clearly about the dangers of pornography and the sinfulness of it than it does even hint about masturbation. So it's, there's something about this sin that something about masturbation that some people view it as a sin and as a is bad as other sexual sins in their minds, they some people have compared it to like self adultery or things like that. And the result of that can often lead to a tremendous mess of guilt. Again, this person, this question recently didn't feel guilty at all about the pornography, but about masturbation, they felt incredibly guilty. And I think that's having it backwards, so to speak. Not that we should allow guilt to control us for anything, but there's something about this, whether it's cultural or ingrained in us that a lot of people really, really struggle with and I I understand it to an extent.

Shea Houdmann

And sometimes I wonder like, as Gwen was saying, that God designed marriage and sex to go together. And that when especially for a male, can't speak for female, that when the sex act is completed and the male has that release, there are endorphins that are released. I think there's a part of that that's designed to be experienced with another person. And when you experience that in a solo fashion it leaves you feeling empty. So to me that I think that contributes to this guilt and that it feels good in the physical sense. But it leaves you with an emptiness that makes you feel even worse than you did before. So I think that's a lot of people are struggling with when they get that physical pleasure for a moment, but then afterwards it leaves you feeling empty. Again, as Gwen was saying, that's not God's intent, and we're missing out on what it's supposed to be in a sense I think that really contributes to the guilt factor that a lot of people experience.

Jeff Laird

Yes, there's a lot of guilt that's involved with the issue and part of that is because, as you say, God's best was intended for us to do this in partnership. That's the ideal. That's his best for that. And as much as we try to get away from it, we we have this innate sense as human beings of understanding that there is something sacred and important about our sexuality and that's why, you know, we can try to be really cavalier about sex lives and casual sex and everything else like that. And it it doesn't usually result in people who feel more well adjusted. They can appear that way on the outside, but typically it just

results in people who are numbed and and uncomfortable and sort of jaded about the whole thing. And when we start to treat sexuality in really, really casual ways we're not doing ourselves a favor.

Jeff Laird

And when it comes to masturbation, there is part of the spiritual aspect of it is it's possible for a person to do it, but that doesn't necessarily mean that it's a good idea. And I, you know, people have brought up that very fact as for a question of why is it possible for this to even happen in the first place? You know, why did God make it even capable of a person to do this by themselves? With the the counter example being something like tickling you, you can't tickle yourself because your body knows what's coming and it just doesn't work that way. But masturbation doesn't function that way. We don't have good answers for exactly why that is. We don't know why babies and young children will do that without having the slightest clue what they're doing, why they're doing it, what it means, and so on and so forth. We see animals that do things like that. So there's a lot of aspects of it that we have to be careful not to try to say no, this is something that's on par with actual adultery, or murder, or blasphemy, or something else like that. But we also don't want to pretend that it's not consequential. It does mean something. Especially because Jesus says if you're going to look at somebody with lust, that's a sin. And if a person is connecting that to their sex life and pleasuring themselves using those kinds of thoughts, then that's not something that's spiritually good. It's going to lead to shame and guilt. We don't want people to wallow in it, but we also don't want to completely run away from it and say no, there's nothing about this you need to be wary of or careful of. We want to appropriately handle those feelings.

Gwen Sellers

Well, I think, yeah, like you've said that lust being connected to masturbation, which I think often it is. But I think often there's just loneliness connected to it for people and that sort of goes hand in hand with the idea of shame. And I think you know the solution to both of those is really is community. I mean and so obviously there's, I mean I guess number one is prayer and asking God to meet your needs, but also just being willing to be honest of like, I'm feeling lonely. I need you God, or shame. I mean, there is an appropriate place for things like shame and guilt. I mean, you know, when we commit something that very clearly is a sin, we should feel guilty. But the proper response to that is not to spiral or get down on ourselves or, OK, I'm going to do better next time. Or I'm such a terrible person. I mean, this is like the core of the gospel. Jesus came to those who need repentance. He came to the sinners, to the sick, like. So when we do that, we realize, wow, this is how in need I am that Jesus has taken care of all this and I can be free in him. And then that just stops the shame spiral. And I think too, that's part of what he's given us the church for. You know, James talks about confessing our sins to one another, and I know it can be really scary for people to share their struggle with masturbation with somebody else. And I mean, I would suggest that there's an appropriate type of person or an appropriate time to do so, but just keeping it to yourself and struggling on your own isn't going to lead anywhere good.

