

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO TATTOOS AND BODY PIERCING

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It seems that many people, mainly young—but not always—are interested in getting their bodies tattooed or pierced. A tattoo is an “indelible mark or figure fixed upon the body by insertion of pigment under the skin or by production of scars” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). A tattoo artist “uses a handheld machine that acts much like a sewing machine, with one or more needles piercing the skin repeatedly. With every puncture, the needles insert tiny ink droplets. The process—which is done without anesthetics—causes a small amount of bleeding and slight to potentially significant pain.” (***Tattoos—Understand Risks and Precautions***, article on Mayo Clinic website, mayoclinic.com).

According to one study, nearly one-fourth of American people between ages 18 and 50 have at least one tattoo. The ***U.S. News & World Report*** says there are over *twenty thousand* tattoo parlors operating in the United States. While tattooing was once the province of those who had been in the military services, or in biker subcultures, tattoos now are more common among all classes of people. Prominent sports figures have multiple tattoos on their faces, arms, backs, and legs. One church pastor in Texas even called on his members to get permanent tattoos depicting the crucifixion and death of Christ, calling them “Stations on Skin.”

Body piercing has also become more acceptable today. While many women have pierced their ears for ages, one does not have to travel far to see persons with grossly distorted ears and lips with prominent rings or studs. Today body piercing may consist of the insertion of jewelry into an opening made not only in the ear, but also in the nose, eyebrow, lip, tongue, or other part of the body. This procedure usually is performed without anesthetics.

What is a Christian view of tattoos and body piercings, and what does the Bible say? For this brief treatment, we will start with the Bible.

Leviticus 19:28 is the most direct about tattoos and piercings: *“You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo your selves: I am the Lord”* (ESV). Now, this is in the Law of Moses, and we in the church age are free of its ceremonial constraints. However, we need to look at the context of the verse.

The immediate passage deals with the practices of the heathen peoples around the Israelites as they came into the Promised Land. God, in the Levitical regulations, was instructing the Israelites on *definite and practical distinction* from the surrounding societies. The Israelites were familiar with all sorts of body alterations, having lived in a pagan society (Egypt) for over four hundred years. The associations of tattoos and piercing were common among pagan societies.

As Israel was to reflect God’s holiness, that nation was expected to be *radically distinct* from those around it. The writer in *Unger’s Bible Dictionary* says, “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 ... 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.” Orthodox Jews since then have forbidden tattoos and piercings.

This principle follows through in the New Testament. **Romans 12:1-2**: *“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”* More than once, Paul reminds his readers that they (including bodies) belong to God, and in **Romans 12:1-2** Paul explicitly links their attitudes toward their bodies—and the doctrine of nonconformity—together. Body art has tended to be one more avenue of conformity with the world. As tattooing has become popular with people of all classes, it has appealed also to those of Christian background. Sometimes people get tattoos or piercings in order to “fit in” with their friends.

Christian liberty still comes under the constraints of the Word of God, and the principle is still true that our attitude toward our bodies is to be different from those held by people in our pagan environment. See also **1 Corinthians 6:19-20** and **2 Corinthians 6:14-17**. If our bodies belong to God, we should make sure we have His clear “permission” before we “mark them up” with tattoos or body piercings. Altering the skin also seems to be a commentary on how God made our bodies and can belie a discontent with God’s plan for our bodies.

Other Scriptures that come to mind are **Isaiah 44:5 and Ezekiel 9:4**, where God instructs that a mark be made on certain people, and that some are to “**write on their hand**” that they are the Lord’s. However, the Hebrew words of reference are different from the Leviticus passage. These verses point to a temporary mark that will ultimately wash off.

There are some other considerations:

1. Tattoos/piercings have their origin in paganism and/or superstition. When missionaries and others encountered pagan societies, those societies often were dominated by body modification practices. When people in these cultures converted to Christ, they ended their body art practices. Most of the obvious expressions today still reflect a dark, negative outlook. Jean-Chris Miller verifies this point, stating, “Death and darkness have always been a classic tattoo theme—skulls, snakes, demons, spiders, and spiderwebs are all conventional tattoo imagery” (*The Body Art Book*, page 12). And to be frank, a fair amount of body art is just plain ugly, and some is rather scary. That Christians today are open to body art shows how far “even this Christian culture” has degraded toward adopting pagan practices.

2. Tattoos/piercings can reflect a negative self-image. People rightly recoil at the prospect of someone intentionally cutting himself to inflict harm and gain attention, but then they seem to approve of a stylized version of the same practice.

“Practices such as piercing, scarification, and branding are linked to anorexia, bulimia, and what has been called ‘delicate self-harm syndrome,’ which is an addictive, repetitive, non-decorative form of skin cutting, usually on the arm or legs. This is considered an expression of absolute hatred or anger” (Victoria Pitts, *In the Flesh*, page 25). At times, body art says that the person is not happy with God’s handiwork, and then wants to either improve on, or attack, the image of God found in the human body. A person’s outside appearance is a representation of what he is on the inside.

