

Tattoos
Should I or Shouldn't I?
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Generally speaking, in the past tattooing has been restricted to male military personnel or people who sought to distance themselves from mainstream society; however, today tattooing has become somewhat normalized for young guys and girls alike. The extreme is no longer tattoos, but tattooing over large sections of the body e.g. face, entire body, back...whereas; smaller tattoos on the arm, back, ankle and the like are viewed as trendy or as fashion statements.

Consequently, what once was not a concern, since it was rarely practiced, has now become a subject of debate in society and Christianity. Some argue adamantly for the freedom to tattoo while others argue against it as pagan and unbiblical. The following is intended to shed some light on the issue while surely not totally resolving the issue.

The verse that is most often cited against tattooing is Leviticus 19:28.¹ "You shall not make any cuts in your body for the dead nor make any tattoo marks on yourselves: I am the LORD." In historical context, it is generally understood that this does not refer to merely tattooing one's body, but to tattooing, which was inherently religious. For example Jamison writes, "...by *tattooing*, imprinting figures of flowers, leaves, stars, and other fanciful devices on various parts of their person. The impression was made sometimes by means of a hot iron, sometimes by ink or paint, as is done by the Arab females of the present day and the different castes of the Hindus. It is probable that a strong propensity to adopt such marks in honor of some idol gave occasion to the prohibition in this verse; and they were wisely forbidden, for they were signs of apostasy; and, when once made, they were insuperable obstacles to a return. (See allusions to the practice, Is 44:5; Rev 13:17; 14:1)."²

Mark Rooker notes, "These activities were practiced by pagans especially during times of mourning for the dead. The Israelites were not to emulate pagan practices in this regard since they maintained sacredness for life and for the human body."³ Therefore, it seems that strictly speaking this was not prohibiting modishness, or an attempted voguish identity statement, but rather it clearly related "to pagan practices concerning the dead."⁴

Both the Old and New Testaments mention several artificially inflicted signs on the body, which were made in the form of an incision, tattoo, brand, or stamp. For example, in the Old Testament, there is the mark of Cain (Gen. 4:15), which was given for protection by making the person of Cain inviolable. 1 Kings 20:41 mentions the mark of the prophet, which was possibly an incision on the forehead. Of course circumcision (Gen. 17:14; 1 Cor. 7:18), was the most prominent mark among the Jews and served to identify the Jew as belonging to God (cf. Isa. 44:5; 49:16). Slaves who did not wish to leave their masters had their earlobe pierced by an awl (Exod. 21:6; Deut. 15:17).

In the New Testament, Paul said, referring to scars from beatings (Acts 14:19; 2 Cor. 11:23-27), he bore the marks of Jesus (Gal. 6:17); The 'mark of the beast' (Rev. 13:16-18; 14:9-11) is the number 666, identifying one with the antichrist and required for commerce when he seeks to rule the world and therefore marked for God's judgment (Rev. 16:2). In contrast, Christians are said to be marked with God's name upon their forehead (Rev. 3:12; 7:3; 14:1; 22:4; cf. Ezek. 9:4).⁵ This is in contrast to those who have the mark of the Beast upon them; although we do not know the exact form the mark of the beast or God will be, the important thing to notice here is that the use or references to marking—tattooing—generally carried the idea of being a religious identification.

Consequently, God's people were not to take on practices and or appearances that represent pagan practices of worship or devotion whether this related to diet, self-mutilation, marking the body, or other pagan and occult practices. However, that does not mean that Christians cannot eat meat that is used in pagan practices nor do other things that parallel pagan worship without the religious meaning. Klein says concerning this, "But if Christians partake of goat's meat and milk or get tattooed for some nonreligious reason, they do not transgress God's commands."⁶

Now, concerning the applicability of Old Testament injunctions and laws; first, the New Testament or New Covenant is complete in and of itself (2 Cor. 3:4-11). Therefore, we do not live under the Old Covenant because Christ fulfilled the demands of the law (Mt. 5:17) and the New Covenant replaced the Old Covenant. This then raises the question of how people under the New Testament are to relate to the teaching of the Old Testament.

First, several laws are directly applicable; Jesus explicitly reiterated the commands to love the Lord wholeheartedly and to love one's neighbor (Mt 5:21-48; 22:40; cf. Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18). Similarly, Paul invoked the Old Testament legal requirement of two or three witnesses to establish guilt in the case of accusations against Christian leaders (1 Tim 5:19; cf. Deut 17:6; 19:15; 2 Cor 13:1). Another instance would be things based directly on the nature of God like His prohibition against murder which preceded the Law of Moses, was prescribed in the Law of Moses and reiterated in the New Testament (Gen. 9:6; Ex. 20:13; 1 Pet. 4:15). In summary, any laws that the New Testament applies to Christians is valid for today as well as those based on the nature of God, which thereby transcend the time of the Mosaic Law.

