

1. What leads a person to develop a taste for sadism or masochism?

Before we talk about sadism and masochism, I think the concept of bondage and domination needs to be addressed. Even though actually being dominated sexually or raped is considered one of the most traumatic and psychologically disturbing things one could experience, there's obviously something about the fantasy alone that floats some people's boat. And fiction authors are obviously aware of this, as lead female characters experience rape in approximately 54 percent of romance novels.¹ So why would humans sometimes fantasize or dream about something that we'd *never* want to actually experience?

I believe sexual fantasies are really just the brain's way of trying to heal itself from some sort of past emotional trauma. It's our way of "righting an old wrong," or "recreating a scenario in order to 'win' this time." If these theories are true, then we must ask, "What kind of life experience might someone have had that would require such a forceful scenario to open up the brain's pathways toward pleasure?"

In a rape scene, the victim has absolutely no choice about whether sex is going to take place or not. It's being forced upon them. And solely in the fantasy, this feels like a *good* thing. Perhaps it's because the fantasizer is a very passive person and the idea of someone dominating and making sexual decisions for them is appealing. Or maybe it's so the victim doesn't have to take any responsibility for what's happening. They don't have to feel guilty. They're not being "loose" or promiscuous. These fears of feeling responsible, guilty, or promiscuous very possibly stem from having repressed their own sexuality, which often happens when we're raised in well-meaning Christian homes with the mindset of, "Sex is dirty and shameful, and those who engage in it willingly are dirty and shameful too."

Guilt and shame aren't compatible with an orgasmic mindset, so the rape fantasy takes all guilt and shame off the table, making room for a feast of pleasure, even if being raped is something that would *not* be pleasurable in real life at all. It's quite fascinating how the mind works to ensure our sexual fulfillment, not because we're perverts or horrible people, but simply because we're designed by God as sexual beings to the core.

At first glance, the fact that someone would get a kick out of tying someone up, inflicting pain, or humiliating them sexually is unimaginable. Yet many imagine, quite vividly! In his book *Who's Been Sleeping in your Head: The Secret World of Sexual Fantasies*, Brett Kahr conducted a large-scale study of the sexual fantasies of 23,000 adults and discovered the following :

- 25 percent of respondents fantasize about being tied up.
- 18 percent of men and 7 percent of women fantasize about spanking someone.
- 11 percent of men and 13 percent of women fantasize about being spanked.²

Speaking of being tied up and spanked, many people have asked, "What do you think of *Fifty Shades of Grey*?" I admit that I have all kinds of mixed emotions.

When it comes to lead character (and sadist) Christian Grey, age twenty-six, I've wanted to slap him into next week for inflicting women with intense pain and degradation. In the story, when we learn of his "Red Room of Pain," he has already abused fifteen women with his bizarre sadomasochistic fantasies. The other part of me says, At least he's acutely aware of his fetish, is seeing a counselor, and is up front and honest about his desires and expectations, even going to the trouble of spelling it all out through a "domination/submission" contract that he asks women to sign beforehand.

Regarding the heroine of the story, Anastasia Steele, age twenty-one, part of me wants to cheer for her courage in exploring her own sexuality, but *only* if this could have been done *within*

the context of marriage, not a dating relationship—and especially not with a man who she met little more than five minutes ago! I wanted to shake her by the shoulders and tell her, “Wake up, baby doll! Don’t give a guy your virginity thinking, *There’s lots of things I really don’t like or trust about this guy, but he’s so sexy and rich that I’ll risk it! Surely my love will change him!* It may work that way in novels and in fantasy, but not in real life.

However, when people ask what I think of the novel, they aren’t always interested in a literary criticism or an opinion of the characters’ morals or choices. Sometimes what they’re really asking is, “What do you think about BDSM?”

Again, mixed emotions. The legalist inside of me (most of us have one in there somewhere) wants to throw a stone and say, “That’s *bad!* Under *any* circumstance! No one should *ever* do that!” But then I remember how God is teaching me to avoid all extremes in either a legalistic or liberal direction. So I slow down long enough to consider the fact that there are happily married Christian couples who, for deep psychological reasons, *both* find pleasure in BDSM activities. What are we to make of that?

