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GREEN



THE 'M' WORD

FANTASY BY BETTY CHURCHILL • CHAPTER EXCERPT

Fantasy is a collection of insights from several contributing writers, about all the stuff women talk about and some they don't, but should. Sex, dating, relationships, the "m" word (not marriage, the other one), but, of course, we talk about marriage, too, as well as the beautiful people, the need to be in control and how God, Jesus and the Spirit fit into it all.

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

Partial List of Topics: Masturbation, How Far is Too Far, The Role of Fathers, Confession-Forgiveness, Community, Filling of the Spirit, Cosmetic Surgery, Worship, Singleness, Faith, Homosexuality, Why Wait?, Body/Self Image, and Pornography.

Contributions by Henry Cloud and Shellie R. Warren



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FANTASY

The M Word

Masturbation ... masturbation
... masturbation. So, how many
times in a month would you say
you use the word “masturbate”?

When you go through training to be qualified to interview applicants to join Campus Crusade for Christ staff, they make you say the word out loud several times and then turn to the person next to you and use the word conversationally. You can imagine the blushing and nervous laughter as trainees say sex words like that out loud. It's comically, randomly ridiculous. Obviously, the point of the practice is to become comfortable with talking about topics that are taboo in polite dinner conversation but that are relevant to a person's character and walk with God.

Why is it that for guys there are all sorts of euphemisms and slang about sex—crass ways to get around using straight-up medical terms—but not so much for women? Scratch that, dumb question. I do, however, know of one girl who refers to her masturbation as her “love button.”

I have to say that term is a little easier to use. Maybe we should all practice asking, “So, have you played with your love button lately?” I will agree that masturbation is more of a struggle for guys than for girls—but it's not *just* a guy thing. The truth is, it's much more of an issue for women than has been historically assumed or publicly acknowledged. It is a real struggle for many women.

I realize that some of you are saying, “‘Struggle’? ‘Issue’? What's the big deal? It's just a normal part of life. Everyone does it.” And the famous Seinfeldian contest did turn it into dinner conversation (though perhaps it's still not a topic that's appropriate to discuss with your mother at the table). Elaine was right there in the running with Jerry, George, and Kramer.

Let me stop right here and acknowledge that there are a couple of you out there who have never realized that masturbation had anything to do with women and their sexuality. Just seeing the word in print has made you feel faint, and you can feel your face flush even if you're in a room by yourself. My former roommate was one of you until she got married she has been blessed with a fabulous sex life. So, for you, I'd say that you should forget you ever started reading this chapter. Close the book and go watch a Jane Austen film. Continue in your

virtue, and kudos to you for guarding your eyes and ears and, thereby, your mind and heart. But for most of us, especially for those who have been sexually active, masturbating is a real temptation, even if it's just out of curiosity.

THE SUPPOSED BOTTOM LINE

From my experience in working with college students and single women and discussing this issue, the bottom line is that everyone wants one thing—justification. “Just tell me it's not a sin!” For Pete's sake, I have to confess that as a thirty-something single woman, I'd like to find some justification for it myself. As my friend who married in her late thirties used to say, “My hormones are all dressed up with nowhere to go.”

In the past year at my church we did a series on the Song of Solomon, a dating series, and in the main service, a series on sex—yes, in the main service. Each and every time, during the Q & A time, the topic of masturbation came up, and it was usually raised by a woman.

Likewise, my friend was one of the speakers at a women's retreat recently. Little did she know what she was getting into when she agreed to do Q & A with the singles. I'm so glad it was she and not me left to recover the room when one woman quipped, “Who needs men when you've

got batteries?” The woman was only half joking. Maybe even just a quarter or an eighth. (If you don’t get it, that is probably a good thing.) To the relief of some and the chagrin of others, the Bible says nothing about the act of self-gratification. It falls into the abyss of “gray areas”—those topics not specifically addressed by chapter and verse. We like to think that fact gives us the freedom to do whatever we feel is right for us. But as with most gray areas, there are some greater guiding principles here that are clearly given and that tend to make things a little more black and white.

AND WHY NOT?

The broadest principle is this. God created sex for the purpose of allowing two people to experience intimacy and connection with one another. When you experience sex as God intended, the greatest pleasure is in pleasing your partner. Masturbation is self-serving (in every sense) and is not what God intended sex to be.

That’s the short answer. There are, however, some other principles to consider as well.

My seventh-grade P.E. teacher taught us the mechanics of masturbation in a one-day sex education overview as required by the Board of Education of the fine state of Arkansas.

(I know—there are so many things wrong with this story. But I wonder if she practiced saying the word out loud several times before she had to say it to a room full of seventh-grade girls.) Anyway, I confess I discovered that the pure mechanics of masturbation didn’t do much, though I did not poll the class the next day to see if others had found the same. Later in life I learned that for women it’s a mental game—it’s about the things we think about, even dwell on, the fantasies we create in our mind that make us feel wanted, pursued, attractive, and sexy, *plus* the mechanics, that lead us down the path to pleasure.

