

Can a Christian Get a Tattoo?

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It is becoming increasingly popular and cool to get a tattoo in these days. Sport's heroes are seen with tattoos now more than ever before. It is the in-thing. It is not surprising then that some Christian's have started to ask the question "Why can't I get a tattoo?" There are even pastors now who argue that grace gives a Christian the licence to get tattoos from head to toe if they so wish provided they are not offensive.

What are we to make of all this?

Firstly we need to underline that the grace of the gospel means that a true believer regardless of whether they have a tattoo or not will be saved. We are not saved by works but by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. There are a number of Christians who at some point in their past decided to get a tattoo. Most of them did this in their unconverted days when they lived for the pleasures of this world and not for the glory of Christ. That does not make them a lesser Christian than one who does not have one. No matter what a true believer looks like, no matter how many scars they may carry on their body, it is the grace of Christ alone that saves. A believer in Christ is completely forgiven, accepted and loved by God in the same measure as every other child of God.

Having said that, we must be very careful that we do not turn the grace of God into a licence to sin [Jude 1:4]. When a person is saved from their sin they become new creatures in Christ. Their hearts are changed from self-centeredness to a desire to live for the glory of Christ. They no longer live to please themselves or their friends. It is Christ Jesus and his will that is paramount above all else.

Now there are those that object and teach that because we are not under Mosaic law, getting a tattoo does not matter. They argue that a verse like Leviticus 19:28 which reads "**You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves: I am the Lord**" is irrelevant for Christians today and that one is free to go ahead and get a tattoo, just as freely as we can eat a bacon and egg sandwich. Unfortunately this argument is weak and foolish. Setting aside the debate over whether Leviticus 19:28 is moral or ceremonial there are a number of reasons why a Christian should not get a tattoo. They are as follows:

First of all, becoming a Christian means being set free from worldly principles. Galatians 4:3 says that in ones unconverted state we were in bondage under the elements of the world. Titus 3:3 says that we were once enslaved to various lusts and pleasures. In other words, we lived for what the world did. Tattoos are very much the "in thing" today in the world. Why get a tattoo? The argument that some use is "because it is cool". But is that a good reason to permanently tattoo one's body? As Christians are we following the fashions and fancies of the world or Christ? Since we have been set free from a desire to be "cool and with it" as far as the world goes, surely we do not need to tattoo our bodies as Christians?

Secondly, becoming a Christian means finding a new identity in Christ. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says "**if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold all things have become new**" To be in Christ is to have a new identity; to have a new nature; to have new desires to please Christ; it is to belong to a new people, the church and to have a new destiny in glory. Some Christians when asked why they would like a tattoo have responded "I want an identity". In other words they want to belong to a group of friends with whom they identify or to have an identity unique to themselves. But Jesus never laid that demand on anyone who seeks to follow him. Our identity is not found in some outward marking of the body. Just as circumcision is no longer a command required for males to identify themselves as one of God's people, neither should tattooing be the means a Christian seeks for identity. In fact, being a Christian means we no longer need to find our identity in what the world is prescribing or promoting. Our identity is found in Christ Jesus as our Lord and master. We do not need to be "in" with friends. We do not need to find another identity. We are complete in Christ.

Thirdly, becoming a Christian means being set apart to live a holy life unique and distinct from the world. Peter recalls the Old Testament command in 1 Peter 1:16 "**Be holy, for I am holy.**" The reason why God gave the nation of Israel all their laws was so that they would be seen to be a unique, distinct nation, set apart for God. While the ceremonial and civil laws of the Old Testament no longer apply to Christians today, the command to be holy and set apart for Christ still does. That simply means that when the world looks at the Christian, they should see a difference in their attitudes and actions. A study of the history of tattoos will show that it is a very ancient practice that has been associated in many different cultures and peoples. Some had to do with cultural and religious practices, others with being associated with bandits and criminals. Yet, while it was widely practiced by surrounding nations, in the setting apart of Israel as God's people, it was not accepted by God as an innocent practice that he cared nothing about. Rather he wanted his people to be different, holy and set apart from the practices of pagan nations. God calls Christians too, not to follow the ways of the world but to be holy and set apart for Christ.