Perhaps she likes playing the dominatrix role while he enjoys submitting to her control. Or she enjoys to role-play being passive and obedient, while her husband pursues her with raw aggression. What’s behind this type of fantasy?

If you think in opposite terms, you discover possible clues. For the person who wants to dominate and control, they most likely felt out of control and dominated by a significant person in their past. By being the one in charge (the “master”) for a change, they regain a lost sense of power. For the person who prefers the submissive role (the “slave”), they most likely enjoy relinquishing control so that they don’t have to fear holding the hot potato of responsibility, guilt,

worry, or anxiety. “I was forced to do it” is the scapegoat that provides permission to enjoy sexual pleasure.

From a physical perspective, one might wonder how infusing sexual activities with pain could possibly be pleasurable. Scientists have actually discovered that the area of the brain associated with pain is stimulated in women especially during sexual arousal, so there is actually a distinct connection between pain and pleasure.³ This may explain why some (although certainly not all) women like being spanked during sexual activity.

From a psychological perspective, it’s not difficult to see how someone who has experienced verbal, emotional, physical, or sexual abuse in the past could naturally gravitate in the direction of domination/submission role play. In this fantasy, the victim becomes a victor. The better their sense of power and control, the better climax they experience.

Dr. Michael J. Bader, author of a book entitled *Arousal: The Secret Logic of Sexual Fantasies* provides further insight as to why BDSM “works” for abuse victims:

One essential aspect of a sexually masochistic fantasy is that the pain and helplessness are voluntarily created and experienced. The helplessness is not real. The masochist is always in control of the type, duration, and degree of pain that she or he endures. The adult indulging in a fantasy of sexual surrender or abasement is actually saying to her or himself: “I’m recreating a terrifying and traumatic scene, but this time I’m in control because I’m scripting the scene as much as my partner is.” The “victim” in the adult sadomasochistic scenario is not really a victim. She or he is constructing a situation in which the pathogenic beliefs that stemmed from childhood abuse are being momentarily disproved, thereby creating the conditions of safety necessary to become aroused. Trauma is

turned on its head. The slave turns out to be the master, and the master is sexually dependent on the slave. A game is set up in which the victim of childhood abuse finally gets to win.⁴

2. Are these types of fantasies considered a sin? Why or why not?

Sometimes Christians' knee-jerk response to anything out of the sexual norm is to assume that it must be sinful. However, many Christians also have to admit that these are the very sexual fantasies that they struggle with, and they've tried everything – fasting, praying, counseling – to get rid of these psychological thoughts, yet they remain deeply imbedded in their brains. So I think it would be helpful to consider what both psychology and theology have to say on this matter.

First, let's consider what psychology says about fantasies. Here are just a couple of examples, taken from my Human Sexuality textbook from Liberty University:

“Fantasy is a safe way to experience a sexual activity that a person might not morally, safely, legally, or maybe physically, be able to do in real life. The only limit is your imagination.”⁵

“Because they allow us to indulge our impulses without social constraints or conventions, sexual fantasies provide an interesting window to our evolutionary instincts.”⁶

For the Christian man or woman, this perspective can sound scary at first glance, as if it goes completely against what we're taught in Scripture. However, the same textbook also says:

“Acting out a fantasy [can be] cause for concern if it involves pressuring or coercing an unwilling partner, *goes against your value system*, or puts you or a partner at physical or *emotional risk*”⁷ (italics mine)

“ . . . you can control the content of the fantasy with deliberate scripting, editing, and casting.”⁸

In other words, some psychologists take into consideration that if certain sexual fantasies create spiritual guilt or inner turmoil for an individual, that’s a bad thing. And most psychologists acknowledge that we do not have to let fantasies control us. We are mentally capable of controlling them, which is also what the Bible encourages us to do. So let’s consider what the Bible has to say about our mental thoughts. These passages in particular come to mind:

You have heard that it was said, “You must not be guilty of adultery.” But I tell you that if anyone looks at a woman and wants to sin sexually with her, in his mind he has already done that sin with the woman. If your right eye causes you to sin, take it out and throw it away. It is better to lose one part of your body than to have your whole body thrown into hell. (Matt. 5:27–29, NCV)

Surely you know that the people who do wrong will not inherit God’s kingdom. Do not be fooled. Those who sin sexually, worship idols, take part in adultery, those who are male prostitutes, or men who have sexual relations with other men, those who steal, are greedy, get drunk, lie about others, or rob—these people will not inherit God’s kingdom. (1 Cor. 6:9–10, NCV)

At first glance, these passages can be even scarier than what psychology teaches! That we’re *not* going to heaven if we sin sexually? That we sin sexually simply by looking at someone lustfully?

That we are to gouge our eye out if it causes us to lust? *Gee whiz!* No wonder many abandon Christianity because they feel as if they'll never measure up to such unrealistic standards!

But let's press the Pause button and investigate these scriptures a little further to fully understand the "bigger picture" of what Jesus and Paul were saying. My pastor, Doug Clark of Community Christian Church in Tyler, Texas, recently preached a sermon on these two passages, and they helped me make more sense out of them than ever before.

Regarding the Matthew 5 text, Doug pointed out that Jesus was addressing the Pharisees' notion that they were "holy enough" to get themselves into heaven. This was ridiculous, of course, because only Jesus fit that category. We need *Him* and the blood He shed for us on the cross to gain entry into heaven. So in order to dispel the myth in the Pharisees' minds that *their* righteousness, particularly their own sexual purity, was enough to earn salvation, Jesus used the illustration of looking upon a woman lustfully, and told how they'd already committed adultery with her in their hearts and minds once they'd done so (Matt. 5:28). Jesus could have said, in other words, "Hey, guys! That little thing that you do so often . . . practically every day . . . without even noticing . . . thinking that it's not hurting anyone or that it's completely inconsequential—that little thing is enough to disqualify you! There's no way you are holy enough to gain God's approval. You need *Me* to get you into heaven!"

Of course, Jesus went on to explain that this "little thing" isn't so little in His rule book. He said, "Gouge out your eye if it causes you to sin!" (Matt. 5:29) Are we to take Him literally? If we did, the entire church would be walking around blind yet *still* lusting in our hearts and minds because of the fallen state we live in! Physical blindness wouldn't be sufficient to cure us of all our sexual depravity!

No, Jesus was using strong language to make His point: we are to take sin seriously!

In 1 Corinthians 6:9–10, particularly the part about “the sexually immoral not inheriting the kingdom of God,” it’s easy to assume that sexual purity is a salvation matter. However, this is *not* a proper understanding of Scripture. Just as Jesus said to the Pharisees, “Your sexual purity does not *qualify* you for heaven,” we can also assume the reverse to be true. “Your sexual impurity does not *disqualify* you from heaven either!”

In this passage, Paul was addressing *believers* in Christ who were saved, yet continued to act like those who *weren’t believers*, or those indulging in all kinds of selfish sins because they weren’t saved or sanctified. Paul wasn’t saying to believers, “If you do this, you’re scratched off heaven’s reception list!” He was saying, “Because you *are* on the reception list of invitees, you should not act like those who aren’t!”

So again, I want to make it clear that salvation is not a matter of sexual purity, but strictly a matter of trusting in Christ as your personal Savior. However, sexual purity *is* (or should be) a natural by-product of being sanctified, which means becoming more holy simply because we are in close relationship with the Holy Spirit.

How can we do that—be made more holy—while walking around in these sexual bodies, thinking these sexual thoughts, and wrestling with these sexual fantasies and urges? By adopting Paul’s strategy for victory in any spiritual battle we face:

We do live in the world, but we do not fight in the same way the world fights. We fight with weapons that are different from those the world uses. Our weapons have power from God that can destroy the enemy’s strong places. We destroy people’s arguments and every proud thing that raises itself against the knowledge of God. We capture every thought and make it give up and obey Christ. (2 Cor. 10:3–5, NCV)

Did you catch that? With God's help, we're able to capture *every thought* and make it *obedient* to Christ. We're able to operate completely within our value system, reduce our emotional risk and control the content of our fantasies with deliberate scripting, editing, and casting, just as psychology supports.

