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FLESH

ALL BY MYSELF—THE ‘M’ WORD

FLESH BY RICK JAMES- ARTICLE EXCERPT

AN UNBREAKABLE HABIT OF PURITY IN A PORNOGRAPHIC WORLD. Sexual immorality and pornography have become the defining issues and obstacles to spiritual growth and ministry on campus.

Flesh (for men) deals fearlessly with lust, sex and pornography in a clear, comprehensive manner and in a way that supports the Campus Ministry’s spiritual Growth Model. Written in a straightforward, gracious and humorous style, Flesh does not stir up guilt but helps the reader to develop an unbreakable habit of purity.

Flesh is divided into three sections: small group discussion material, topical articles, and a month of daily devotionals.

Partial List of Topics Covered: Temptation, Confession, Community, Filling of the Spirit, Faith, Accountability, Pornography, Worship, Truth-Scripture, Habitual Sin, Homosexuality, Masturbation, and Sanctification-How We Grow.



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ALL BY MYSELF

Well, let's get right to it, shall we? What does God have to say on the topic of masturbation? Turn with me to the gospel of ... I know I saw it here someplace ... Come to think of it, there isn't anything in the Scriptures about masturbation, is there? (Actually, there is one occurrence of a man spilling his seed, but its context has little relevance, relating to inheritance not sexual immorality, and should not be applied to this issue.)

Besides the fact that it's a rather gross topic, many have wondered why something so heavy on our conscience is never addressed in the Bible. Some would say that it's simply subsumed as a subcategory in the biblical discussions on sexual immorality, or implied in what it means to be sexually pure, while others would take Scripture's silence to mean that masturbation is not always a sin, if exercised within certain parameters.

We'll look at both of those perspectives in a moment. But first, let's not miss an application

that's as glaringly obvious as it is comforting: that the weight biblically assigned to this sin is drastically out of proportion with the swelling of guilt and self-loathing we experience when we masturbate. I honestly wish I felt as bad about, say, lying, envy or murder. Let's take comfort and encouragement where it can be found, and there's a good bit of it in Scripture's silence on the topic. We're not saying that the issue isn't important, and that it shouldn't be to us, or isn't to God, but that our consciences are out of alignment with the truth of Scripture on the magnitude of this sin.

A godly man who taught me as a young Christian used to say to our men's small group Bible study that while the Bible doesn't mention masturbation, it clearly states that lust is a sin. He would challenge us to try masturbating without lust. Well, perhaps I'm just gifted in this area, but I found it quite possible. We all have different strengths and abilities; this, apparently, is my gift to the world. Actually, I don't think I'm alone, especially if you've had a sexually

active past. So much for easy answers. There are other loopholes, too. I had a seminary professor who mentioned that when he traveled extensively, he didn't feel it was a sin when he masturbated thinking about his wife (but, presumably, this would be a sin if, say, you were to think about his wife). He certainly brings up an interesting nuance, which I would probably ponder if it didn't bring to my mind images of my professor that, frankly, make me never want to have sex again.

As much as we find these objections quite rational, even appealing, we would say that masturbation falls short of God's design for us sexually and is, therefore, something we should avoid. Perhaps the most concise apologetic for "why" is found in Russell Willingham's book *Breaking Free*. Here are a few of his reasons:

Willingham feels that masturbation violates biblical sexuality because when the Bible speaks of sex, it speaks of a union between man and woman and

a shared experience: an experience that ideally brings us out of ourselves and into the mind/soul of another. Masturbation seems to fall short of this design, and in the act and the residual guilt, it does the opposite. It makes us self-absorbed.

Masturbation also has a way of opening the door to sexual immorality. Our motives may begin innocently, perhaps trying not to lust or imagine a person or scene, but sexual stimulation can cloud our minds and make it very easy to pop in an old mental video or fantasy that is far from pure. *In Every Young Man's Battle*, Stephen Arterburn quotes David, a 17-year-old, who said:

Let me say this: it is possible to masturbate with a clean mind and eyes, because I've done it. I have to tell you, however, that it really takes a long time without visual stimulation or fantasizing—even if I'm trying to get it over quick. It's sometimes so demoralizing that I'll stop. That isn't good because then my motor is riding the red line, and then the mind gets difficult to control, and I drop back into sin."