Jeff Laird

It's also curious because this is one of those issues, that's almost universal. There's a humorous reference that people will use when they say if you do a poll of men, 95% of men will say that they have masturbated and the other 5% are lying. Obviously that's not true in the most literal sense, that there's never been a man in the history of the world who's never done that. However, it does speak to the idea that this is something that's much more common to struggle for the typical person than people

realize. And to what you were saying about different motivations. Is the idea that men and women have different responses to sex in the first place. It meets slightly different aspects of their psychology and their needs, so there can be different motivations for women who do struggle with this issue, as men will, you know? Whether they struggle with it to the same extent or not is subject to some level of debate, but it's also a problem for women. So it's a shame that we feel has a lot to do with that stigma. We we just instinctively know that sex is supposed to be something sacred. It's supposed to be something intimate and it's not supposed to be used in a casual way. So, you know, we we sort of have this instinct to go to shame. But it's it's forgivable. If you're a believer, it's forgiven. It is something that we can, we can overcome spiritually and in terms of habit. It's not something that a person's going to be locked into for eternity.

Shea Houdmann

I think we've covered the what does the Bible say in the sense of it's no where directly mentioned in the Bible. That therefore makes it a matter to an extent, a matter of personal conviction, matter of applying biblical principles to the issue, and also Gwen touched on the dealing with guilt about it to an extent. There is one question that I know comes up a lot that I definitely want to spend a little time on. And so many times people will submit a question where I'm really struggling with this sin and I've been trying to get victory over for a long time and they go on and on and on and we're just literally like dude, just spit it out. We already know. We know what you're talking about in the first sentence. So on a sin like this, it doesn't not actually limited to masturbation, but how do you overcome or gain victory over a sin like this that has a very physically addictive component to it? So it's both a physical issue and a spiritual issue. So what, what are some keys that we can tell people on how to gain victory on an issue like this when you're convinced that this is not honoring to God, I need to stop. How do you actually achieve that stopping?

Jeff Laird

There are definitely differences in how men and women perceive and how men and women process a lot of things. Sexuality is one of them. So Gwen, if you, if you're interested in speaking first to the idea of how you would discuss that with a woman. I think it's important for us to to maybe hit that first so that we recognize that this really is something that women can deal with and to also point out that there are going to be slightly different approaches or tactics to it.

Gwen Sellers

Yeah, sure. So I would say I mean first for anybody about anything sin is, pray about it. I mean, so not only, you know, like pray for confession, but also if you're in Jesus you have the indwelling Holy Spirit. So, like, ask him to equip you. And I think too, when you have that mindset that like you're going in and you're saying, God help me with this, like, then you more immediately recognize in the moment God is with you. And he is helping you. I think too about, you know, kind of what I said earlier about those motivations and the heart things. I think oftentimes when we have these physical addictions and a spiritual issue, it's the physical is kind of still trying to fill something spiritual or emotional, that it shouldn't be. And I think it's helpful to know what that is. I mean, you know like, yeah, you wanna stop the behavior, but if you're still left with this thing that you don't know how to deal with, that's not any good. So kind of finding the route. So you know, let's take this, if for women it's loneliness like take that to God. What is the struggle here? What's going on? And work on that issue.

Gwen Sellers

And then I think there are also just a lot of practical things, you know, like notice when is it that I'm most tempted? Is it you've just watched, you know, a Hallmark movie and now you feel especially lonely. Well, like maybe don't watch so many Hallmark movies. Or maybe always watch them with a friend. You know, so kind of notice what are those triggers? And then I think too scripture like that's how we see Jesus respond to temptation. And my pastor recently talked about the importance of saying it out loud. Like demons can't hear your thoughts, so like speak them out loud and to yourself too. So I'm thinking, you know, say those scriptures that that affirm your identity in Christ or that praise and extol the attributes of God. I mean, that's not a time to be shaming yourself with some like don't do this type of scripture. It is a time to be like, wait, I'm a child of God. I can cry out to my Abba father. I've been set free from sin, and I'm now a slave to righteousness. So those kind of things.

Gween Sellers

And I think too just in general, what you're feeding your mind on all day long, you know, does it fit the Philippians 8 guidelines? Or is it social media that's showing you, you know, like women are subjects and I need to present myself as one, or my value is in sexuality, or that's the only pleasure and the highest pleasure or, you know, like are you feeding your mind with those kind of things or are you feeding your mind with God's beauty and the good things in the world? And so I think the more you are full of who God is like, the less your emotions need it. And then you can also have those practical things that help stop the physical behavior by just like not putting yourself in those situations.