When it comes to determining whether certain sexual thoughts are in need of controlling or editing, it might be helpful to divide various types of sexual fantasies into three categories:

- Auto-Erotic—automatically produces sexual excitement or pleasure without association with another person or intentional external stimulation
- Erotic—intending to arouse or satisfy sexual desire within marriage through an activity that is perfectly acceptable to both spouses and not expressly forbidden in Scripture
- Illicit—disapproved of or not permitted for moral or ethical reasons, mainly due to the relational context of the participants not being married to one another

Applying these definitions directly to our sexual fantasies, *auto-erotic fantasy* includes sexual thoughts that come into our brains completely unbidden. In other words, we didn't conjure them up by looking at pornography or reading a romance novel. The thought simply came to us—out of the blue—either in our dreams or our random thoughts.

Should we feel guilty for auto-erotic thoughts, dreams, or fantasies? Many do, but there's absolutely no reason to beat ourselves up over what happens naturally in our human bodies, even if those thoughts “turn us on” sexually. We can simply choose not to act on them. I believe this is what it means to take a thought captive and make it obedient to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5).

Based on some research that I stumbled upon recently, it would be impossible for humans not to be turned on by random auto-erotic thoughts. There are several nerves that run directly from the genitals to our brains, so thoughts that cause the sexual parts of our brain to light up are

also going to light up our loins! And any sensations to our genitals whatsoever can trigger these nerves to send sexy messages to the brain. In other words, we couldn't turn off all sexual thoughts if we tried, unless, of course, we severed this bundle of nerves altogether.⁹

So let's do ourselves a favor and give up the guilt over *all* sexual thought. It's simply unrealistic to expect this of ourselves. Like expecting elephants to give up *all* thoughts of peanuts or monkeys to give up *all* thoughts of bananas! Not gonna happen.

The next category is *erotic thought*, the goal of which is to intentionally arouse ourselves or our partners. As a single person, intentionally entertaining erotic fantasy is like playing with fire and is perhaps why Song of Solomon warns, "Do not arouse or awaken love before it is time!" (2:7; 3:5; 8:4, NIV)

But if you're married, of course, intentionally arousing yourself and your spouse is a good thing! I'm reminded of a seventy-two-year-old woman who called me in response to my book *The Sexually Confident Wife* a few years ago. She explained that for the first thirty years of her marriage, she was sexually frozen. She didn't want to entertain her husband's sexual advances at all because she feared displeasing God with the thoughts that ran through her mind when having sex. You can imagine the impact this mind-set had on their marriage. Divorce court was the next scheduled stop in their relational journey, until her husband convinced her to see a therapist.

After hearing her concerns, the therapist simply asked, "If God created you with a brain that can imagine certain thoughts and fuel your own sexual energy and your marriage bed as a result, isn't that a *blessing* rather than a *burden*?"

This woman proclaimed, "I decided I'd rather give up the guilt than give up my marriage, and I'm so glad I did!" The woman continued, "Our sex life over the past twenty years has been

amazing, and I have more intense orgasms at seventy-two-years-old than I've had my whole life!"

I remember thinking, "Yes! Perhaps the best is still yet to come!" Seriously, I was *so* grateful for her brave confession and cherished words of wisdom! They've stuck with me, and hopefully they'll stick with you too.

However, where we have to be incredibly careful is when our erotic sexual fantasies turn into *illicit fantasies*—those involving unlawful or inappropriate relationships, which for Christians means anyone we're not married to!

This definition of illicit fantasy can be disconcerting, because a *lot* of people's sexual thoughts often fall into this category. According to Brett Kahr's *Who's Been Sleeping in Your Head?* study:

- About 90 percent of adults fantasize about someone other than the person they're having sex with
- 41 percent imagine sex with someone else's partner
- 39 percent fantasize about sex with a work colleague
- 25 percent fantasize about celebrities¹⁰

Gulp. Ninety percent are fantasizing about someone they shouldn't? So can't we just declare that fantasizing about someone other than the person you're having sex with is "perfectly normal?"

