

Tattoos and the Christian

The dictionary defines a tattoo as “A permanent mark or design made on the skin by a process of pricking and ingraining an indelible pigment or by raising scars.”¹

The topic of tattoos is quite relevant in our day, not only because of the rapidly growing prevalence of tattoos in our culture (especially starting with the millennial generation) but also due to the growing prevalence of tattoos with Christian imagery (e.g., crosses, Bible verses, and images of Biblical figures). Every Christian and every young person who has yet to decide whether to get a tattoo should ask himself, “Are these tattoos pleasing to God?” What does the Bible have to teach me on this matter?

What does the Bible teach about tattoos? There is likely only one explicit reference to tattoos, as such, in Scripture—Leviticus 19:28. Some people claim that this means Scripture is indifferent to the practice. Quite to the contrary, however, there are many Biblical teachings and principles that speak out against such a practice. By carefully considering Old and New Testament teachings applicable to this subject, the diligent student of Scripture can form a Biblically-informed position. Furthermore, by rightly understanding what the Bible has to say on this subject, the faithful Christian can live a life free from regret as he lives in accordance with Scriptural principles.

In this paper, we will present ten reasons why Christians should not get a tattoo and why tattooing is incompatible with the Christian religion, as revealed in Holy Scripture.

Before we examine these ten points, let me say a word to those who have already chosen to get tattoos. With God there is forgiveness; it is never too late to make right choices and tell others the truth about this issue, just as much as with any other issue. The apostle Paul told the Athenians, “Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). All Christians are called to forsake what is wrong and to do what is right. We must resolve to follow Jesus and not turn back.

2 Corinthians 5:17: “Therefore, if anyone *is* in Christ, *he is* a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.”

Now, let us examine ten reasons why Christians should not get tattoos:

#1. The LORD of Holy Scripture explicitly prohibits His children from getting tattoos.

King James translation--Leviticus 19:28 “Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you: I *am* the LORD.”

New Kings James Version--Leviticus 19:28 “You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor tattoo any marks on you: I *am* the LORD.”

¹Excerpted from *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition* (1992), Houghton Mifflin Company.

New International Version--Leviticus 19:28 "Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the LORD."

It is true that the old covenant ceremonial law was fulfilled in Christ and therefore the ceremonial and civil laws found in Leviticus are no longer binding on Christians. However, the moral law is still binding on Christians, which includes a prohibition on paganism, witchcraft, and sorcery, as well as images and idolatry (the first three commandments). The sixth commandment entails doing no harm to the human body.

It is common to see tattoos with names or dates of deceased friends or relatives. Clearly, this is a similar practice to that prohibited in Leviticus 19:28.

The principle of Leviticus 19:28 is consistent with New Testament teachings that we will consider below. There is no reason to believe that God would want a Christian to mutilate their body or put tattoo mark on their skin for any reason; there is no reason to believe that such a practice would please God in any way. On the contrary, there are reasons to believe that God prohibits such practices.

In early Greek and Roman times, tattooing was associated with barbarians. The Greeks learned from the Persians how to use tattoos to mark slaves and criminals so as to identify them if they tried to escape. The Romans adopted this practice from the Greeks. Pre-Christian Celtic, Germanic, and other central and northern European tribes were often heavily tattooed according to historical records. In the twentieth century, tattoos were still associated with the cultures of pagan tribes, Indian Hindus, or a subculture that includes piercings and mind-altering drug use, such as among various tribes in Asia or South America. Tattooing in the United States was limited to a few sub-cultures, such as some motorcyclists, some military personnel, and among some Native American tribes.

With the rise of criminal gangs in America's cities in the 1980s and 1990s and culminating with the most ruthless MS-13 gang, the prevalence of tattoos among gangs and criminals expanded greatly. By the 2000s, tattoos became much more mainstream in American culture, being publicly displayed by Hollywood and in pop-culture and, especially, among the millennial generation. The practice of entire body tattooing (including the neck, face, hands, etc.) also became increasingly common, although still limited to a small percentage of the population.

Throughout history, tattoos were clearly associated with paganism and history shows that they were shunned by Christianity and Western culture.

#2. Tattoos are harmful to a person's body, skin, and health.

Tattoos are against nature. While some children are born with birth marks, no child is born with a tattoo. Animals, inferior to human beings, do not have tattoos.

Human beings did not evolve from lower life forms. God created mankind to be superior to all other created beings:

Moses wrote, "Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over

all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in His *own* image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." (Gen 1:26-27)

Human beings were created in the likeness and image of God.

The coloring, dyes, pigments, and needles involved with tattoos, or the burning associated with other bodily markings and mutilations are in no way beneficial to human health. Quite to the contrary, they are damaging to the skin and bloodstream. Tattooing can cause allergic reactions and infections. If proper health and sanitary conditions are not met, a tattoo may lead to infection, the spread of Hepatitis B and C, and even HIV. The pigments and dyes may contribute to the development of various skin cancers and potentially other cancers.

#3. Tattoos are irreversible.

