

SHOULD CHRISTIANS GET TATTOOS?

By Steve Cardno

In recent years tattoos have become a fashion item, and some Christians claim having a tattoo is another way we can identify with people we are trying to win for Christ. However, Christians need to take their guidance from God's word, not the world, so let's start with the Scriptures.

Created in the Image of God

God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. Genesis 1:27 (ESV)

This verse proclaims our origins as well as our spiritual and physical inheritance. A scriptural principle is neither to add to nor take away from what God has done. God made our bodies perfect and just as He intended us to be. Even when God became the man Jesus, I don't believe that He had any tattoos. And before any critics claim that neither were we born with hair-styles or jewellery, none of these things actually scar or permanently deface what God gave, in the same way as a tattoo.

It is undeniable in our 21st century western culture that tattoos have become associated with a sort of rebelliousness or defiance of social and moral norms.

Why is it that outlaw bikie gangs and drug users almost always sport tattoos? And why do tattoo parlours often have names such as 'Sin City'? Have tattoos historically been a source of glory to God? Or man?

For many today tattoos seem to have become a 'must-have' fashion accessory. Tattoo parlours have prospered as popular culture and the media have led impressionable minds to follow the latest peer-pressure driven trend. It seems almost every secular music celebrity and popular culture hero wears tattoos. Young people especially have embraced this fad and even many Christian youth are making every excuse possible to justify why it's ok to get their own tattoos. Even sometimes going to the extent of having Bible verses or some other apparently 'Christian' symbolism portrayed in a less than obvious form.

Sadly, many Pastor's children and Christian 'celebrities' (such as footballers) proudly wear tattoos. Young people, who look up to these stars for leadership, are encouraged to believe that it must be ok if their heroes are doing it. Some church youth leaders, themselves driven by 'every wind of doctrine' and terrified of seeming disconnected with popular culture, also desperately try to appear 'cool' by telling those in their care that there's no problem getting tattoos and being a Christian.

The message that's increasingly coming through from modern churches to young Christians is that you can be a Christian and also be just like the world. Some church leaders expect that impressionable young people - who are already eager to not appear too different than their worldly friends - can on the one hand be told that it's ok to surrender to worldly patterns of behaviour, such as getting tattoos, and then expect that they will have no problem standing against the world when it comes to more socially-costly decisions.

Why Get a Tattoo?

But why the need to get a tattoo at all? Regardless of what is pictured.

Some life-issues are what we can call *wisdom* issues – where the principles and spirit of God's Word partners with His direct commands to give us a clear picture of His will for our lives – even though there may not be a direct Biblical reference to the issue in consideration. For example, the Bible may not specifically command against smoking. However, our understanding of its health risks *and* knowing that God expects us to care for our bodies as the dwelling place of His Holy Spirit should lead us to conclude that smoking is not wise. However, the issue of tattoos is even more obvious since it has both a *clear command against them by God Himself* - and the principles of His Word also leave us in no uncertain position as to God's attitude towards them.

Leviticus 19:28 states '*Do not cut your bodies for the dead, and do not mark your skin with tattoos. I am the LORD.*' (NLT) This is a clear command directly from God against tattoos to His people Israel as they began to form their new nation. In the New Testament we are told in 1 Cor 6:19 '*Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own...!*' (NIV) Here is where wisdom based on God's Word informs us how to treat our body on any issue - be it tattoos, or cremation, etc.

Very often, in an effort to appear unconcerned about worldly fashions, Christian youth protest that it's *not* peer pressure or worldly influence that motivates them to want a tattoo but simply their own personal preference. One might ask that if getting a tattoo was viewed as so unpopular by the world and their friends - in the same way as being labelled, say, a racist - would their 'personal desire' be still so strong as to get one? Of course the answer is obviously 'no', because the reality is that getting tattoos is primarily to follow what others are doing and to feel accepted by the world.

Pastors, church leaders, and others as Christian role-models need to be encouraging young people how to stand strong against all the fads of worldly popularity which are ultimately harmful. They need to teach youth to be individuals of inner strength, conviction and purpose rather than encouraging a weak 'don't-appear-too-different' type mentality. Are we teaching youth to be 'salt and light' and to possess the inner strength to stand up for God's Word when it might hurt? If being popular and accepted is reinforced as amongst the highest of priorities when it's a relatively *easy* thing to go against a trend, then how will these same youth fare when their faith is *heavily* tested?

Trying to justify their decision to do whatever they want, some Christians claim that the Leviticus 19:28 commandment is not relevant for today and was applicable only in Old Testament times. These were commands only to the Jews and their priestly leaders, they claim. Strangely, these same Christians do not claim this is also the case with the command directly following this scripture which forbids fathers from selling their daughters into prostitution!

Consider what Jesus meant when He said that we cannot enter the Kingdom of God unless our righteousness *exceeded* that of the Jews. Our modern times are not very different from a certain time in old Israel's history when the scripture states in Judges 21:25 '*... every man did that which was right in his own eyes.*' (KJV) Our behaviour should not be a matter of our own changing opinions or fashion trends, but rather obedience to the Word of our loving Creator.

Who Do We Please?