No, we can't. As Christians, our standards of "normal" are measured against the loving guidance of God's Word, not the life most of the world is living, not even inside their heads.

The fact that the vast majority of us are sexually fantasizing about someone we shouldn't have a sexual relationship with at all is a pretty clear indicator that (a) there are a lot of people

“walking wounded” and trying to medicate their emotional pain through sexual fantasy, and that (b) an article such as this is long overdue.

3. How can fantasies help a person and at what point do they begin to hurt a couple? Is there a limit?

Just the word itself—*fantasy*—can illicit all kinds of anxiety among Christians. In fact, *fantasy* seems to be an even more taboo word than *sex*! But before we throw the baby out with the bath water and assume that all fantasy is unhealthy, dangerous, and therefore entirely off limits, let’s consider how fantasy can actually be a friend.

1. Fantasy helps us prepare for a life transition.

Cassie came to me incredibly concerned about whether she should ever get married because the idea of sex was so scary and repulsive to her. In her late twenties, she still experienced such sexual anxiety that she asked, “If I do get married, can I ask him to cut ‘those things’ off?” I inquired what “things” she was referring to and learned that she grew physically ill over the thought of a man’s testicles “bumping up against her” during intercourse. I assured her that *no man* would ever be willing to do that—not even for his wife—and that when she fell in love, she’d never dream of asking that wonderful man to castrate himself! Indeed, Cassie eventually fell in love and got engaged, but she was still very nervous about the honeymoon (and every night thereafter). So she began preparing herself mentally through the use of fantasy. She envisioned repeatedly that she would enjoy her husband’s body, and vice-versa, in very holy and healthy ways, and that there would be absolutely no feelings of anxiety or disgust with any particular body part. After the wedding, Cassie proudly proclaimed, “Our honeymoon rocked! Nothing really freaked me out at all, thanks to the mental exercises you recommended!”

2. Fantasy can warn us about a possible future event.

Janie set up a coaching session thinking she'd crossed a horrible line. She was distracted almost daily by thoughts that a particular tall, dark, and handsome stranger may board the train she rode home on. She'd seen him a handful of times but had never interacted with him at all. When I asked what line she had crossed, she admitted to having fantasies that this man might engage her in conversation, and that their "accidental tourist" relationship would blossom into a sexual affair. "Is that what you want?" I inquired; she responded with shock and horror. "So if it's *not* what you want, could it be that the purpose of the fantasy is simply to warn you that this possibility exists, and to encourage you to rehearse an appropriate response?" A few weeks later, this stranger's spotlight was indeed aimed in Janie's direction. However, by delivering the exact response she'd been rehearsing, Janie was able to nip a potentially inappropriate relationship in the bud.

3. Fantasy can help us endure separation.

When I speak to military wives, I'm always asked the question, "Is it okay for me to fantasize about sex with my husband while he's deployed?" I usually grab that woman by the shoulders, give her a playful shake, and declare, "You'd better!" Seriously, how could military spouses (both husbands and wives) cope with such a lengthy, painful, and scary separation from one another if they felt sinful entertaining sexual thoughts of one another? There's nothing sinful about healthy sexual thoughts of your marriage partner—*ever*—even if they're only gone to the grocery store for an hour! But for spouses who have to endure an extended separation, sexual fantasy can keep the home fires burning until a passionate sexual reunion is possible.

4. Fantasy can comfort us as we age.

When I made the announcement on my blog that I was writing *The Fantasy Fallacy*, I received an email from an anonymous man. He explained, "As we grow older, I enjoy letting my

mind wander back to the good old days—back to when my wife would let me boldly stare at her youthful, beautiful body, when we had all the strength and energy required for frequent afternoon delights and weekend sexual marathons, back to when I wasn't concerned about whether I could maintain an erection until I'd crossed the finish line. Recalling these wonderful times we've shared together keeps me from looking at pornography or lusting over other women—(I'm old, but I'm not dead)—so I think fantasy can serve a good purpose.”

