

## Some Thoughts Regarding Tattoos

Pastor Rob Willey – 1/17/14

### The Biblical Principles

1. Some people point to Lev 19:28 (*You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves: I am the LORD.*) to say that tattoos are wrong. Period. The problem is, most of them get haircuts regularly, and the *previous* says – *You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard* (Lev 19:27). So the question is, how do we reconcile the two, and what was the intent of the laws in the first place?
2. The answer is that God forbade tattoos in the OT because they were associated with pagan people and pagan practices, especially mourning rites for the dead.
  - a. Again, Lev 19:28 says – *You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves: I am the LORD.* Cuts and tattoos were apparently associated with ritualistic mourning.
  - b. Not only that, but these practices were totally contrary to God's primary concern and intent with the laws in general in that section (Lev 19:26-31). He wanted his people to be set apart. *Be holy as I am holy* (1 Pet 1:16, quoting Lev 11:44).
  - c. What's more, indulgence in such practices, including cutting your hair, showed disrespect for the Lord and brought shame to his name. For instance, Lev 21:5-6 says – *They shall not make bald patches on their heads, nor shave off the edges of their beards, nor make any cuts on their body. They shall be holy to their God [set apart] and not profane the name of their God [bring no shame].*
  - d. So the original intent was for God's people to be set apart *from* the aberrant behavior and sinful ways of those around them, and set apart *for* his glory and use.
3. The question then becomes, is it okay today? Is it okay to cut your hair or get a tattoo *now*? And the answer is, it depends. It depends on why you're doing it. Because while we're not *under* the Law, we *are* held to its principles. Here's what I mean:
  - a. In 1 Cor 9:8-10 Paul applies an OT law about oxen in *principle*, saying – *it was written for our sake.* In other words, it applies to us today. And if that's true of a law about oxen, it's certainly true of the rest.
  - b. Especially so, since Jesus said in Mt 5:19 regarding the Law – *Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.* So the OT Law applies to us.
  - c. The key is that it applies in *principle*. In other words, it's the reason *behind* the laws, the principles *behind* the laws that apply, not the particulars or the consequences of breaking them (see Rom 3:28; 7:6; 10:4; Eph 2:14-15; and Gal 3:23-26). And those principles never change because God never changes. His heart and desires are always the same.
  - d. The difficulty sometimes, is figuring out what the reasons behind the laws *are*. To the extent it's clear, we can and should try to live by them as a way to glorify the Lord. To the extent it's not clear, we simply need to hold loosely. So the OT Law applies in principle – including Lev 19:28.

4. So if tattoos, or gages, or whatever are not associated with sin or sinful people in a particular culture, they might very well be okay. Just like cutting your hair. In other words, in and of themselves, they're not wrong.

### **The Application**

Having said that, just like anything else there are some other considerations that could *make* tattoos wrong; especially for a believer. For instance . . .

1. If they distract from who you are in Christ, or your devotion to him – they're wrong.
2. If they inhibit your witness, that is, what you're saying through your words or actions about the Lord – they're wrong.
3. If they are associated with deviance, arrogance, or sin for the most part in your culture – they're wrong.
4. If they are worn for vanity purposes ("look at me, aren't I cool"), or to draw attention to yourself in general – they're wrong.
5. If they portray over-indulgence, kind of like drinking too much – they're wrong.
6. If they would cause a weaker brother to stumble by your tacit endorsement or position of leadership – they're wrong.
7. If they prevent you from fulfilling your ministry in a role to which God has called you, or may call you – they're wrong.
8. If they are harmful to you – they're wrong.
9. If they represent an emotional outlet, akin to an addiction – they're wrong.
10. If they are the result of youthful passions – they're wrong.
11. If they are not profitable, even though they are permissible – they're wrong.
12. If they are a problem for your spouse (they don't like them on you) – they're wrong. (1 Cor 7:4)

That said, I don't believe it's a sin to get a tattoo if your heart is pure and you avoid the above considerations. They *could* be a legitimate way to express something dear to your heart, and the heart of God; or a tasteful way to adorn yourself like pierced ears or colored hair. They *could* be, if your heart is right and you take into consideration the above guidelines.

### **The Process**

When it comes to actually getting one, I would advise the following:

- Use the utmost discretion
- Think long term (they tend to run, fade, or sag)
- Bathe the decision in prayer (because they don't wash off)
- Seek godly counsel (lots of it; from people who will ask the hard questions and say the hard things)
- And wait (sometimes time and maturity changes your thinking; and so does your spouse)

Last, if you already have one but got it for ungodly reasons, or just regret it – seek God's forgiveness. He redeems.