Jeff Laird

And all those spiritual things apply to everybody.

Gwen Sellers

To men too.

Jeff Laird

And then to women. And then. But the the thing that I think is especially useful for men is what you were talking about with things like triggers and context. In my experience, you know men, we are much more up and down, reactive, mercurial when it comes to that. It is much easier for a man to get riled up in that sense. And so men are, in a sense, more sensitive to the short term type of of environment that they're in. So it's it's about recognizing those triggers. What things? What movies? What TV shows? What images does a person see that that puts them in that frame of mind? Learn how to recognize those. Recognize how to avoid them.

Jeff Laird

That can go all the way up to what Joseph did in the Book of Genesis, where he literally ran away from somebody. It doesn't necessarily need to be that extreme, but when you start to recognize the triggers, you can say, look, I'm going to take a hold of the spiritual power that God gave me. I don't have to do anything that I'm tempted to do. I am and I am. I'm not supposed to be controlled by these things. I get to make the decision. And instead of saying OK, Lord, I'm gonna make a promise that I will never do this ever again. Because that never works. You're trying to take the whole elephant than one bite. What

makes more sense is just to recognize it, moment by moment. What am I going to do right now? Can right now I decide to say I probably don't want to be watching this because it's going to lead to those thoughts and those behaviors. I don't have to do this right now. Just for now, just for today. And then you can look back the next day and go, OK, I got through that. I didn't have to do that, and then that makes it just a little bit easier the next time when you say I'm not going to, I'm not even going to turn that particular show on because I know exactly where it's gonna go. I'm not gonna click that link because I know why I wanna click on the link and I know what I'm trying to do. And I know where that goes. So I'm not going to do that.

Jeff Laird

So understanding how to take control of your own mindset and what winds up happening is over time, you really do gain more control over that. The temptation becomes less because you train yourself so that when something comes up that you're not expecting, like you're in a circumstance where you don't have the ability to just turn it off or turn it away from it, you're more in that framework of being able to say this is, I don't have to respond to that in any way other than what God tells me I can or cannot or should or should not do. And that's where Paul talks about. I'm not going to be mastered. By anything, I'm not going to be controlled by anything.

Jeff Laird

So the the most useful practical advice that I've ever seen for men is just be willing to take control and responsibility. Take accountability for your environment and take those steps. Don't put yourself in a bad position. And as you go forward it it gets easier and easier it it really is possible to overcome. And you got to forgive yourself for those times where you have a mess up. It's the same thing with drug addiction or any other addiction. You're going to have a relapse, probably of some kind every once in a while. Don't use that as an excuse to just give up on the whole thing. It's forgiven. You're still a child of God. You can still overcome. Trust the process and give it a chance to work.

Gwen Sellers

And I think that that's key to like what happens you know if you do still masturbate or still do whatever sin or still engage in whatever addiction it is. And yeah, like that recovery from it of recognizing, oh, I did that and I didn't want to. And rather than go right to shame, go right to God. Like I did that and that was wrong and I didn't want to. And you know, believe what First John 1:9, says or look at Romans 6-7, like so that quick out of like, confess this sin, be restored, and then move on. And I think to Jeff, what you were saying about fleeing the temptation like, yeah, turn off that TV show. I think also it's important to sometimes it can be helpful to replace that urge, so rather than just like, OK, I'm just gonna sit here and not do it. Is like do something else instead. You know do something with your hands. Go for a run, call a friend, like fill that time with something else rather than just sitting there trying not to sin.

Jeff Laird

Right, instead of just standing there under the fire hose, get out of the way for to do something else. Yeah, that's that's totally legitimate. And I think what we're talking about here all speaks to that idea that this really is something that people are going to struggle with. The culture that we live in is hyper sexualized. It is almost impossible to completely avoid sexual imagery and sexual temptation in a visual and audio audio sense. Regardless of what a person thinks about, you know, progress in American

culture over the last 40-50 years between the Internet and fashion and music and everything else like that. It was easier in the past to avoid some of those things. When when I was growing up, if you wanted access to pornography, you had to go find it. You had to pay for it. Now I get advertisements and I get things that pop up that are more or less blatantly in that category that I'm not interested in, and I'm not looking for, but they're just there. So I appreciate the struggle that that we have as human beings in this culture and time avoiding it because it's there and it's hard to stay away from.

