

## Doctrine of Tattoos

### A Personal Note

This particular study was conducted because of the behavior of a young lady named Miley Cyrus who presented herself to the world as a wholesome role model for many years. And so she was. But, as she reached her upper teenage years and moved to adulthood she began to mark her body. My concern is that she will influence multitudes of impressionable young people to do the same. As a result, I opened the Bible to see what the Scriptures might have to say on this matter. The following is the result of that study.

1. The divine prohibition against tattoos seems to be very direct.
  - *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.*
2. Despite the clear revelation of the will of God on this matter, individuals continue to make cuttings in their flesh and print marks upon their bodies. The question is why?
  - Some people get a tattoo in order to sympathize, identify with others or make a statement. One popular television , movie and recording star, Miley Cyrus, has as body art a heart on her little finger, an anchor on her wrist, dream catcher on her ribcage, and the words "Just Breathe" on the left side of her chest in honor of a friend who died of cystic fibrosis. Ms Cyrus has also placed an equal sign tattoo on her middle finger in support of gay marriages.
  - Some people get a tattoo in order to demonstrate their love for someone or as an act of remembrance.
  - Some people get a tattoo because they get drunk and act in an impulsive manner.
  - Some people get a tattoo due to peer pressure.
  - Some people get a tattoo in order to draw attention to themselves. There are individuals who simply are in love with themselves much like Narcissus. In Greek mythology, Narcissus was a handsome young man who rejected all potential relationships because he had fallen in love with his own reflection in a pool. In like manner, individuals look into a mirror and love their own image to the point they must draw the attention of others to it.
  - Some Christians get a tattoo without violating their conscience because they have not thought this matter through with prayerful consideration before an open Bible. There is nothing evil, rebellious or sinister in their getting a tattoo. They just think a tattoo looks nice.
3. The question the Christian must ask when considering whether or not to get a tattoo is, "Can I get a tattoo for the glory of the Lord?"

- *1 Corinthians 10:31 Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.*
4. In addition to glorifying the Lord in getting a tattoo, the Christian must consider whether or not their conscience is being violated or has been violated.
  5. Once a person has gotten a tattoo and is confronted with the Word of God on this matter, there are only two options. The first option is to regret that such an action was taken while the second is to justify what has been done to the body.
  6. Several arguments have been set forth by Christians to justify tattoos.
    - Argument. The divine prohibition against tattoos is found under the Law and the New Testament believer is under grace where there is much more liberty of conscience. Therefore, Leviticus 19:28 is not binding on the Christian today.

Response. While it is true that the reign of grace supersedes the reign of the Law of Moses, the Christian is not lawless. The Moral Law of God, for example, summarized in the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 is still valid. And there are other compelling moral laws as well.

For example, it would be hard to read the verse following Leviticus 19:28 and say it was not binding on a Christian today.

*Leviticus 19:29 Do not prostitute thy daughter, to cause her to be a whore; lest the land fall to whoredom, and the land become full of wickedness.*

It would be difficult to read the prohibition against bestiality and say it does not apply to the New Testament believer.

*Leviticus 18:23 Neither shalt thou lie with any beast to defile thyself therewith: neither shall any woman stand before a beast to lie down thereto: it is confusion.*

There are many moral laws that are specifically forbidden only in the Old Testament, such as the human sacrifice of children.

*Leviticus 18:21 And thou shalt not let any of thy seed pass through the fire to Molech, neither shalt thou profane the name of thy God: I am the LORD.*

Nowhere in the New Testament is child sacrifice forbidden, and yet the Christian's heart knows it would be wrong to perform such an act.

The Puritans of old remind the church there are moral commandments found in the Old Testament that are not only for Israel of old but for the Christian today. "Some ceremonial precepts are in this chapter, but most of them are moral. . . Most of these precepts are binding on us, for they are expositions of most of the Ten Commandments" (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Leviticus 19:28)

- Argument. Leviticus 19:28 prohibits getting a tattoo "for the dead." Therefore, it is permitted to get a tattoo as long as it is not "for the dead."

*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.*

Response. It would be difficult to successfully argue from a Christian frame of reference that the practice of satanic bloodletting, self mutilation or cutting of the flesh is permissible as long as it was not done "for the dead."

It is instructive to note the words "for the dead" are associated with "any cutting in your flesh" and not with the marking of the body.

Commenting on this passage, Merrill F. Unger notes, "In Leviticus 19:28 we find two prohibitions of an unnatural disfigurement of the body: 'Ye shall not make any cutting in your flesh for the dead, nor print any *marks* upon you.' The latter (Heb. *qa aqa, incision*) refers to tattooing, and has no reference to idolatrous usages, but was intended to inculcate upon the Israelites a proper reverence for God's creation" (Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, 1974 ed., p. 696).

