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A Measure of Grace

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Masturbation Part II

An Article By Roger Jones

In last month's article, I opened up the topic of masturbation. In that writing, I talked about how I found the issue confusing and why. I explored the Scripture and what the Bible says about masturbation and fantasy. I looked at some of the questions that come to mind concerning this topic, namely, "Is masturbation a sin?" and "Can a person masturbate without fantasy?" If you're joining the conversation now, I recommend that you go back and read the first article in this series, in the August 2009 newsletter. You can contact the WGA office for a copy or read it on the WGA website at www.whergraceabounds.org/Newsletter_PDFs/August_2009.pdf.

I ended last month's article with a statement about where I find myself now with the issue of masturbation. In a

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nutshell, I said that I have found that masturbation is something
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that is really not good for me, and that it is too connected with fantasy and other addictive behaviors that I no longer want in my life. I went on to say that in my next article (the one you are reading now) I would go into more detail about why I think this is so.

I'd like to say a few words about biology. For the most part, what we hear from doctors is that, biologically speaking, there is nothing wrong with masturbation. Many say it is a normal and healthy. From the purely biological point of view, they may be correct. I've heard from several men that masturbation has been prescribed by their doctors in order to counter the possibility of infections. Rather than delving further into the biological aspects here, I'd like to look at some of the psychological impacts.

My experiences with masturbation fit into what I define as addiction. I do not believe that everyone who has masturbated has an addiction problem. But for many, masturbation has been used as a means of escape from stress, loneliness, or other problems in life. In my own case, I have used it primarily to avoid pain. In such instances, I have created more problems for myself than solutions!

Masturbation trains us to think about ourselves. We use it to meet our own needs, rather than trusting that God may have another avenue to provide for us. When we feel responsible for meeting all of our own needs, including the sexual ones, we train ourselves to believe that we don't need anyone else in our lives. This independence is very American, but not necessarily Christian!

Through masturbation, we often cope with non-sexual problems in life in a sexual way. This is a stepping stone towards addiction. As we turn to self gratification as a means of escape, when we feel lonely or tired or we are in conflict with someone, we begin to find that every time conflict or pain arises in our lives, we feel sexual. We then seek out the release that comes from orgasm, rather than trying to address the real needs that are driving us to masturbation in the first place.

Another problem is that masturbation often reinforces thoughts and behaviors that we are trying to eliminate from our lives. This is particularly true when sexual fantasy accompanies masturbation. Fantasy, by its very definition, is not reality. Whomever or whatever we choose to

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fantasize about separates us further from reality. This preference for fantasy over reality is a form of idolatry. As Christian men and women, we are admonished through the Scripture to turn away from lust and idols. If that is our goal, obviously sexual fantasy is not a good idea. The more we practice the fantasies, the more the patterns become ingrained within us. We engage in the very behaviors we seek to leave behind, even if only in our minds.

Also with fantasy and the use of pornography, our expectations of sex are being shaped. Most of us, of either gender, do not possess the physical attributes of models, actors, or performers in the adult industry. Many of the sexual acts performed in pornography are degrading to either or both partners. A real life partner may be unwilling to participate in such acts. We bring a lot of baggage along with those expectations of sex!

For those who are married, masturbation can prove to be problematic in building a mature sexual relationship. After reading last month's article, a married woman told me some of her history with masturbation. She didn't have a problem with sexual fantasy while masturbating, but

when she and her husband came together sexually, she often found her interest level decreased and the experience to be less than satisfying. When practicing masturbation, there was little reason for her to be sexual with her husband. When she stopped engaging in this behavior, her sexual relationship became more satisfying. I imagine this is true for men as well.

For most, orgasm can be achieved more quickly alone. If we are repeatedly pleasuring ourselves, what do we have to offer our spouse who may need more time to reach orgasm? Sex is a gift within marriage and can be an amazing way for spouses to connect with each other.

In closing, I would like to thank you for thinking through this topic with me. This is an uncomfortable issue, to say the least. While sitting in the privacy of my own office, I got embarrassed a number of times while writing! I am certain that there is much more to say about masturbation, but I will leave it here for now.

Lord, continue to teach me more about Your intent for my sexuality. Help me to submit my will to Yours. Help me to make good and healthy choices, motivated by my love for You, rather than my love of me.

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Reflections: Thoughts From a WGA Leader

By Nancy Hicks

Don't Kick the Dog

Don't get me started about credit cards. I can rail for hours on the deceptive trap that they can create: that they prey on a false sense of self-control, that there is no such thing as a free lunch . . . Do I personally have credit cards with some serious numbers on them? Why, yes. Yes, I do. Why do you ask?

So caught in my own web of hypocrisy a few weeks ago, I started to apply for a new credit card online because doing so would save \$100 off of the plane tickets I was buying. I felt a vague uneasiness, tossed up a quick prayer, and got the entire form filled out. As I went to hit the "apply now" button, my keyboard and mouse wouldn't work. I'm not kidding. I went around to the back of the desk and discovered that my dog had randomly decided to chew through the cord to the keyboard, which tugged the mouse cord loose from the back of the computer as well.

So here is an ethical/ theological

question: Do you discipline a dog for naughty behavior when she is most likely responding to the motivation of the Holy Spirit?

It got me to thinking about a variety of unpleasant things that I have experienced over the years that God has used to guide me, shape my character, and help me towards a greater understanding of who He is. Some have been the simple natural consequences of my own decisions and some have come out of the blue and had little to do with my initiation of them.