Most powerfully, Willingham claims that masturbation cultivates poor emotional management. When we are bored, anxious or lonely, it is ill advised to reinforce a habit of sexual gratification as a coping mechanism.

Here are a few other reasons why, on the whole, masturbation is an activity you want to keep out of your life. Masturbation affects our sense of being godly men, making us more passive. It brings guilt and makes us feel distant from God. It tends to be addictive and progressive. You're most likely to masturbate a day or two after you just did it. It may be a small thing, but when sexual purity is your goal, small things can make all the difference.

No, masturbating is not the end of the world. However, it is so easy to settle for mediocrity in our walk with God—to get by with an acceptable level of purity. The greatest intimacy we could ever know is in our relationship with God. It's the little things like this that blunt our ability to meet with him or hear his voice. They steal our passion and joy. It puts a veil between God and us and that is why it is worth ridding from our lives.

As John Piper says in his book *Desiring God*, "It's not that we sin because we desire our happiness too much, it's that we don't desire it enough." When I eat a candy bar instead of a salad, it is not because I cared too much about what my body wanted. It's that I cared too little. We have momentary needs for intimacy that are met by masturbation, but what we trade off is the far greater intimacy with God. Oh, the passion and zeal we could have in our lives if we wouldn't make these trade-offs!

PRACTICAL AVOIDANCE ISSUES

In seeking to weed impurity from our lives and abstain from masturbation, there are two different approaches: one is to quit cold turkey and the other is a gradual tapering off. Before we get into the merits of these approaches, let's look at some helpful tactics you might employ in your battle to weed masturbation out of your life.

Debauchery. It's an ugly word. So ugly, in fact, that when the Bible prohibits it, we immediately vow to stop, even though we have no idea what the heck it is. It means excessive living: over eating, over drinking, over exercising, over sleeping, "over-TVing" (new word), etc. It's a principle that says excess, or fleshliness, in one area of your life will overflow into others. Aiding us, then, in our battle against masturbation is a lifestyle that avoids excess or fleshliness on all fronts. I don't know many people who sleep 12 hours and do not masturbate. Actually, I don't know many people who get to sleep 12 hours a day, but you get the point.

Don't play with yourself and don't hang around naked (get dressed right away after a shower.). Good, I sound like your mother. It is simply a truism that either of these things lead toward masturbation, as do long showers:

Sleep with the door of your room open. This was the rule in a house full of Christian guys on one campus I visited. Also, get right out of bed in the morning.

Stay away from the Internet late at night.

Joshua Harris also lists: *Don't play the "I'll touch myself but won't climax game."*

You also need accountability. If you fail, you need to have someone you can tell. Of course, you'll have to find a non dorky way to say it, like, "I made a bad choice last night," or, "I really blew it." A general rule of thumb is that no one wants to get a call from a guy who was "playing with himself."

Last, walk away with a partial victory. This battle is won by a series of partial victories that turn into a final victory. Never say, "Well, I've gone this far; I might as well finish and get a clean start tomorrow." The road to purity is paved by decisions to stop yourself while in the act.

ON QUITTING

Don't be "the king" of resolutions and promises but simply fight *one-day-at-a-time*. Think about it: Can you partner with the Lord to not masturbate just today?

Identify and confess specific triggers involved in your habit patterns. This includes the time of day you are most tempted, the place you might normally "act out", and the emotional and physical condition when you especially struggle. Talk these over with some trusted brothers who will help you with a strategy to make progress.

Embrace the fact that you are *powerless* to stop and *surrender* each specific temptation today (John 15:5). Use temptations as a reminder to surrender to God and to move toward relationship with him and others.

Surrender by being *willing to make some radical choices*. This is what Jesus had in mind, when in speaking hyperbolically about lust (the real issue here because it has to do with the heart), he exhorts us to pluck out or eye or cut off our hand if they cause us to sin. I've had friends who've slept in their clothes, stopped eating at certain restaurants and took sponge baths instead of showers for a time to see progress in laying aside their masturbatory habits. Please note, I'm not talking about more self-effort but rather a practical demonstration of surrender born out of a willingness to change.

Finally, abstinence regarding masturbation will allow you to get to the deeper issues of the heart. When we lay aside such idols we are able to "feel" life in a fresh way- both the good and the bad- and begin to relate to Jesus in a new and more intimate way.