The *Wycliffe's Bible Encyclopedia* under the definition for TATTOOING states, "While 'cuttings in the flesh' have reference here to mourning customs [for the dead], the tattooing does not appear to pertain to such practice" (*Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia*, 1975 ed., p. 1664).

Likewise, *The New American Commentary* on Leviticus 19:28 writes the condemnation was for, "cutting the body either for the dead or with tattoo marks" (Mark F. Rooker, *The New American Commentary* on Leviticus, 2000 ed., p. 262).

- Argument. In the Old Testament the trimming of the beard and getting one's hair cut was also forbidden. Since these practices are acceptable within the Christian community, getting a tattoo should be acceptable because it is no different than getting a beard trimmed or getting a haircut.

*Leviticus 19:26 Ye shall not eat anything with the blood: neither shall ye use enchantment, nor observe times. 27 Ye shall not round the corners of your heads, neither shalt thou mar the corners of thy beard. 28 Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you: I am the Lord.*

Response. There is always danger in trying to draw a parallel conclusion for many analogies prove to be false. Here is a case in point. The context of Leviticus 19:26-28 is a clear condemnation of pagan, witchcraft and heathen practices.

Verse 26 plainly prohibits the use of an enchantment which refers to the casting of spells or witchcraft. The passage also prohibits the observance of times or astrology.

Verse 28 prohibits the pagan and demonic practice of bloodletting or the cuttings in the flesh and tattooing.

Question. Why would the Lord place in the middle of verse 26 and verse 28 a passage that simply condemns getting the hair cut or the beard trimmed?

Answer. God would not do such a silly thing, and He did not.

The divine prohibition found in verse 27 of "rounding the corners of your head" or "mar the corners of thy beard" was the forbidding of a common pagan practice that cut the hair as an act of worship to honor the hosts of heaven. *Matthew Henry* explains.

"Those that worshipped the hosts of heaven, in honour of them, cut their hair so as that their heads might resemble the celestial globe; but, as the custom was foolish itself, so, being done with respect to their false gods, it was idolatrous." (Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Leviticus 19:27)

In the Latin or Western Rite of the Roman Catholic Church, the wearing of the tonsure as an act of worship is not only practiced but insisted upon within some facets of the church. Since the tonsure is intended to be borne in honor of God and after an alleged apostolic example, it has been accepted for centuries, despite the Word of God condemning it without qualification.

"Herodotus tells of the use of this type of haircut, forming what is called a tonsure, as the practice of pagan religious cults of ancient times who did so honoring one of their gods." (*Coffman Commentaries on the Old and New Testament*, Leviticus 19:27)

Even the secular historical testimony is that tattoos are associated with paganism and have no place within the Judeo-Christian heritage.

"Just as occurred in other cultures with tattoo traditions, when these pagan tribes were 'converted' to the Christian religion, their spiritual and cultural rites (which included tattooing, piercing and scarification) were outlawed. . ." (Jean-Chris Miller, *The Body Art Book: A Complete, Illustrated Guide to Tattoos, Piercings, and Other Body Modifications*, p.9).

"Whenever missionaries encountered tattooing they eradicated it." (Gilbert, Steve, *Tattoo History: A Source Book*, p. 101)

"While these and other body modifications continued to be practiced underground as a way for non-Christian people to identify each other, God forbid you got caught and your mark was revealed." (Jean-Chris Miller, *The Body Art Book: A Complete, Illustrated Guide to Tattoos, Piercings, and Other Body Modifications*, p.11)

- Argument. Isaiah 44:5 and Ezekiel 9:4 are God ordained examples of tattoos being not only permitted in the Bible but commanded.

*Isaiah 44:5 One shall say, I am the Lord's; and another shall call himself by the name of Jacob; and another shall subscribe with his hand unto the Lord, and surname himself by the name of Israel.*

*Ezekiel 9:4 And the Lord said unto him, Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof.*

Response.

Isaiah is not talking about tattoos. What he is saying is that he will write with his hand to the Lord, much like someone will sign a contract to express his complete commitment and personal obligation.

In Ezekiel 9:4 the prophet uses the word "tav" [ תָּ (tawv)] which means "a mark; by implication, a sign or signature." The man clothed with linen is going to mark the foreheads of the righteous with ink, not tattoo them!

- Argument. The Lord Jesus Christ has a tattoo therefore it must not be wrong.

Response. The idea of the Lord Jesus Christ having a tattoo comes from Revelation 19:11-16.