The Apostle Paul frequently found himself in distressing situations after doing the "right" things. Of all people who deserved to com-



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plain about unjust treatment, Paul was definitely towards the top of the list. But Paul writes from prison that he was glad he had been imprisoned because it was allowing the Gospel to be preached to a whole new crowd of people that he wouldn't have been able to reach before (Philippians 1:12-14). Rather than railing at the injustice of being thrown in prison for doing the right thing, he saw it as an opportunity provided by God. If I really believe that God's plans are good, that there is nothing beyond His love and redemption, then I find myself not punishing the dog, or my boss, or my neighbor, or my friend I can consider all things joy when I encounter various unpleasant blocks in the path to my happiness (James 1), because I know that there is no situation that God can't use as an opportunity for good.

As I finished working on this today, I got the last WGA newsletter and read the article by Franklin Castle. Franklin is in prison for a life sentence and works as a literacy tutor on the special-needs unit at SCI-Smithfield in Huntingdon, Pennsylvania. He is a powerful, living picture of my weak description here. He is living out the Gospel to a whole new crowd of people that he wouldn't have been

able to reach before. There is no place God's love will not go. I want to be a willing ambassador no matter where I find myself, and one who doesn't beat the dog.

Turning to Faith

By Mary Heathman

I was recently asked why I rejected my early religious training and wandered without faith for so many years. I have been thinking about my response and concluded that it would make a good statement about the imperfection, yet critical importance, of early religious training.

Unlike some people who turn away from their early religious training, I didn't leave my childhood faith because it couldn't answer my questions. In fact, I wouldn't say I *left*, as much as I just didn't connect to begin with. As I think back, I realize I turned away because it didn't give me what I thought I needed, and I didn't ask anyone any questions about my experience.

In my early religious training, from ages five through ten, all of the questions were given to me in weekly classes and I memorized all the answers, which were also given to me. There were two ceremonies, one at age five and another when I was ten. I understood these to be the steps to connection with God. But when I marched along all the steps, got to the end and the ceremonies were over, the promised connection with God

didn't happen in any way that I could recognize.

I had already learned that there was no room for other questions, because I was one of those intellectually curious children that often are considered problem kids in a time-constrained class—the one who was always asking the “why” questions, or trying to change up the answers. For example, once the class was asked, “Did God create all things?” I knew the expected answer was, “Yes, God created all things.” But instead of replying by rote, I said, “God is the only creator of everything.”

The teacher considered this a discipline/attitude/rebellion problem. To be fair, I'm not sure that he wasn't right. I still like to challenge the status quo; it is my way of testing, examining, and learning—but it wasn't well-received by this teacher. He wasn't mean, but I remember he stopped the class and made an issue of my nonconformity. I still remember the shame I felt—as if I had done something very wrong by asking questions and speaking differently than did the other children. And I was also afraid—panicked that I would somehow never get connected to God if I did it again, so I didn't! The consequence

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of this, of course, was I learned by rote, but didn't get what I needed to internalize or apply what I was learning.

Also, my motivation for doing all the memory work word-perfect was very personal, which I shared with no one. I was in a situation as an oldest child where I had to take care of younger siblings while parents were gone to the club three to four nights a week. I had decided when I heard in my first classes that "God is all-powerful," that He would be the one to take care of me—and the way to get there was through completing the classes and celebrating the rites of passage—the ceremonies that came after successful completion of the training, followed by weekly attendance at worship services.

So I did all that was expected of me—all the while simply by faith expecting the gut level emptiness to be gone when I got connected with God. But, the anxiety that kept my life perpetually on edge didn't go away as I expected it would after the last ceremony. So, I turned my attention away from Christianity as irrelevant and decided I was going to have to take care of myself.

I returned seventeen years later, not to the faith tradition of my childhood, but to another Christian tradition's way of expressing faith. Somehow within the first fifteen years of that new beginning, my

childhood memorizations and my study of the Scriptures merged and I realized I had been taught well as a child—taught fundamental truths about God and Jesus and me. But these truths had just never sparked anything in my heart, probably because of my expectations and never asking anyone about the problem I was having connecting with God.

Having connected, with the expected peace finally having set my heart at rest, I then taught my children, and later talked to my grandchildren. I wanted them to know the importance of always at the very least asking God to help them understand their relationship with Him. I also told them how good it is to ask and talk with a few others about their internal experiences as well, as it could make all the difference. We don't all have to spend seventeen years of wandering faithlessly as did I, enduring a spiritual loneliness we were never intended for.

I'm glad I finally did turn with my questions, and profound need, to the God who created me. I pray that I will always turn to Him first in whatever tradition of worship I find myself.

This is also my prayer for all the men and women who sometimes return to a faintly remembered faith of their childhood through their experience in WGA groups. May they find, at WGA, people who will listen to their questions and walk alongside them as He supplies all they need.



August At a Glance

August 8th: WGA Men's event—softball

August 15th: WGA participated in the AIDS walk with HIV CareLink

August 29th: WGA Event—BBQ

Thursday Night Group

August 6th: 36 people

August 13th: 35 people

August 20th: 27 people

August 27th: 43 people

Orientation meeting: 8 new people

September And Beyond

September 12th: WGA speaking at First Denver Friends Church

September 15th: WGA Pastor Training Event

September 25: Roger speaking at HIV CareLink volunteer training

October 3rd: Intercessory Prayer. Join us from 7:00—9:00 am at the WGA offices

October 9-11th: WGA Leadership Retreat

October 11th: WGA participating in missions event at First Denver Friends and Cherry Creek Presbyterian Church

November 17th: WGA Pastor Training Event

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Where Grace Abounds
exists to guide and support
men and women who seek to
understand sexuality and
relationship, and to inspire
all people to know and
personally appropriate
God's plan for their
sexuality and relationships.

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