Shea Houdmann

Excellent points both of you. Getting victory over sin is they they're universal principles that apply to many of the struggles we face in this life and not not limited to masturbation. So thank you for sharing. Thank you for sharing the heart and this wise counsel which I needed here at one point in my life on this issue. And I'm sure many of our listeners do as well. There's two before we close this episode, there's two other related issues I really want us to to cover. The first being that typically when we talk about this issue will lay out, here are all the biblical principles for why, at least for us, is extremely doubtful that masturbating could be done not be a sin and have it be something that honors and glorifies God. So I'd encourage you if you have not already, to read the two articles on GotQuestions.org that covers this issue. But they lay out some of the prints we've been talking about and some other principles, but I like how our main article closes. If masturbation could be done with no lust in the heart, no pornography, no desire to gratify the flesh, full assurance that it is good and right, and giving thanks to God, then we can say perhaps masturbation would be allowable. But with those item just said, you have a lot of trouble imagining how it could be possible to masturbate with all those principles being fully applied. So, can we say conclusively that masturbation is a sin? No, we're the Bible doesn't say that. So we're not going to say that. But do we have serious doubts whether it can truly be said I'm masturbating for the glory of God? I, my personal conviction is that's not possible.

Shea Houdmann

And then question #2 we receive a lot. It will be like a married couple where, let's say, the husband or the wife is deployed military for years, out of town for a long period of time, and if the married couple agrees that as long as you're thinking about me, I'm OK with you masturbating. Is it a sin in that context? And again, the Bible doesn't mention this. I can't say the Bible says it's a sin, but I struggle with this one too, in the sense that that's not God's design. If a married couples fully agreed that they're OK with the other one doing that or OK with whatever ultimately, I think that's between them. A married couple and God. But I don't think just the fact that you're married doesn't negate the principles I just mentioned. So it's still questionable at best whether that would make masturbation allowable.

Shea Houdmann

So again, this is an issue that we all struggle with how how to best answer the wide variety of questions we get about it. How frequently we get questions about it. Truly, if the verse that says no temptation is taking you except what is common to man, this is one of those issues that is a temptation that is common to virtually every man and woman who's ever lived on this planet. So you are not alone. You're not the only one who's struggled with this issue. You're not the only one who's ever asked us the question is, is you trust me that we have had this question so many times. If we go a day without a question related to this, it is surprising. So Jeff or Gwen, any closing thoughts before we sign off?

Jeff Laird

Only one that I would have is that idea that this is something that a lot of people struggle with and the right response if you're feeling shame and guilt over it is to take it to the Lord first and then bring it to somebody you trust. Second, and if that's you know, something like Got Questions you want to ask a question about it. It is, it's something that a lot of people struggle with, so at least the reassurance that we want to give people is that this is something that many, many people struggle with and it is not the worst possible thing ever. It's just embarrassing, and weird, and awkward to talk about and to bring up so don't be afraid to do that. It's it's healthier and better to just say, OK, let's deal with it and talk to somebody about it than to just bottle it all up inside.

Gwen Sellers

Yeah, I definitely agree with that. The one other thing that comes to mind for me is just, you know, the idea of glorifying God in everything. And I think really the idea of how sin came in the first place, you know, is Satan deceived Eve into thinking that basically that God was withholding something good. And I think that our culture does that so much. And like Jeff mentioned being such a hyper sexualized culture. And so I think sometimes it can feel like, well, something good is being withheld for me, but that's not who God is. So, like living God's best really is best for us. I mean, Jeff even brought up, you know, like secular studies show that so many times on so many different biblical issues. So I feel like just kind of in general, our walk with God is not so much how do I avoid sin? It's how do I live as a child of God? Like if you were in Jesus. You're a child of God. How do you walk out that righteousness and that abundant life? So I think when we have that mindset, it makes it easier to say, you know, God said this isn't a good idea. So I'm just going to trust him and not do it, but then, you know, to also have that fulfillment and gratitude in in Christ.

Shea Houdmann

Gwen and Jeff, thanks for joining me for this conversation. I like like the word that Jeff used and I go this is this is an awkward conversation to have. It's I think he also used the word weird in that this is something's a little weird to talk about. But if you take anything else from this, please recognize that this is an issue that a lot of people have questions about. A lot of people struggle with. It is not an unforgivable sin. I mean, again, even if it is, even if it could be declared that it's definitely a sin. And victory is achievable. So please don't come away with failing in this temptation. Come. Don't come away with the spirit of despair, hopelessness, or anything like that. So this has been the Got Questions podcast on what does the Bible say about masturbation? Got questions? The Bible has answers. We'll help you find them.