Jesus said that if you even look at a woman (or a man, in our case) with lustful thoughts, it’s the same as committing adultery (Matthew 5:27-28). Granted, the natural consequences of lusting are not necessarily the same as those for actually committing adultery. A spouse might be a little more upset by one more than by the other. Adultery is all the wrong of lust and then some. But the point is that just because you draw the line at actual adultery (or actual sex, in the case of single women with single men), that doesn’t mean you’re home free with God in the area of sexual purity.

That’s the thing about Jesus. He’s always much more concerned with our heart and mind than with just the outward actions. Having lustful thoughts is not in the game plan. Sexual fantasies that accompany masturbation certainly qualify as lusting, or coveting something forbidden. According to Jesus, thinking about it is not as far from doing it as one might think. As an alternative, Paul recommends this as a good overarching principle: “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, and if there is any excellence, and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things” (Philippians 4:8).

I will acknowledge here that for people who have been sexually active in the past and who have made a commitment to chastity (now, there’s a word from your grandmother’s handbook), masturbation is a much greater struggle. Furthermore, for those who became aware of their sexuality at younger age through whatever circumstances—whether abuse, pornography, a lesson by their seventh-grade gym teacher, or just becoming sexually active—this is much greater temptation. In a sense, love has been awakened before its time, as it says in the Song of Solomon.

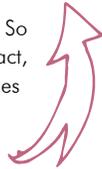
Some of the women I've discussed this topic with would say that they can masturbate without having lustful thoughts, that it is a purely mechanical release. This may especially be true for women in their thirties, when hormones are changing. And several well-respected Christian leaders—Dr. James Dobson of Focus on the Family fame among them—would say that if you can masturbate without lusting and without its becoming addictive, then go for it; it can be welcome relief for sexual pressure. So, there may be some freedom within parameters, according to some.

Another way to look at it, however, is to ask, "Is it out of bounds to have an orgasm if you're not married?" One sex therapist I know says it this simply: "There are two kinds of sex—married sex and unmarried sex." One is clearly in the green zone, the other in the red. Some want to believe that sex is only actual intercourse between two people, but I think that common wisdom would say sex is broader than that—it is anything that leads up to, but is not necessarily inclusive of, an orgasm. Really, it's anything that involves sexual arousal. The point, the motivation, the goal, the result, the climax of masturbation is the orgasm. So I think it's safe to say that masturbation is a sex act, though it may be a solo one, and thereby qualifies as "unmarried sex."

Contrary to popular belief, God is not the consummate parent wagging His Michelangeloesque finger and saying something is wrong "Just because I said so" (although, if you ask me, He certainly has every right to do so). If God draws a line and says not to cross it, that's because it's not a true reflection of His nature and character and/or because it's detrimental to us in some way—physically, emotionally, or spiritually. We know that orgasms per se are not bad. After all, God created them, and so that experience of intense physical pleasure is somehow reflective of how good God is. Yeah, it shows just a taste of His goodness and pleasure. (I know that's possibly a little freakish to think about, but it's true.) So then, the question becomes, are there detrimental consequences to masturbation?

WHAT WILL IT COST ME?

What is it that God is trying to protect us from? I'm not a sex therapist by any stretch, but I recently had a conversation with Marnie Feree who does counsel women with sexual issues. She gave me some insight into the risks involved.



One of the biggest risks in this area is addiction. Masturbating can become your drug of choice. When you feel lonely or frustrated or disappointed, masturbation becomes your outlet to feel better. Soon it can control you, as can any addiction. Certainly we all find ways to adjust our emotional thermostat. For example, when I'm depressed, I go for a long drive, often at high rates of speed, while listening to loud music, preferably U2. Not all emotional self-maintenance is bad or addictive, but some ways we cope are worse than others. So what I would say is that creating a link between negative emotions and sexual gratification is not wise.

It is clear in Scripture that we should be mastered by nothing, that we should learn to control our bodies.¹ Paul says we should "buffet" our bodies.² (That's not *buffet* as in all you can eat; that's *buffet* as in Jimmy and Warren—it means to discipline.) It is not our nature to deny ourselves what we want, but fortunately one of the fruits of a life with God is self-control.

Another consequence of indulging in masturbation is that you can train your heart, mind, and body to respond only to self-stimulation. Imagine the heartache and disappointment that might bring to your spouse when you are married and he is unable to satisfy you. "Thanks, honey—I'll take

it from here.” That would certainly inhibit your experience of sex as God intended it.

There is also the temptation of wanting more. This is the law of diminishing returns: what once seemed satisfying is now boring and doesn’t do so much for you. It can get to the point where the fantasies are no longer exciting and you’re tempted to act on them, to make them a reality, even if it is only a virtual reality via the Internet or romance novels or other forms of pornography. The risk is being drawn deeper and deeper into more destructive habits.

