

The Dilemma of Tattoos

I live every day with a dilemma, a challenge if you will. I live at a time when the majority of my brothers and sisters in Christ think differently than I do about the issue of tattoos. My position is that tattoos are never justified and should never be encouraged by any Bible-believing Christian. At the same time, men and women that I have the utmost respect for as committed Christians have tattoos. It is not that they got their tattoos during a season of rebellion and now are simply stuck with them. Some of them have made the decision to get their tattoos believing them to be appropriate expressions of their Christianity.

How do I respond to this dilemma? Over the years I have tried to read a good bit from a variety of resources on this issue. My reading has not been exhaustive so I would not say that there has been nothing written that would satisfy my yearning, but most of what I have read has been disappointing in one way or another. And so, even though my own thoughts I am sure will not satisfy most who read them, I am endeavoring to make an attempt at what I believe is a biblical response to tattoos.

Where to begin? Many begin with the Scriptures. And if you know anything about me, this is typically my approach. I believe that the Bible is our final authority on this issue and every issue. But in this case I think it is helpful to begin with some historical context.

We live in the first time ever where a significant portion of the Christian community accepts and endorses tattoos. Let that sink in for a moment. Tattoos have been around for millennia. But the Christian Church has never before endorsed them. It is possible that the Church of history past has been entirely wrong on this issue and we have now come to a more enlightened age. But whenever the contemporary Church takes odds with the entirety of the Church past, we should at least pause and seriously consider what we are doing.

Tattoos have existed in virtually every known culture of the world. But up until the most recent history, every time the gospel penetrated into a new land, those who embraced the Christian faith gave up the practice of tattooing. My conclusion to this fact is that I must have some very compelling evidence and strong reasoning before I will break with the wisdom of godly men and women throughout history.

But unfortunately, even though the Christian church has been consistent in their belief that tattooing was wrong, they did not take much time to explain why it was wrong. It may have been common sense to them. They may have been satisfied with taking the one verse in Scripture (Lev. 19:28) that speaks of tattoos in a straightforward manner. I do not know. It is possible that I have not been able to find the best of their writings. But what has occurred from this vacuum is that many people write today as if their opinion is far superior to those of the past. I think this is a terrible mistake.

I will take the time to walk through Leviticus 28:19, but again, before I do this I would like to think in broader strokes. Just as understanding the history is helpful, so understanding some general theological principles is also very helpful.

It is accepted Christian doctrine that man is made in the image of God. Bearing the image of God is primarily spiritual in nature, but most would acknowledge that this does mean that we ought to respect not only our souls, but also our bodies. But the connection between this and tattooing has been more difficult to discern.

Humans, both body and soul, are fearfully and wonderfully made by the One who is the greatest Designer and Creator. We are God's handiwork. And as such we belong to God. We are his

masterpiece. Now, due to the Fall, God's masterpiece has certainly been marred in various ways. But even acknowledging this, we must stand in awe of what God has made.

Tattooing takes the masterpiece of the Living God and degrades it to a piece of canvas on which to write. Let me try to illustrate this reality. As I sit in my office and type this essay, I am able to look at a beautiful painting on my wall. This picture was painted by a good friend of mine. It is beautiful to say the least. I love the colors and the message it conveys. The painting is of some green grass and some beautiful flowers growing in that grass. It symbolizes the life that we have in Christ. When I look at this painting what is it that comes to mind? Is it the wonder and glory of the canvas that is under the images that were painted on it? Of course not. I really do not give a second thought to the canvas underneath the painting. What is important is what has been painted on the canvas. Now, this is as it should be. If you were to compare the value of the canvas to the value of the painting, what was painted on the canvas is far more valuable.

But what should we think when the canvas itself is far more valuable than what is painted on it? This is what occurs when we tattoo the human body. God is clear that the human body is his masterpiece. He is the first painter. He is the one who has skillfully designed every portion of our body. But when the tattooist does his work, he is making the statement that what he or she is painting is more valuable than what was there in the first place. Whether or not this is done consciously is not the point. This is what happens. It is impossible to look at the tattoo and give more value to what is under the tattoo. The importance of the tattoo cries out in our minds, "I am more valuable than the canvas on which I have been written.

I believe God takes this very personal. He is an artist over which other lesser artists are writing. What would we say if someone decided to use the Mona Lisa as their canvas on which to write their own masterpiece? What would we say if someone decided to take the Whitehouse and use it for their own personal paintings? We would see this is distasteful graffiti. I know that sometimes we see murals painted on the sides of old buildings that really improve the building. But this also makes my point. The building

was old and not really of much value. This is why it can be appropriately painted upon and improved. Is this what we want to say about our bodies?