*Revelation 19:11 And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. 12 His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself. 13 And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God. 14 And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. 15 And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. 16 And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND Lord OF LORDS”.*

The idea of the Lord Jesus being tattooed should make any Christian shudder in horror at the very idea for it would mean that He did not fulfill the Law but violated one of its great moral prohibitions found in Leviticus 19:28. The Bible tells us that Jesus Christ is without sin (Hebrews 4:15) and so without a tattoo.

William Barclay helps us to sort through the various possibilities of the image in the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ the Warrior with a name written on His thigh.

“Various suggestions have been made. It has been suggested that the name is either embroidered on his girdle or engraved on his sword hilt. It is suggested that it is on the skirt of his general's cloak, for that is where it would be easiest to read on a horseman. It is suggested that it is actually written on his thigh, because it was sometimes the custom to engrave the titles of statues on the thigh.

It seems clear that the name is visible to all, and, therefore, probably the likeliest solution is that it was written on the skirt of the warrior Christ's robe, lying over his thigh, as he rode upon the white horse. In any event, the name singles him out as the greatest of all rulers, the only true divine One and the universal King”.

7. If the Lord does not want one of His children cutting the body, getting a tonsure or marking the body with a tattoo there must be good reason. Indeed, there are several good reasons not to get a tattoo, in particular.
  - Physical health. There is always danger in getting a tattoo. There is the danger of blood poisoning or some other infection due to a dirty needle.
  - Mental health. There is the danger of addictive behavior. Many people feel compelled to return time and again to tattoo their body until they are covered with markings from head to foot. The tattoo lady once relegated to the circus of yesterday is found walking the streets in the local neighborhood today. And you do not even have to pay to see her!
  - Spiritual health. There is the danger of violating one's own conscience, failure to study the Word of God on this matter, and setting a poor example to weaker believers.
8. Historically, there seems to be a general consensus among Christian conservative commentators that Leviticus 19:28 is an undisputable condemnation of the tattoo.
  - The *Jameison-Faussett-Brown Commentary and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* comments on Leviticus 19:28 in the following manner.
 

*"nor print any marks upon you – 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”.*
  - James M. Freeman in his excellent book, *The New Manners & Customs of the Bible*, says the following about Leviticus 19:28. "Tattooing forbidden both cutting and tattooing were done by the heathens, and so God forbade His people from doing so in imitation of them" (1998 edition, p. 157).

- *Coffman's Commentary on the Old and New Testament* under Leviticus 19:18 says, "The cutting of one's flesh also characterized pagan worship as attested by the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel in the contest with Elijah. Tattooing was also a device of paganism. . . Christians generally disapprove of tattooing, despite the fact of the widespread use of it by many even today. In the light of what God says here, and in view of the history of it, it seems strange that anyone would pay someone else to tattoo him."
- Charles R. Erdman in his commentary on Leviticus 19:28 writes, "The custom of tattooing was forbidden, while among all the nations of antiquity it was common." (Charles R. Erdman, *The Book of Leviticus*, 1951 ed., p.93)
- *Naves Topical Bible* states simply under the topic "Tattooing": "TATTOOING, forbidden, Leviticus 19:28" (p. 1312).

9. If a Christian has placed a tattoo on his or her body there is not much that can be done by way of removing it without great pain, cost and personal danger. What is more important is whether or not a future tattoo is anticipated and whether or not another tattoo should be placed on the body which is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

With that in mind the following statements should be reviewed by the individual Christian as a matter of self judgment, "*For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged*" (1 Corinthians 11:31).

- Question. I believe that the moral precept of Leviticus 19:28 is not binding on me today as a Christian. True \_\_\_\_\_ False \_\_\_\_\_
- Question. I believe the Lord Jesus Christ is *pleased* with me as a Christian wearing a tattoo. True \_\_\_\_\_ False \_\_\_\_\_
- Question. I believe it is God's perfect will for me as a Christian to be marked with a tattoo. True \_\_\_\_\_ False \_\_\_\_\_
- Question. I have prayerfully studied the Biblical teaching on the wearing of a tattoo and find nothing to prohibitive for me. True \_\_\_\_\_ False \_\_\_\_\_
- Question. If I had a chance to do it over again, I would not wear a tattoo. True \_\_\_\_\_ False \_\_\_\_\_

10. If the historical evidence is correct, then tattoos are consistently identified with religious paganism. If that is true then 2 Corinthians 6 might have something to say on this issue, for why would a Christian want to identify with that which belongs to Belial?

- *2 Corinthians 6:14 Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness? 15 And what concord hath Christ with Belial? Or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? 16 And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? For ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 17 Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you.”*
11. The objective of examining any issue of concern in life is not to bring shame or judgment to an individual but be faithful to the gospel narrative and to communicate the whole counsel of God.