

Should Christians Get Tattoos?

The intent of this brief article is to provide a biblical basis for a Christian to refuse to be tattooed or acquire additional tattoos. With this intent, it is recognized that some believers were tattooed prior to becoming Christians. These believers are under a different condition. In their former lives they, as well as all Christians, certainly made decisions that were not biblical. Some of those decisions, as well as some decisions following becoming Christians, including being tattooed, have long and even lifetime negative repercussions. While God, in Christ has certainly forgiven the sins that may have been associated with these decisions (Rev. 1:5), He may not, in this life remove all of the consequences. But God is merciful and in addition to forgiving, He also enables Christians to bear up under these conditions as they walk obediently to His Word (1 Cor. 10:13), even at times enabling believers to use the negative consequences of sin as deterrents of future sins in their lives and the lives of others. It is a tremendous blessing from the Lord for the Christian to understand the truth that where sin abounds much more does the grace of God abound (rm. 5:20). Knowing such a tremendous truth by no means warrants continuing in sin that grace may abound (Rm. 6:1-2). Instead, the truth of abounding grace works in the person of God to produce great responsibility so as to live a life of obedient faith in God (Rm. 6:3-23).

Now, regarding Christians getting tattoos; Leviticus 19:28 is a direct command for the people of God not to put marks on their bodies.

“You shall not make any cuts in your body for the dead nor make any tattoo marks on yourselves: I am the Lord.”

Leviticus 19:28 NASU

In the light of this verse it would be very difficult for a Christian to justify getting a tattoo or to say having a tattoo of any kind is biblical.

Some maintain that because Leviticus was written to Old Testament Jews it does not apply to Gentile believers today. However, in the immediate context of this verse (Lev. 19:28) there are other instructions that Christians clearly acknowledge and presently apply, such as cutting one’s body for the dead or that found in the very next verse, ***“Do not profane your daughter by making her a harlot...”*** Not to mention the facts that we are to revere the things of the Lord (v. 30) and ***“not turn to mediums or spirits...”*** (v. 31). We are to honor the elderly (v. 32), love our neighbors (vs. 33-34) and be just in our business dealings (vs. 35-36). All of these, God spoke to the Old Testament Jews in this context and we certainly have no issue with adopting them as a Christian practice. It is true that there were certain ceremonial practices that Jewish people were responsible to maintain under the Old Covenant, but clearly the regulations mentioned above are not limited to the Old Covenant.

Other professing believers in favor of Christians getting tattooed maintain that the pagans in the day of Leviticus were tattooed for the purpose of religious worship and since that time getting tattooed for religious purposes has diminished and as a consequence most tattooing of the present day has more to do with esthetic value than religious worship. Therefore, they say, Christians getting tattoos is okay. However, as pointed out in their commentary on the Old Testament Keil and Delitzsch state that **not** all tattooing by pagans in Old Testament times was

necessarily for the worship of false gods. They indicate that the prohibition of tattooing in Leviticus 19:28 was to teach the Jew to respect God's creation of the body. Furthermore, in the context of Leviticus 19, God's issuance of these regulations for His people was to clearly set them apart from others around them who did not know the Lord.

In a similar sense, New Testament believers are told that their bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit and that their bodies are not their own. Because their bodies belong to the Lord they are to glorify God in their bodies (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). This is not an endorsement for a Christian to get a tattoo with a religious symbol or Bible verse. From bumper stickers with catchy slogans to tattoos, many professing to be Christians, have succumbed to the idea of reducing the representation of their walk with God to the use of various signs, symbols and catchy sayings even permanently or semi permanently marking their bodies in an attempt to display their faith. Sadly, they fail to see that nowhere does Scripture exhort such a practice. On the contrary, Scripture teaches that it is a changed life, a new life lived out based on the Word of God, that is the evidence of being a true believer as indicated in the following verses,

“Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.”

2 Corinthians 5:17 NASU

⁹ But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God's OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; ¹⁰ for you once were NOT A PEOPLE, but now you are THE PEOPLE OF GOD; you had NOT RECEIVED MERCY, but now you have RECEIVED MERCY. ¹¹ Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul. ¹² Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.

1 Peter 2:9-12 NASU

Peter then goes on to address honoring authority (2:13-20), Christ as our example (21-25), wives being submissive to their husbands (3:1-6) and husbands living understandably with their wives and honoring them (7). There can be no improvement or enhancement on these principles and several others addressed by the Word of God.

Believers are very specifically instructed by Scripture to not be like the world around them. Instead of being like the world around them Christians are to be identified by lives transformed by the Holy Spirit Who indwells them. Sadly, the idea has become more and more popular among evangelicals in recent decades that the more we can identify with the world so long as we retain a certain level of morality, the world can better identify with believers providing Christians a better opportunity to witness to the lost. Such thinking is in direct opposition to the instructions God gives in His Word where He instructs Christians to come out from the world and be separate. Christians are to be separate from the world not like it.

¹⁴ Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? ¹⁵ Or what harmony has Christ with

Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? ¹⁶ Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, "I WILL DWELL IN THEM AND WALK AMONG THEM; AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE. ¹⁷ "Therefore, COME OUT FROM THEIR MIDST AND BE SEPARATE," says the Lord. "AND DO NOT TOUCH WHAT IS UNCLEAN; And I will welcome you. ¹⁸ "And I will be a father to you, And you shall be sons and daughters to Me," Says the Lord Almighty.

2 Corinthians 6:14-18 NASU

There are references in the Bible to believers having names written on them indicating they belong to the Lord (Isaiah 44:5; Revelation 14:1). However, these are references to specific situations (The Millennium) and even specific people (144,000 believing Jews). These verses do not justify getting a tattoo as the situations regarding them are unique and under God's specific direction.

Other Scripture references to marking the body speak of the mark of the beast which is obviously not a mark Scripture endorses (Rev. 13:16-17; 14:9,11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4).

Referring to marks on his body which resulted from various times he had been beaten, Paul said, "*I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus*" (Galatians 6:17). The Greek word translated *marks* has a similar idea to that of Leviticus 19:28, which refers to a mark on the skin. However, in Paul's case, the marks were scars and he did not place them on himself. Instead, their presence was done by those opposed to the Gospel and it was these marks that demonstrated Paul's devotion to Christ as opposed to some self-inflicted mark (ink or cut) for the sake of art or identification. If the believer is marked let it be the result of his or her self-sacrificial life for Christ as the apostle Paul.

Given the fact that Scripture specifically forbids getting a tattoo (Lev. 19:28) and exhorts believers to be witnesses of God by obedience to His revealed Word, getting a tattoo, even if it is a tattoo that is not apparently against the Bible, is hardly justified biblically. Since it cannot be justified Scripturally, getting a tattoo cannot be an act of faith and whatever is not of faith is sin (Rm. 14:23).

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