Indeed, fantasy can serve *many* good purposes, so don't knock it completely until you try it!

Where we must be incredibly careful, however, as far as a marriage relationship is concerned, is to never expect our spouse to fulfill any sort of sexual fantasy that makes them uncomfortable. It is incredibly easy to feel “slimed” or “used” when one person has a fantasy that the other spouse doesn't share, especially when the one with the fantasy wants to turn it into a reality.

In fact, when one of my coaching clients tells me that they are considering turning a fantasy into a reality, a red flag always goes up in my spirit. I want to know more – a lot more -- of exactly what they have in mind, and most importantly, who else it might involve!

For example, one woman told me that for Valentine's Day, she was going to make her husband's fantasy come true by pursuing him in a creative way. She sent him to a nice local hotel, where she would later knock on his door dressed as a seductive cleaning lady. While not all wives would participate in such an adventurous role play, this scenario seemed tame enough to simply applaud her courage and cheer her on. Indeed, her husband was both surprised and delighted by the amorous gesture. No harm, no foul.

However, another client (I'll call her "Connie") confided that her husband had asked her to arrange a meeting with her old friend from college. When Connie confessed to him that she and her friend had been involved in a rather "intimate" friendship where lesbian experimentation was involved, he declared her forgiven by himself and by God. But later, aroused by the thought, her husband wanted them to re-enact the scenario so that he could be a spectator.

I asked Connie how she felt about his request. She sat there in silence, twisting her wedding ring for several seconds. Then with tears spilling out of the corners of her eyes she replied, "I struggled with enormous guilt and shame over that situation for years, and it took so much out of me to confess it to him. Initially, I was grateful for his compassion and mercy. But to realize that he'd sacrifice my dignity and ask me to recreate such an inappropriate relationship makes me want to vomit on his shoes and punch him in the stomach! I have to question whether he really loves me at all, or if I'm just a sexual object to him!" Without a doubt, Connie's husband ripped a scab off of a very deep wound and poured acid on it. Not wise. And he'll have a hard time recovering her trust after such a selfish move.

Another couple came to me for marriage coaching after having acted out a fantasy, which they initially thought they'd gotten away with. Bob and Tina traveled to a convention where they manned a booth together, staying in a posh hotel room both Friday and Saturday night. When Bob suggested they watch porn on his company laptop, Tina was a little reluctant, but figured that their teenage children would never know. True, their children never discovered what they'd done, but Bob's boss did. The company laptops contained filtering software that sends a report to their I.T. department whenever any "red flag" activities are suspected. Bob walked into the office Monday morning with a smile on his face from his wild weekend with his wife. He was escorted out the front door with his personal belongings before lunchtime.

Moral of the story? *Some fantasies are far better left as fantasies!* Bringing them to life will often bring far more heartache than heat! So here are some guidelines to help you discern whether to bring a fantasy to life, or leave it in your head where no one gets hurt by it...

- Does your fantasy involve the presence of any other human being on the planet?

Whether a prostitute, porn star, a phone sex operator, or a personal pal, that's never a good idea! The Bible states clearly and unequivocally that the marriage bed should be kept pure by all (Hebrews 13:4). Translation: *Only a husband and wife belong there!*

- Is the acting out of this fantasy going to cause either spouse to feel used or abused in any way, shape, or form? If so, the resulting pain can never be justified by any amount of derived pleasure.
- If your spiritual leader, boss, or best friend discovered that you'd acted out such a fantasy, would it threaten your reputation or your relationship with them at all? Equally as important, would it discredit your witness as a follower of Christ?
- Would your job (and livelihood and family security) be in jeopardy if others were to discover this secret part of your sex life?

Let's face it. Political campaigns and budding careers have crumbled. Ministries have imploded and left followers floundering. Families have fallen apart. All because of fantasies that should have never become a reality at all.