Fourthly, becoming a Christian means avoiding practices that may be harmful to the body and soul. It is a well testified fact that tattooing may carry certain medical risks. Allergic reactions and skin infections have been reported by some after getting tattoos. Then there is also the risk of the transmission of HIV and cancer-causing hepatitis C as a result of some needles being not properly sterilised in certain tattoo parlours.^[1] As a Christian one must not deliberately place one's body under unnecessary risk of disease and damage. Then there is also the problem associated with regret. Many who get tattoos when younger later regret what they did. At great cost and expense they may try to get rid of these tattoos but many just have to live with something they become uncomfortable with for the rest of their lives. In this regard I have good

Christian friends who live with this regret and would warn others of not making the same mistake they did. Tattooing then can be harmful for both body and soul.

Fifthly, becoming a Christian means being a good witness to our neighbour and not deliberately being a stumbling block to others who need to come to Christ for salvation. Tattooing is forbidden amongst strict Jews as well as Muslims. Christians who tattoo themselves and argue favourably for it, will become a hindrance to a Jewish or Muslim neighbour or work colleague coming to faith in Christ. Out of love for Christ, the gospel and ones neighbour, a Christian must avoid this practice.

Sixthly, becoming a Christian means walking in love and having respect for others. Christians who go ahead and get tattoos despite the concern of family members are not acting in love. They may of course be quick to argue that grace gives them this freedom. Like some of the Corinthians they may say "All things are lawful for me" to which God's Word responds, "but not all things are helpful." [1 Cor 6:12]. To be free in Christ does not mean liberty to do whatever you so wish. Certain actions you may consider fine may lead to hurting others and wounding their souls. I have known of cases where the desire to get a tattoo has caused major tension and debate in the home. For a Christian to go ahead even though it is creating this tension is not acting in love or in the wisdom of Christ.

Seventhly, becoming a Christians means not allowing yourself to become enslaved by sinful passions and desires. 1 Cor 6:12 says "I will not be enslaved by anything". A Christian is to exercise self-control and restraint with regards food, drink and other things that may be appealing to the body. Sadly, many struggle with addictions related to these things. Tattooing can become an addiction where one tattoo will lead to another and then another. It has been known to become an addiction to some who enjoy going through the experience. Scripture warns us against becoming enslaved to anything.

Noting the reasons given above, we must conclude that it is regrettable and even foolish for some Christians and pastors to endorse the practice of tattooing. The argument that it is permissible because it is not part of New Testament law undermines the very heart of what it means to be a Christian as stated above. Being in Christ is to be set free from worldly principles and values. Therefore we cannot endorse that which so clearly has been a worldly practice down through the ages. Christians who teach that there is nothing wrong with this practice have not understood what is at stake and are in danger of causing much hurt and harm to the body of Christ, unnecessary division among God's people, as well as harming the witness of Christians who naively go ahead and tattoo themselves. A Christian who wishes to get a tattoo needs to examine the real reason as to why they want one. Is it for personal selfish reasons because it is "cool" and "trendy" or is it for the glory of Christ? In light of the above, how can it be for the glory of Christ? Indeed, is it not sinful to turn back from the gospel of freedom and grace in Christ to follow the miserable principles and values of this world?

Praise God that there is grace in Christ to forgive all sin, even this sin of pursuing the ways of this world, of naively harming one's body, grieving the souls of fellow believers and damaging ones witness for Christ. What a Saviour Jesus is, whose own body was pierced and wounded on the cross for our sins, that we might be healed and made perfectly whole one day, without spot or blemish! All who come to Christ have their sins washed away and begin a new life in Christ! What joy, peace and satisfaction there is in Christ. Get excited about Jesus and follow in His footsteps who did not seek acceptance from the world but rather honour from His Father in glory. Remember the words of the apostle Paul who said "***But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.***" [Galatians 6:14]