I know that the Bible does talk in a limited sense about the adornment of our bodies. Certainly, adornment can be taken too far, and to give more importance to outward adornment over inward character is always wrong. But appropriate adornment accents the beauty that is there, it does not cover over it. Even when it comes to make up, usually there is the intent to either cover over blemishes (results of the Fall) or to enhance the beauty that exists. This is not the case with tattoos. The skin is seen as a canvas on which to write. This is not what God intended.

If one understands this principle then it becomes clear why one small, somewhat tasteful, tattoo does not grip us in the way that an entire body full of tattoos does. And it also helps us to understand why tattoos on the face are usually the last part of the body to be tattooed. The face of every human being may most gloriously reflect the image of God bodily. As humans, we look forward to the day when we will stand face to face with God. I know that this is anthropomorphic language, but still it makes the point: The face is very valuable and personal. To use it merely as a canvas is to degrade its importance.

Age and life in general have a way of marring our skin. We grow old and wrinkled. Our skin begins to droop over time. Fat cells have a way of multiplying and muscle cells of shrinking. But all of these are common effects of living in a world that is fallen. As Christians, our faith in Jesus Christ to forgive the

guilt of our sin produces a hope that when the resurrection occurs our bodies will be made entirely new and whole. Think for a moment if people in the New Heavens and New Earth will want to add tattoos to our glorified bodies. I hardly think so.

It is with this common sense, yet truly biblical, foundation that we can now begin to consider the one text in Scripture that speaks directly of tattoos.

ESV Leviticus 19:28 You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves: I am the LORD.

On first reading, this verse seems pretty clear. And for some it is sufficient in itself to keep them from even considering getting a tattoo. I am thankful that these individuals would submit themselves to the Scripture. But many wrong ideas have been promoted by taking a single verse out of its context and making it say things for which it was never intended to say. Do we have good biblical ground for applying this verse to our modern practice of tattooing?

Even though there are many factors to consider, I do believe that this verse has something to say regarding tattoos today. First, let me try to address some common objections that I have encountered.

Some Christians view the Old Testament standards and rules as having been “repealed and replaced” by New Testament standards and the principle of love. I believe this to be fundamentally a wrong way of looking at the Old Testament. When it comes to God’s standard of holiness and righteousness, it is impossible for his standard to ever change. If it could change, it would mean a fundamental change in the very character of God. There must be one standard of righteousness that exists throughout all eternity that is unchanging. We cannot hide behind the doctrinal truth that we are no longer “under the law” as a way of dismissing verses like Lev. 19:28.

At the same time that we must uphold the unchanging norms of God’s law, we can also accept that these laws have “changed” in two very specific ways. The first way is that many of the Old Testament laws were put in place as foreshadows to lead us to their fulfillment in Christ. The easiest illustration of this is that Christians no longer are obligated to sacrifice lambs when they come into worship. It is not that God changed his standard so much as that the Old Testament sacrifices were fulfilled in the one perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We often refer to laws such these as ceremonial. But when we look at Leviticus 19, we do not see how this law can be viewed as having been fulfilled in Christ.

The second way that we can see any law as “changing” without the norm of the law as being changed is in regard to the situation in which the law was given. As the situation in which we find ourselves is changed, then how we apply the law can sometimes be affected. The easiest example of this occurs as we seek to obey the command to “honor your parents”. This is the fifth commandment. And there are no qualifications placed upon this commandment. Still, most people accept that applying this command looks different if the child is 4 years old than it does for that same child who grows into adulthood and is now caring for their aging parent. The norm has not changed, but the situation has greatly changed.

And in this sense, we all can readily admit that times have changed since the 3,000 years ago that Leviticus was written. But in what ways have they changed? And in what ways are they still the same? And even if the situation has changed, how can we positively apply this verse in our present situation? These are the questions I will try to answer.

When we understand the context of the book of Leviticus, we can see that it was written to help the Israelites to remain holy and separate from the pagan nations currently living in the Promised Land. But a mistake that many people make in considering the prohibition against tattooing is to think that the only reason why it was forbidden was because pagan nations were doing it. The assumption is that tattooing was merely wrong because pagans were doing it for religious reasons. Therefore, if those religious motivations are not currently in place then the law no longer applies.

The truth is that not everything that the pagans did was bad. It was only when their actions were evil that God instituted laws forbidding his people from imitating them. So, it is better to think that God made laws against tattooing because there was

something about the practice that went against his moral law. Tattooing violated something about God's order of creation and so was wrong. But what exactly was it that was being violated? We have already touched upon it.

There is an order within the creation. Certain parts of God's creation are more valuable than others. And the higher the order in creation something is, the more it should be valued. In this case, the human body is only surpassed by the human soul. They are of the highest order and so should be most valued.

