

Is it wrong for Christians to get tattoos?

by Charles Leiter

This question is perhaps worthy of consideration, not only because tattoos are advocated in our day as a “witnessing tool,” but also because it provides an opportunity to explore some overarching New Testament principles that apply to questions of this sort. Tattoos are forbidden in Leviticus 19:27-28, along with “harming the edges of the beard”: “You shall not round off the side-growth of your heads, nor harm the edges of your beard. You shall not make any cuts in your body for the dead, nor make any tattoo marks on yourselves: I am the Lord.”

Some Bible students believe that both of these verses apply to pagan religious customs or mourning rites in honor of various deities. If so, they would have present-day application only in cultures where tattoos have negative religious connotations. On the other hand, this interpretation is not certain. Some believe that God forbade tattoos because they involved a voluntary and permanent disfigurement of the human body as God’s creation. It is obvious that in order to make a decision about the rightness or wrongness of getting a tattoo, Christians will have to turn to the higher considerations and principles given in the New Testament. We will consider seven of these that may be helpful in making a decision of this sort.

1. Will my getting a tattoo dishonor or deeply wound those who love me most? To “treat others as we want them to treat us” is the New Covenant’s “Golden Rule” by which Christians are to live.[1] This consideration alone can sometimes show us the right course of action when there are no other clear guidelines to follow in making a decision.

2. Would I have to go against my own conscience to get a tattoo? Do I have any doubts or uneasiness about doing this? Is it right to do something *permanent* and *irreversible* to my body, when I may later regret it? Could it be that tattoos *were* forbidden by God because they voluntarily disfigure His creation? Do I sense that I will grieve the Holy Spirit if I follow this course of action? Can I do this in complete confidence?

These questions flow from the general principle that it is wrong to do anything against one’s own conscience, even in matters that may be indifferent in themselves. “But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.”[2]

3. Will it hinder my ministry if I do not get the tattoo? Are tattoos such an integral part of the group I am trying to reach that my not having a tattoo will hinder my witness to them? In other words, is this a situation where I should become “like” those I am seeking to reach in order not to give unnecessary offense in my presentation of the truths of the gospel to them? “Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.”[3]

4. If my tattoo enhances my ministry to this group, would it hinder my ministry to another group if God later called me to go elsewhere? Should I do something permanent to my body, if it rules out the possibility of ministering to certain people in the future? In other words, should I put myself in a position where it is no longer possible for me to “become all things to *all* men”?[4]

5. Will my tattoo embolden some weaker brother (who sees my example) to go against his own conscience by getting a tattoo himself? “For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol’s temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? *For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died.*”[5] “It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which my brother stumbles.”[6] “For if because of food my brother is hurt, I am no longer walking according to love.”[7]

6. *Am I mastered by this desire, or am I completely neutral in it, wanting only God's perfect will in this matter?* "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, *but I will not be mastered by anything.*"[8]

7. *Have I humbled myself and sought counsel from those who are older, wiser, and godlier than I am?* "You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble."[9]

None of these considerations gives us a clear-cut "Yes or No" answer to the question before us, and answers may vary depending on individuals and circumstances. This is why Paul tells us to "present our bodies as a living and holy sacrifice" to God. We must "not be *conformed to this world*, but be *transformed* by the renewing of our mind, *that we may prove what the will of God is*, that which is good and acceptable and perfect." [10] God is faithful to guide those who truly want to know His will.

[1] Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31

[2] Romans 14:23; cf. v. 14

[3] Acts 16:3

[4] 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

[5] 1 Corinthians 8:10-11

[6] Romans 14:21

[7] Romans 14:15

[8] 1 Corinthians 6:12

[9] 1 Peter 5:5

[10] Romans 12:1-2

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