By definition, a tattoo alters the skin of a human being *permanently*. Many people have regretted getting tattoos later in life for various reasons. Yet, removing a tattoo is not painless, easy, or inexpensive, and the human skin can never be restored to its original, virgin state and appearance. It would be foolish knowingly to endure the pain, cost, and time involved with getting a tattoo if you do not intend to keep it for life. However, if you do have a tattoo, it is appropriate to explore various options for having it removed in a safe manner, if possible.

#4. Tattoos deface the temple of the Holy Spirit.

1 Corinthians 6:15a: "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?"

1 Corinthians 6:19: "Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit *who is* in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's."

Tattoos deface the temple of the Holy Spirit. Tattoos are disfiguring. They permanently alter the appearance of a man or woman, boy or girl. If Christ wanted your body to look a different way, He would have made you that way.

Since our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit, they must be kept clean, pure, and holy. Jesus Christ did not tattoo images of angels, Bible verses, or other things on His body. Neither did His disciples. The apostles of Christ never encouraged anyone to get a tattoo.

In fact, historically, tattoos or various forms of branding were used on slaves, prisoners, and animals to mark them as belonging to a master or as a visible symbol of servitude. (Interestingly, today many people have tattoos with images of chains, letters, and numbers, which seem to resemble the tattoos branded on slaves and prisoners in ancient times.) It is not appropriate to presume that God would be pleased by a Christian marking himself with numbers, words, or images—even if they have a "Christian" appearance or reference. (Presumptuous sins are those done with "good intentions" but which violate God's law, Biblical teachings, or Biblical principles.)

Jesus said, “Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed” (John 8:36). If you are free, why would you want to assume the appearance of a prisoner or a slave?

#5. God is the Master Artist; we are His perfect masterpiece.

As quoted earlier from Genesis, we are made in the likeness and image of God. God made every human being beautiful in His sight. He is the Creator; we are His creation and His perfect masterpiece.

God has made human beings with great diversity. While there is unity among humanity (all human beings are similar in most anatomical ways; males share many anatomical similarities; females share many anatomical similarities), there is also considerable diversity.

God created mankind with various hair colors (black, brown, red, blond), in various shades, and with various textures (wavy, straight, curly).

God created mankind with various skin colors, with differing shades of black, brown, and white (not to mention freckles, dimples, wrinkles, birthmarks, fingerprints, etc.).

Human beings have a diversity of eye colors (various shades of brown, blue, green, and hazel).

Human beings are quite diverse in height, weight, and other attributes (sizes and shapes of teeth, hands, feet, faces, etc.).

We read that at Creation, “God saw everything that He had made, and indeed *it was very good*. So the evening and the morning were the sixth day” (Genesis 1:31, emphasis added).

God is the Master Artist. He created the universe, this world, and all that is in it. Look at the various cloud formations in the sky, sunrise, sunset, and the stars at night. Look at the diverse landscapes across the planet. Look at the ocean and its waves. Look at the diversity of trees, plants, fish, land animals, fruits, vegetables, birds, and flowers.

God is not merely the Master Artist, but He is also the Creator. We are His creation, His creatures. We are His perfect masterpiece.

To dye your hair pink, green, purple, or blue is to reject the natural colors God gave to man. Even more rebellious it would be to be discontented and unsatisfied with the body God gave you. A tattoo is a replacement for the beautiful body and skin the Lord of heaven bestowed on you; it disfigures the Master’s masterpiece.

Yes, an older person whose hair has turned grey might choose to dye his or her hair brown or blond. And, yes, most people may style their hair a certain way. But their hair is not permanently altered. A tattoo is far different than merely a natural hair color or style. It is a permanent alteration, a permanent replacement for the skin and bodily appearance that God, the Master Artist, created.

#6. Images and idolatry are prohibited.

Elsewhere we have discussed the Bible's prohibition on images and idolatry. Many tattoos include images of skulls, dragons, angels, goddesses, gods, religious objects, famous people, or athletic teams. If a man attached such an image to his body, permanently, this would seem to turn his body into a public billboard for that image, which is surely a form of idolatry. Such images and idolatry clearly distort and pollute God's holy temple, which the Christian is.

#7. Pride is prohibited.

Proverbs 16:18: "**Pride** goes before destruction, And a haughty spirit before a fall" (emphasis added)

Ezekiel 16:49-50: ""Look, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: She and her daughter had **pride**, fullness of food, and abundance of idleness; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. And they were **haughty** and committed abomination before Me; therefore I took them away as I saw *fit*." (emphasis added)

To tattoo words, phrases, sentences, or images onto your body is to draw attention to yourself and to invite others to look, stare at, and even worship your body. To draw attention to yourself engenders pride and haughtiness. Humility requires that Christians be humble and discreet (Titus 2:5).

1 Timothy 2:9-10 says, "in like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing, but, which is proper for women professing godliness, with good works."

#8. Man looks at the outside; God looks at the heart.

1 Samuel 16:7: "But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have refused him. For *the Lord does not see as man sees*; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.""

Luke 16:15: "And He [Jesus] said to them [the Pharisees], "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God."

Christians are called to be good stewards of the money and resources He gives them. To spend money on tattoos is unnecessary; it is focusing on changing the external, not the internal. And in what way is this change good?