It only makes sense that self-gratification can lead to self-consumption: it’s all about me. Sex was never intended to be all about one person. As God created it, it is the most intimate connection between two people. It’s not about seeking to have one’s own needs met but about giving and about satisfying another. Masturbation trains you to be self-serving in sex. That trait can spill over into other areas of life as well. And like any area of habitual sin, it can lead to a hard heart toward God.

THE REAL BOTTOM LINE

Not everyone who plays with her “love button” is going to end up a sex addict and never be able to have satisfying sex in marriage. But one of the overarching principles in this and every area of life has to do with our relationship with God, which is the source of all fulfillment in life. That relationship is not dictated by how much we can get away with and still be just to the right of the line, but rather it is about the condition of our heart toward Him.

I know that God’s desire for me is to be able to experience this good gift of sex as He intended it in all its fullness within the context of marriage. I want what He wants for me. Granted, I may never marry (that’s another chapter), but I still choose to honor sex for what He made it to be, which is not what I see on TV or movies or even the fantasies I could make up in my head. All of those are a poor reflection. I am hardheaded but am slowly learning that life is not so much about me and my pleasure and satisfaction as it is about knowing God and reflecting His glory. So, for me, the principle is to draw the line and take two steps back—not only for my own safety and protection but also to turn the other way and pursue being more like Christ, to pursue greater intimacy in my relationship with Him.

So, what does that look like—to turn the other way and pursue holiness? As with any sin habit, it means to bring it into the light (sin cannot survive in the light) and to own it, to tell someone. In fact, go ahead. Call Mom right now. Pick up your cell phone—speed dial 2. Okay, I’m kidding. I know that’s an awkward conversation to have with anyone, especially Mom. But hopefully you have, or are developing, some heart-level friendships within which you can be real about the struggles in your life.

Then, quite literally, as the word repentance implies, “turn from it.” Turn your eyes from things that make your mind go down the path of masturbation and lust—certain movies, TV shows, books, magazines, and Web sites. Maybe you need to get rid of cable TV. (Maybe I do.) Turn your thoughts from fantasizing about men and situations that make you feel sexy and wanted and valued. As Scripture says, “Take every thought captive.”³ Replace sexual thoughts with thoughts about God’s love for you and the things He says are true of you. I know that sounds like a Sunday school answer, but if I had spent the same amount of mental energy on contemplating spiritual truth and memorizing Scripture that I’ve spent on daydreaming about men and relationships over the years, I’m pretty sure I’d be a different person by now, at least a little more Mother Teresa and a

little less *Cosmo*. (Okay, not that I'm so *Cosmo*. But you know what I mean.)

Steer clear of situations and activities that stir wrong emotions and desires. For you, it may be flirting with men that makes you feel sexy and wanted. Crossing boundaries with your boyfriend can certainly start something you feel the need to finish on your own. Or it may be wearing a sexy outfit and slinky lingerie or sleeping in the nude or taking bubble baths by candlelight—whatever the romantic thing is that makes you a bit randy (apologies to those actually named Randy). Also, you might take note of your cycle. How very maternal that sounded. But it's true that most women tend to be in the mood more when they're ovulating and right before their period starts. It only makes sense that God would create us that way.



I know all this sounds a bit extreme, and I'm not saying that you shouldn't do things that make you feel attractive. Please do express your femininity and beauty and experience the fullness of being a woman. But if there are things that get your "love button" going, then you should flee. As you would with any sin, figure out what your triggers are and set up some boundaries for yourself, then get some accountability and encouragement.

Most importantly, ask the Holy Spirit to give you strength to resist temptation. Jesus modeled that we should pray that we would not be led into temptation, but rather delivered from sin and evil.⁴ It is only through the power of the Spirit who lives within us that we can overcome any sin habit. Practice living the Spirit-filled life. Make a conscious decision to give Him control of this area of your life. I realize at this point you may not want to, because like most sin, masturbation is satisfying in the moment and seems harmless. However, the more you cultivate intimacy with the Lord, the more your desire for sin wanes. Pray that He would make you willing to be willing.

AND ONE LAST THING ...

While not taking seriously our holiness in the area of sex is certainly a problem, there can be an extreme in the other direction as well. That is that we can feel a disproportionate amount of guilt when we fail in this area. A failure with masturbation is no different from a failure with gossip, overeating, or any other sin. If you have masturbated, there is no reason to allow a veil of guilt to remain for days, separating you from intimacy with Christ as you punish yourself rather than confess and accept God's forgiveness. In other words, don't let sin separate you from intimacy with Him, but don't let guilt feelings separate you either.

¹ 1 Thessalonians 4:4

² 1 Corinthians 9:27

³ 2 Corinthians 10:5

⁴ Matthew 6:13