Second, some laws actually become stricter; for example, in the case of marriage and divorce, it was permitted under the Old Testament (Exod 20:14; Deut 5:18; 24:1-4)⁷. In the New Testament, divorce except for adultery (Mt 19:3-12; Mk 10:2-12; Lk 16:18) and desertion (1 Cor 7:15-16) is not allowed and is actually adultery (Mt. 5:32).

Third, some laws have no direct applicability in the New Testament since they were shadows of the reality of Christ and His work. This would include the sacrificial system (Heb 10:1-10), food laws (Mk 7:19; cf. Acts 10:9-16), or regulations concerning circumcision (Gal 5:2-6).

Another insight that might aid in understanding the relevance of Old Testament laws to the believer is that civil or religious laws are no longer binding unless repeated e.g. building houses with flat roofs, Sabbath regulations, etc. However, moral laws, which are based on the nature of God, are eternal e.g. prohibitions not to murder, steal, lie or command to worship God only....

Even laws and events covered in the Old Testament that are not directly applicable today can carry great lessons and warnings and or teach timeless truths (1 Cor. 10:6). William Klein notes "Thus, the OTsacrificial system graphically reminds Christians that God takes sin seriously, requires a severe penalty, yet graciously offers forgiveness. Similarly, the clean animals in OT food laws probably symbolized Israel as the chosen people, in contrast to her ritually "unclean" pagan neighbors. Hence, eating reminded Israelites (and, by implication, Christians) of their gracious election by God and their resulting duty to pursue God-like holiness. Even the cultic law concerning the sabbatical fallow year (Lev 25; Deut 15) proves instructive; underscoring that compassionate humanitarian service ultimately represents service for God."⁸

A fortiori, the New Testament gives new realities and truths which should weigh heavy in every Christian's decision making where there is no explicit prescription. One of the most compelling considerations for the Christian must be the glorious truth that our body is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1Cor. 6:19). Taken seriously, every thing that a Christian does with or to her body is a question of sacred importance. The Christian should ask, is this act enhancing the reality that my body is God's sacred temple, or is it just another act that emanates from a culture set on the total desacralization of everything?

It seems that Christians most often get tattoos not when they are seeking to follow God closely, but rather in their seasons of confusion, estrangement, immaturity or sin. Although tattooing may not be associated with pagan rituals in our culture, one surely needs to ask, what is it associated with? Is that association something that honors God? In addition, the permanence of tattoos, at the very least, beckons Christians beware. It is not like cutting, lengthening, or coloring one's hair orange, which can be easily changed once that phase of life is over. Many military personnel have expressed to me that they wished they didn't have their tattoos now.

Another consideration is the witness that tattoos communicate. This involves not only the issue of tattooing per se, but also the image and visibility of the tattoo as well as its message. While one may wear his tattoo proudly today, in ten years it may prove to be an embarrassment or even a barrier to certain opportunities. Maturity reminds one that today's trend is tomorrow's trash. In this case, the trash would still be attached to the body, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

If a person is working with young people today, tattooing may prove beneficial, but what if God has plans for you in the future where that same tattoo would be a hindrance? Today's decision could potentiate missing God's best tomorrow. Again, facial hair, clothing and hair styles can be changed, but tattoos are for life. I realize they can be removed, but it is a painful process and most that get them, have them for life whether

they like it or not. Most of us that have served God for a number of years have changed the way we dress, talk, or relate to others so that we can honor God in the situations that He chooses to place us in; giving up the ability to choose to change is significant, and therefore should not be entered into thoughtlessly.

Does the Bible prohibit tattoos for non-religious reasons? I think not. Is it wise for a Christian to permanently mark his body, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit and witness vehicle for Christ? I think not.

¹ Leviticus 21:5 and Deuteronomy 14:1-2 are referred to.

²Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, A. R. Fausset et al., *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*, On spine: Critical and explanatory commentary., Le 19:28 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

³Mark F. Rooker, vol. 3A, *Leviticus*, electronic ed., Logos Library System; The New American Commentary, 262 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001, c2000).

⁴Dallas Theological Seminary, *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 155*, 155:146 (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1998; 2002).

⁵ This is covered by Paul J. Achtemeier, Publishers Harper & Row and Society of Biblical Literature, *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, Includes index., 1st ed., 605 (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985).

⁶William W. Klein, Craig Blomberg, Robert L. Hubbard and Kermit Allen Ecklebarger, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 348 (Dallas, Tex.: Word Pub., 1993).

⁷ Some believe this was limited to adultery or some moral perversion while others understood it very loosely.

⁸William W. Klein, Craig Blomberg, Robert L. Hubbard and Kermit Allen Ecklebarger, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 348 (Dallas, Tex.: Word Pub., 1993).