Michelangelo and Claude Monet are renowned for their artistic abilities. Who would have remembered them if they had merely tattooed their bodies with "body art"?

#9. The worldly man expresses himself through his body; the Christian man lives by the Spirit.

Philippians 4:8: "Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things *are* noble, whatever things *are* just, whatever things *are* pure, whatever things *are* lovely, whatever things *are* of good report, if *there is* any virtue and if *there is* anything praiseworthy -- meditate on these things."

God does not tell His children to tattoo on their bodies what is true, noble, just, pure, lovely, good, virtuous, and praiseworthy. On the contrary, He says to meditate on these things. Christianity is a religion of the mind, intellect, and heart.

Worldly man, pagan man, is carnal and focused on the carnal appetites, the carnal desires.

Romans 8:5-11: "5 For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those *who live* according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.

6 For to be carnally minded *is* death, but to be spiritually minded *is* life and peace.

7 Because the carnal mind *is* enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be.

8 So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

9 But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.

10 And if Christ *is* in you, the body *is* dead because of sin, but the Spirit *is* life because of righteousness.

11 But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you."

The pagan is consumed with the vicious appetites of the flesh—food (gluttony), alcohol and drugs (drunkenness and sorcery), and sexual immorality.

The Christian is called to meditate on that which is virtuous, to renew his *mind* daily, meditating on the law of the Lord day and night (Rom. 12:1-2; Psalm 1).

Many false teachers in our day boast that we are "no longer under law but under grace," distorting the apostle Paul's words from Romans 6:14. This statement is true in one sense—we are justified by grace alone; we are saved by grace, apart from the works of the law. However, we actually are under God's moral law more than ever before. Now, under the clearer light of the new covenant, as revealed to us in the New Testament, we are even more accountable to God to obey God's commandments and His law.

Paul said in Romans 6:13-18: "And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.

14 For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.

15 What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not!"

16 Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin *leading* to death, or of obedience *leading* to righteousness? 17 But God be thanked that *though* you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. 18 And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness."

Paul is hardly justifying tattooing, bodily mutilation, or any other such practice. Elsewhere, Paul warned, "beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation!" (Phil. 3:2). Paul warned against those who sought to bind the consciences of Christians with manmade requirements or adherence to old covenant rituals such as circumcision (which had been replaced by water baptism).

Grace is no license to sin (Rom. 6:15). Quite to the contrary, grace means that we are set free from manmade doctrines and requirements (Matt. 15:9; Mark 7:7; Col. 2:22). We are justified by grace alone, and, yet, we are set free to serve God, to obey God in true righteousness and holiness. We are slaves of Christ and slaves of righteousness.

Paul instructed the Ephesians in Ephesians 5:8-19:

"For you were once darkness, but now *you are* light in the Lord. Walk as children of light [Christians are not to live in ignorance, darkness, magic, or a Gothic, skull and crossbones, Medievalist subculture.]

9 (for the fruit of the Spirit *is* in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), 10 finding out what is acceptable to the Lord.

11 And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose *them*.
12 For it is shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret.

[Christians are strangers and pilgrims on the earth, set apart from the pagan world and its vices.]

13 But all things that are exposed are made manifest by the light, for whatever makes manifest is light. 14 Therefore He says: "Awake, you who sleep, Arise from the dead, And Christ will give you light."

15 See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, 16 redeeming the time, because the days are evil.

[How would getting a tattoo be an appropriate way of "redeeming the time," the short time that we have in this life?]

17 Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord *is*.

[God reveals His will to us in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament alone; they are the all-sufficient, revealed will of God.]

18 And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit,

[Unbelievers find refuge in drunkenness with alcohol and drugs; Christians find happiness in Christ and His Spirit, as they draw close to Him through His Word.]

19 speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord,

[By singing the psalms, meditating on Scripture, and worshipping the one, true God, Christians find true meaning and delight.]

#10. Christians are to be holy, set apart from the world, flesh, and devil, and set apart to God.

The world loves tattoos. Many Hollywood stars, athletes, and musicians love tattoos. People from most religious traditions love tattoos. Many people who hate God love tattoos. Why? God says, "All those who hate me [God or wisdom incarnate] love death" (Proverbs 8:36). What are some of the most common tattoos? Skulls, images of death or violence, drugs, dragons, and references to death.

God calls His children to be holy, to be set apart from the world and its worldly ways, from the flesh (and its carnal, manmade inventions), and from the devil and his wicked ways. Christians are not to be associated with the darkness of this world and its ungodly subcultures.

God is the Master Artist. The tattoo artist acts in the place of God, as he creates his own masterpiece through his own carnal, manmade imaginations. This is not compatible with Christian art. The Christian artist thinks God's thoughts after Him. He puts on a canvas or photographs the beauty of God's Creation. The tattoo artist seeks to alter God's creation, the human body. Human skin is not to be altered like a piece of photographic paper, a wall, or an inanimate canvas.

God created us—body, soul, and spirit. God created our bodies and our skin. We should not alter His masterpiece. We are to be set apart to God, set apart in our body, mind, and soul.

Romans 12:1-2: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is* your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."

2 Corinthians 5:9: "Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him."