

Tattoos

January 7, 2018

In a recent adult Bible class, there was a great deal of discussion about tattoos ... whether or not they are sinful and if those that have them should cover them in the assembly. I have included an article which expresses some good thoughts in regard to the verse most often cited regarding this topic. In addition to the thoughts expressed in it, I would add the following thoughts of my own.

Without doubt, good arguments could be made against a Christian getting tattoos. Factors like influence, modesty, and stewardship come to mind (for more about this see *The Truth About Moral Issues: Tattoos and Piercings* by Don Blackwell). For these reasons, I would always discourage a Christian from getting these permanent pieces of art on their bodies, which in most cases I believe to be very unwise.

However, it would be an oversight not to realize that what was once considered a practice associated with sailors, gang members and ex-convicts, is now part of mainstream culture. Please understand, I am not suggesting that the church should follow the trends of culture (Christ trumps culture) but what is considered culturally acceptable is of some importance to Christian practice. This is seen in 1 Corinthians 11:5, 6, 16. In this passage Paul speaks of the practice of wearing head coverings in worship. Paul commanded the Corinthian women to cover their heads because, in their present culture, not doing so was a sign of rejecting their husband's authority. However, in verse 16 he noted that this was not meant to be considered as part of church doctrine. The point was to make every effort to disassociate oneself from what is seen as immoral, unethical or unaccepted behavior.

Two points can be made from this. First, we should like manner, seek to disassociate ourselves from any ill practices: including but not limited to tattoos, piercings, etc. – if they carry such connotations. Second, since there came a time when wearing head coverings no longer carried such a connotation and Christians no longer needed to wear them, there may also come a time when culture removes the stigma of tattoos.

The question we might ask is, “has culture’s acceptance of tattoos reached the point where they no longer have connotations of immorality or ill behavior?” The answer might differ from one person to another. Therefore, let each make up his own mind before God (Rom. 14:22, 23). That is, unless a specific situation requires for a different response (such as a lude, racist, or profane tattoo, etc.).

It was a great class and I am thankful for the comments. ~Bruce

Does the Old Testament Condemn Tattoos?

Wayne Jackson

Someone submitted the following question: “**So many young people are getting tattoos these days. In Leviticus 19:28, the Bible says: ‘Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you; I am the Lord.’ Would not this passage condemn having a tattoo?**”

One must be very careful about trying to use Old Testament passages as proof-texts for what one may or may not practice in the Christian age. It is a fundamental aspect of Bible doctrine that the Mosaic system was abrogated by the death of Christ (Eph. 2:14ff; Col. 2:14ff). The law of Moses, therefore, is not the Christian's standard by which to measure conduct.

The following observations are in order:

(1) This same chapter (Leviticus 19) also provides instruction for appropriate conduct in conjunction with offering animal sacrifices. It requires leaving certain portions of one's crops unharvested (in the interest of the poor). The sowing of two types of seed in the same field is prohibited. The Hebrews were not to wear a garment with two different fabrics combined (e.g., wool and linen). When new fruit trees were planted, none of the fruit was to be eaten for the first three years. There are restrictions about how the man's hair was to be cut, and the manner in which his beard might not be trimmed. Keeping the Sabbath is enjoined, etc.

Why should we focus on *one* of these injunctions to the exclusion of the others?

(2) The immediate context of Leviticus 19:27-28 suggests that Moses was attempting to inoculate Israel against the emulation of certain heathen practices related to idolatry.

For example, the prophet forbids "cutting the flesh" in the passage under consideration; yet no one contends that medical surgery is being condemned. Rather, "cuttings" in the flesh "for the dead" are in view (cf. also 1 Kgs. 18:28). This was an idolatrous practice.

Too, ancient archaeological evidence indicates that some of the Canaanites would tattoo themselves with the names or symbols of their favorite "gods." This appears to be what the prophet is condemning, not the modern custom of "esthetic" tattooing – regardless of how distasteful such a practice may be to many people.

(3) Since the New Testament does not address the issue of tattooing specifically, one must be guided by principle. Any practice that is vulgar, gaudy, or a distraction to one's Christian influence should be avoided. But, to some extent, this is a matter of taste and judgment.

No one can presume to prescribe conduct for everyone else in matters of this nature. Is it appropriate for women to wear make-up? How about permanent eye-liner? May men and women adorn themselves with jewelry? May they pierce their ears?

Christians must attempt to employ sound judgment in such matters, and give no occasion to the adversary for reviling (1 Tim. 5:14). Moreover, a Christian's personal privacy and right of choice must be respected in ambiguous areas of judgment. This is the most a wise Bible instructor can say.