3. Body-art—whether tattoos or piercings—are meant to draw attention to oneself. In nearly every instance of exposed tattooing or piercing, they tend to say, “Look at me and see how different I am.” One website that promotes tattooing says, “Today tattoo is a decorative means of self-expression and personal decoration.” Often, they tend to be extreme and grotesque markers that turn people away, rather than attract people. Further, body art is often associated with a rebellious attitude, again to draw attention to self.

4. Body art—particularly oral piercing—in-vites infection of the body and other physical reactions. The Mayo Clinic points out the following concerns.

a) Disease and infection

Many tattoo parlors are meticulous with their hygiene, but there is still a *risk of getting blood-borne diseases* such as tetanus, hepatitis B and hepatitis C. Every time the skin—the body’s largest organ—is pierced, there is an increased *risk of infection* from the bacteria that normally reside on the skin (such as staph and strep). Some have developed a type of skin tuberculosis. In December 2011, anyone who had had a tattoo or body piercing while visiting the Indonesian island of Bali was warned to urgently seek medical advice. This warning went out after a traveler contracted HIV after getting a tattoo on a recent visit.

b) Allergies

Some persons are allergic to the tattoo dyes and developed skin reactions, such as an itchy rash. These results may arise only some years after the tattoo is made.

c) Permanent damage to the body

Scarring may occur, and in some people there may be difficulty in getting an MRI or other diagnostic test because of the metal content of some inks. For oral piercing, ask your own dentist for his view. The American Dental Association opposes the practice of piercing in and around the mouth, because of the *damage done to the tongue and the teeth*. Does it seem to be taking proper care of our bodies when we invite such problems unnecessarily?

5. Tattoos and piercings will degrade with the body over time. What might look good today on an eighteen-year-old body will look rather different on a sixty-eight or seventy-eight-year-old body. Our skin becomes less elastic and becomes thin and droopy. Will that body art seem as attractive then? Or will it be an ugly reminder of one’s younger, self-centered days?

6. Removal can be painful, expensive, and time-consuming. Having tattoos removed is a growing business. Even with modern techniques, the process has been compared with “being splattered with hot grease.” Laser removal may take as many as ten appointments, with each costing \$250 to \$850, and the effectiveness is not guaranteed.

While some piercings may close up over time, those with large rings or pins may find a need for expensive plastic surgery in the years to come.

7. Will it seem as cool in twenty years? One in six who have had tattoos or piercings in the past look back with embarrassment and regret. Body art has been called, “skin graffiti.” If one enters a professional work environment, obvious body art, is generally frowned upon, and has less than honorable associations. It may hold one back from initial hiring or advancement in a business organization. At a major coffee chain, for example, “baristas” (the servers) cannot display any tattoos or wear any piercing jewelry beside small, matched-pair earrings. Each ear cannot have more than two piercings. Serving upscale coffee demands upscale workers, and tattoos do not fit that scheme. One pop singer and actor says, “I wish it was like an Etch-a-Sketch where I can wipe them all out ... it would be nice to have a pure, clean body again.”

8. Do tattoos and piercings make our testimony for the Lord stronger or weaker? In other words, does body art draw people to Christ, or does it repel people? While some may argue that body art may invite opportunities to witness, it may just as easily “turn off” people who would otherwise be open to the wholesome words of God’s Good News. Having unnatural holes and ugly studs cause people to turn away.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, **does tattooing glorify God?** The Scripture says, *“For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s” (1 Corinthians 6:20)*. Will a tattoo or body piercing bring honor to God, both immediately and the years far ahead? Or will it be something to be covered, restored to its former state, or constantly regretted?

These considerations, taken together, would teach *against* Christians getting their bodies modified through tattoos and piercing.

What about those who have already had their bodies pierced or tattooed? Some folks had them done years ago, and there is not much point in going back and trying to reverse them. Those who are currently having tattooing and body piercing done, should seriously take the step of stopping further body modification. If the body art is in places normally covered by clothing or if the individual has only minor body alterations, it likely will not help to try to change them. For those with extensive body art, perhaps the best answer is to cover up and not draw attention to it. Whether one wants to spend the time and money and endure the pain necessary to reverse the body art is an individual option. Wearing rings and pins in piercings should be avoided.

Certainly, having tattoos (and the remnants of piercing) are not barriers to coming to Christ, or to becoming a part of the church. We all have things from our past that we regret, have repented of, and by God's grace will not be doing again. Yet now we want to live in newness of life and reflect the image of Christ in US.

So, we conclude that it is best to rejoice in the body God has given us, and to accept the natural beauty of our bodies—which God Himself declared are "very good." We will not regret keeping our bodies as God had made them.