For anyone sincerely seeking to please God, we suggest that it is *always* best to err on the side of safety. Everywhere in scripture we are admonished to demonstrate a preferential love for God and to place Him first. If there is any doubt or debate about the acceptability to God of our choices then should we not err on the side of what we know for sure pleases Him? So the real question is how high is pleasing God on our list of priorities? To refrain from getting a tattoo if there's even a *slight* chance it might offend God is preferable to being unsure and risking our best relationship with Him. If we think so little of God that our acceptance of social trends *outweighs* our regard for His Word then what sort of relationship do we have with God? Scripture makes clear to us that God's blessing and our usefulness to Him very much depend on how obedient we are to Him. Luke 16:10 teaches us God's attitude towards our behavior, "*He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much.*" (NASB)

Getting a tattoo will not threaten our salvation, nor will it stop a person becoming saved who already has them. However, as a Christian, any disobedience or attitude of indifference will bring consequences - perhaps in this world but certainly spiritually. As an example of possible consequences in the world, many employers will not give a job to someone with a tattoo. I recall a recent conversation where a young lady was given the opportunity to realize her dream job as a flight attendant with a top airline. Everything about her appearance, qualifications and experience was ideal and her successful course through interviews left her feeling assured the job was hers – until the last interviewer discovered she had a small tattoo near her ankle. Unfortunately, she missed out on the job only because of this one little insignificant mark. The airline's policy was 'no tattoos'. She was devastated. This had been her one career ambition. Suddenly gone was the self-assuredness and defiance she displayed towards those who advised her against getting the tattoo. Sadly, over such a trivial matter, she missed out on a special blessing God had for her life because of her insistence to have her own way.

And since we don't know everything, we might never know the missed blessings God had planned for us if we choose to err on the side of what *we* want instead of what *He* wants.

Our skin was not meant to be an artist's canvas for artificial artwork. Instead, God the Creator made us as He intended for us to be - natural. As the temple for God's Holy Spirit, our bodies were not meant to be continually abused with things such as man-made junk food or drugs or subjected to unhealthy or unhygienic practices. Tattoos require the injection of unnatural dyes and inks into our skin - and many have experienced the pain of infection after such procedures. To deliberately pollute one's body with such substances does not enhance or add to one's health and hardly respects the body as God's temple - regardless of whether or not one experiences negative side-effects.

Many of us living in cities feel disappointed when we see nicely painted buildings and clean surfaces, vandalised with graffiti. There are those who wish to deface or fill up any clean surface with junk. Our natural bodies are much like this. Why deface and mark the clean surface that God has given as a gift to you? Our skin is a very important organ and obtaining a tattoo does not enhance its health and wellbeing.

Tattooists warn that one should consider a tattoo as permanent – so in this regard they are not really the type of action that one can reverse should it be later decided to be a bad idea. There will be scarring and skin damage if one takes this painful course of removal. Even then it is not completely removed. Also, to get a tattoo is an unnecessary and deliberate waste of the money God has given you - and an even greater financial waste to then later have it removed. It's better not to behave foolishly in the first place. Tattoos are a reflection of man's spirit, not God's.

We need also to consider that as a Christian we are not to be a stumbling block to others. We are to consider others' sensitivities *above* our own feelings. We might feel that we do not have to limit our actions and freedom because of someone else's unease over such things as tattoos. However, God wants us to voluntarily put aside our personal rights for the sake of others' wellbeing and growth. Similarly, wearing a tattoo might be a stumbling block to someone else who, like many, might associate them with those who are rebellious. Scripture teaches in 1 Thess 5:22 that we ought to '*... abstain from all appearance of evil.*' (KJV) If the tendency by some in society is to view tattoos as primarily associated with rough or rebellious people, then why potentially harm your witness for Christ to a certain group of people if you don't need to?

Our attitude in everything should be to first consider what God might think (on any issue) and then how our choices and actions might affect our witness to others. When our personal justification is something like '*It's my body and I can do whatever I want with it*' or '*It makes me feel good*' then we demonstrate that we regard ourselves as master of our lives, when for the Christian it is God who should be Lord of our life.

The reasons to *avoid* getting a tattoo far outweigh the spiritual and health risks of *getting* one.

Ultimately, this question is one of God's authority.

Man has always sought to do whatever he wants and then make it seem that God's Word supports his choices. Tattoos are today nothing more than a primarily western fashion trend marketed to impressionable people with excess money to spend. Rarely will one see those in third-world poverty feeling the need to get a tattoo.

It is foolishness to (even potentially) impair one's relationship with God over something as trivial as fashion, which comes and goes. Is being socially-accepted or fashionable *so important* that it is worth perhaps offending God? In recent times it became a fashionable trend to obtain multiple body-piercings. Not content with perhaps a simple ear-piercing, it became even more fashionable amongst youth to pierce one's nose, eyebrows, belly, lips, or even the tongue. Infections were common and enormous amounts of money wasted - especially by young people - seeking to fit into what the world promoted as popular. Today, this fad has largely passed and the visible reminders of that fashion are for many becoming less obvious. However, tattoos cannot be easily unclipped or taken out - and damage your skin till the end of your life.

People will usually make almost any effort to please the one they love. Should it be any different with us towards God? In fact, should we not be even *more* focused on what is pleasing or otherwise to Him?

Why endure the tears and heartache or problems later on for a foolish decision now? Why risk the withdrawal of God's best in some area of your life just for the sake of a passing worldly fashion trend?

Ask yourself, why would the urge to get a tattoo be so strong that you would feel the need to override every argument or piece of wise advice against it? Why is it so important to you? It would be great to see many Christians put as much time and energy into living out God's Word as they do in finding reasons why it's ok to passionately pursue the latest fashion trends.

Let us not be stubborn or hard-hearted people but soft-hearted towards God and willing to quickly err on the side of obedience and pleasing Him - rather than passionately striving to find justifications to do whatever we want. As Christians we ought to resist finding our sense of fulfilment in what the world says is desirable. Rather, we can experience complete joy by obeying God and eagerly seeking after those things that we can be sure are pleasing to Him. Live for Him in such a way as to *maximise* your usefulness to Him both now and in the future.

Jesus Christ didn't hesitate to suffer the loss of everything – even His very life - for our sakes. Is it really such a big thing to obey God and refrain from getting a tattoo for His sake?

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