So before you decide to turn a fantasy into a reality, be sure to count the potential costs – to your marriage, your ministry, your family, your friendships, your finances, your future reputation, etc. Chances are, keeping that fantasy merely a fantasy is a great safety net against your whole world falling apart.

4. In your experience with real cases and couples, do you feel more church-going couples are struggling with the issue of unhealthy sexual fantasies?

To assume that Christians struggle with sexual fantasy less than other people do is simply naïve. We're all created as sexual beings, and we all have active sexual imaginations. I think that church-going couples probably do struggle more because (a) they have a softer conscience than the rest of the world (which is a good thing), and (b) they don't feel as if they have anyone in the church they can talk to because it's rare for a spiritual leader or church community to make fellow members feel "safe enough" to share such struggles.

After I speak at churches, I'm occasionally approached by someone wanting to talk. It doesn't take long before I realize they're wondering the same thing that many others do. "Where is the switch? Can I just turn off the 'sexuality switch' so that I don't have to wrestle with these temptations any longer?" Sure, it might seem much easier if such a switch existed. Unfortunately, it doesn't. As long as we're living and breathing, we're sexual beings. From the cradle to the grave. We simply can't escape this reality.

However, some people still try, and some might even succeed to a large degree, but at what cost? This denial of all sexual thoughts and feelings is called repression. Dictionary.com defines *repression* as "the rejection from consciousness of painful or disagreeable ideas, memories, feelings, or impulses."¹¹ In other words, repression occurs when you do not let yourself experience any sexual thoughts or feelings to any degree. Unfortunately, repressing all sexual desires doesn't work at all. Or it works *too* well, leaving us completely numb to *any* desire to be in a physical relationship with another sexual being (especially our spouses).

That's too high a price to pay; complete sexual repression is not a healthy choice for any individual, especially if that person is married.

But just because we shouldn't or can't turn our sexual thoughts completely "off" doesn't mean we have the right to leave them "on" at full speed, "expressing" them at whim and drawing others into dysfunctional sexual relationships with us. The Bible makes it clear that the act of sexual intimacy was designed strictly for the marriage bed.

If we're not married, we're still *sexual* beings. We're simply not sexually *active*. At least that's how it's supposed to work according to God's perfect plan. So an alternative to sexual repression for single people is "sublimation," defined as "the diversion of the energy of a sexual or other biological impulse from its immediate goal to one of a more acceptable social, moral, or aesthetic nature or use."¹² In other words, instead of looking at pornography and masturbating or pursuing a willing partner with your sexual energies, channel that same energy into painting, writing, dancing, singing, or some other healthy pursuit or hobby. Some of the greatest works of art, books, and songs have been birthed simply because their originator was sublimating their sexual passions rather than expressing them.

When I think of sexual repression and expression, I think of a giant red beach ball being forced to the bottom of a pool. The main problem is that it won't stay there unless you're incredibly vigilant to keep something heavy perched directly on top of it. The second that it's not being forced down with ample weight, it's going to come rocketing, not just to the surface, but right out of the water!

Think of some of the most infamous sex scandals of our day involving Christians, and this "beach ball" effect has probably manifested itself in those relationships. When sexual desires were ignored and repressed for a long period of time, the moment vigilance waned these desires

rose to the surface with great force (and painful consequences). They were suddenly and forcefully “expressed” instead of “repressed.”

A more effective approach to properly managing a beach ball would be to simply let it float naturally on top of the water without tension to go in either direction—up or down, unnatural repression or unhealthy expression. Then it won’t have to fight against such a strong gravitational force, nor will it suddenly soar to scary heights when released. It just floats there calmly and serenely, not causing any harm to anyone.

If we can accept the fact that a beach ball is best managed by simply letting it float naturally on top of the water, can’t we also accept the fact that there is a healthy “middle ground” to managing our own sexual desires? A balance where we’re neither expressing nor repressing unholy desires, but accepting the sexual nature of our own humanity, sublimating sexual desires when necessary, and resting in God’s grace to keep us directly in the center of God’s will? That’s certainly the goal.

Endnotes:

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