It commonly accepted that the reasons for cutting the body and tattooing had to do with one's mourning for the dead. The pagan nations were attempting to show the intensity of their mourning. Nothing seemed to express the level of mourning quite like cutting or marring or tattooing oneself. What is helpful for us is to know that God is not in any way against our intensity of mourning, especially when loved ones die. But he clearly places limits on the expression of our mourning. In Scripture it is acceptable tear one's clothing (rend one's garments) and even to place ashes on yourself in times of mourning. But the ashes are temporary and the clothing is not the skin.

Many proponents of tattooing argue that religious motivations are not in place and getting a tattoo today is not done out of mourning for the dead. (Although, many people that I have talked to want to get tattoos as a sort of memorial for loved ones who have died.) But what motivations do they give? I know that they are varied, but I would venture to say that most modern motivations are actually of a "lesser importance" than intense grieving over the death of a loved one.

So, if God is opposed to marring permanently our bodies even for something so important as the grief over the loss of a loved one, would it not make sense that he is opposed to this marring of his creation for all lesser reasons? I believe so.

The universal principle in Leviticus 19 is that the human body is valuable and there are certain things that simply should not be done to it. The fact that pagan nations were tattooing is not the principle making tattooing wrong. Instead, we should only make the correlation that since pagans would not value the human body as a work of God's master-craftmanship, they would naturally be inclined to see nothing wrong with tattooing and other body-marring practices.

Mr. Hartley, in the New International Commentary of the Old Testament sums it up very well when he writes:

"Man is not to disfigure the divine likeness implanted in him by scarring his body. The external appearance of the people should reflect their internal status as the chosen and holy people of God." Hartley

These are the reasons why I believe that tattooing is never justified and should never be encouraged by any Christian, but especially by those who are leaders in the Church.

But the reality is that many people already have tattoos. Some got their tattoos in times of rebellion and regret their decision. Others received them under the false belief that the Bible really did not care about tattooing or in some cases even encouraged tattooing. What is to be done in these situations?

How should the person respond to the truth that tattoos are wrong if they themselves have one or more tattoos?

The answer is that they should respond as they do to any other sin that they have committed. They should confess that sin to the Lord (even if they did not know it to be a sin at the time) and they should cast themselves on the mercy of God that is freely given in Christ. It is important to note that the mark of the tattoo continues, but the sin of getting the tattoo only happened at one moment in time. This is why a person should not continue to beat themselves up over a past decision. What is important is that the person acknowledges the sin and makes a clear decision to not continue getting more tattoos or approving those who do. It is not necessary that a person who has a tattoo have that tattoo removed. He or she may want to do this because they regret having gotten it, but the fact is that the blood of Jesus Christ washes them clean.

How should a person who believes tattoos to be wrong respond to those who have them?

I believe there is a slightly different approach that should be given when dealing with those who are outside the Church as opposed to when they are responding to those who are members of the Church.

If someone is outside the Church, I would not make tattoos the first issue in explaining the gospel to them. It is far more important to emphasize other sins of the heart that they are more aware of. Unbelievers often can identify with sins like pride and selfishness and anger and lust. I would make these sins more the focus in explaining to them their need of Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. I may even ask them questions about their tattoos in an attempt to get to know them and their past. Tattoos often tell a history about a person. But I am always careful to not say anything that would imply my approval of their tattoos. The time will come for addressing this issue later.

If someone is inside the Church, there ought to be a slightly different approach. Again, I would not make the issue of tattoos the item of first importance. It is still very important to aim at the heart. At the same time, bringing up the issue of tattoos ought to be done in the context of discipleship. Every Christian should be taught to value their body. Tattooing is only one distortion. We are always tempted to either over value or under value the human body. Gaining a biblical appreciation for the body without idolizing it ought to be discussed. Tattooing can be included in this discussion, but should not be isolated while other sins are ignored.

If you are only an acquaintance of someone in the Church, it is probably best to simply overlook the tattoos of others. We do this when it comes to obesity for instance. If someone is obese, it is possible that they have a sin problem. But it is not right for anyone, not knowing the full situation to make that judgment from a distance. It is far better to look past this outward appearance and focus on the heart. God told Samuel this very thing when he was choosing David as king. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart. I would hope that those having tattoos would feel

welcomed and not condemned in our local churches. And then, at the appropriate time and in the right way, they would also be challenged to bring this area of their life into conformity with the Word of God.

Living out my convictions is not always easy. As I said at the beginning, I have friends who I respect greatly who do not view this issue as I do. Until they are convinced by Scripture and sound reason, I would not try to force them to my position. And I continue to respect them and even seek their counsel in many other areas of life and doctrine. But neither will I be shy about my beliefs. I believe they are consistent with the whole of Scripture and make good common sense as well. In the end, we all will have to stand before the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge all of our thoughts, and words and actions. And on that day, my only hope will be found in the precious blood of Christ, shed for me.