

What Does the Bible Say About Tattoos?



Church of God International Canada
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Introduction

Maybe you're a Christian and want to know if it's okay to get a religious tattoo, like a cross or Bible passage. Surely that would be acceptable to God, wouldn't it?

There's a lot of information on the Internet that can give you many different kinds of answers as to whether or not it's okay to get a tattoo, but there is only one source of God given truth, and that's the Bible.

So, what does the Bible say about tattoos?

Keep reading to find out!



What is the Origin of Tattooing According to Historical Records?



(Common Face tattoos among the aborigines in Taiwan) via Wikimedia Commons



Bontoc Head Hunter 1904 via Wikimedia Commons



Greek vase (circa 450-440 B.C.E.) depicting the death of Orpheus by a tattooed Thracian by ArchaiOptix, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

For the longest time, historians believed the art of tattooing dated back to the Egyptians in 2000 B.C.E. This was a result of finding tattoos on female mummies as well as small bronze implements identified as tattooing tools discovered at the town site of Gurob in northern Egypt and dated to circa 1450 B.C.E.

However, a recent discovery of a mummy in the Alps near the Italian-Austrian border, nicknamed Ötzi, was found to have tattoo markings across his body. This mummy was determined to be 5,300 years old and became the earliest known evidence of tattooing worldwide.

Ethnographic and historical texts reveal that almost every human culture has practiced tattooing in historical times. According to the Office for Science and Society at McGill University;

"The ancient Greeks used tattoos from the 5th century to communicate with spies; later, the Romans marked criminals and slaves with tattoos. In Japan, criminals were tattooed with a single line across their forehead for the first offense; for the second offense, an arch was added, and finally, for the third offense, another line was tattooed, which completed the symbol for "dog": the original three strikes and you're out! Evidence suggests that the Maya, Inca, and Aztecs used tattooing in rituals, and early Britons used tattoos in certain ceremonies. The Danes, Norse, and Saxons are known to have tattooed family crests onto their bodies. During the Crusades, some Europeans tattooed a cross on their hands or arms to mark their participation and indicate their desire for a Christian burial should they not return."(1)

1. <https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/history-you-asked/what-history-tattoos>

Historically speaking, the reasons people got tattoos differed significantly, depending on where they lived. Most of the time, they were for “religious purposes, for protection or as a source of power, as an indication of group membership, as a status symbol,”(2) an artistic expression, and for beautification purpose .



Where are Tattoos Mentioned in the Bible?

In most modern translations, the word tattoo is only used once, and it’s found in the book of Leviticus 19:28 (ESV):

“You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves: I am the LORD.”

The Hebrew word used in this passage is **kethobeth** (3793), from **kathab** (3789), a letter or other mark branded on the skin. It only occurs once in scripture to mean something inscribed, specifically “tattooing.”

Who is this passage for?

Beginning in verse one in the same chapter, it’s clear that Moses is speaking to “all the congregation of the people of Israel.” So, this is not merely instructions for the priests and Levites.

2. <https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/history-you-asked/what-history-tattoos>

Does this law only apply to Israel?

When this law was given to the congregation of Israel, it was meant for Israel and the mixed multitude that came out of Egypt with them.

Those who were not part of the twelve tribes of Israel (outsiders) who believed that the God of Israel was the one true God were instructed to obey the same laws, judgments, and statutes that Moses gave to the congregation.

Fast forward to today, and you'll hear people saying that the laws given in the Old Testament are only meant for the nation of Israel. Some Christians believe that the laws were done away with when Jesus died on the cross; therefore, they don't have to follow those laws.

The truth is that this law applies to Israel AND believers in Jesus Christ.

There is this false idea being taught that what is written in the New Testament is for Christians (believers in Jesus Christ) and what is in the Old Testament is for Jews.

First of all, when Jesus spoke to the multitudes, who was He speaking to? Who did He direct His messages to? To the Jews.

Did He preach that they were no longer required to uphold the law? On the contrary, He took the law to another level. He said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery. But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart' (Matthew 5:26-28, ESV).

That's just one example.

Nowhere in the New Testament is it written that believers in Jesus are not required to uphold the law. (Please see our booklet *Are Christians "Under the Law"?* for further study).



Jesus did not nail the law to the cross when He died, as is so often taught. The passage says, "And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross" (Colossians 2:13-14, ESV).

In this passage, The apostle Paul says that Jesus wiped out our long list of offenses against God because He was perfect, and we could never pay the price alone. He was without sin because He was able to keep the law perfectly. Because we can't perfectly keep God's laws, we pile up debts against Him, and the price for sin is death.

There is one law and one faith for the Jew and the Gentile alike. God does not have separate standards for Jews and believers. As is written in the scriptures:

"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord," (Romans 6:23).

Therefore, "legal demands" refers to the penalty for breaking the law. The punishment for sin is what only Jesus can remove, thereby canceling our debt.

To answer the question, does this law about tattoos in Leviticus only apply to the Jews? The answer is no; it applies to everyone

If you are interested in learning more on the topic of God's laws, please check out our digital booklet titled, "[Which Old Testament Laws Apply Today?](#)"



Is Getting a Tattoo a Sin?

Here is an example of an argument some Christians use to justify getting a tattoo:

Since the only mention of tattoos is in the Old Testament, the law no longer applies to Christians, and there is no mention of tattoos in the New Testament. Since there is no specific command against tattoos in the New Testament, getting one is not a sin.

We've already addressed the commandment in the Old Testament and how the law DOES apply to Christians because Jesus never did away with the law, only our record of sin and its punishment for us.

The reason the New Testament doesn't mention anything about whether it's okay to get a tattoo is that it was already on record as being a sin. It was written in the books of Moses (or scrolls at that time) that the Jewish people would have referred to. It didn't need repeating because they would have already known.

Even in the beginning of the early church, the gospel message was taken to the Jews first. Only later, it was revealed to the apostles to take the message to the Gentiles because the Jews had rejected the gospel and their Messiah.

“Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one...Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law”
(Romans 3:29-30, ESV).

What if you already have tattoos?

If you were a believer already but didn't know that the Bible says not to tattoo yourself before you got a tattoo, then it is still counted as a sin. Fortunately, if you confess your sin, Jesus is able to forgive. You did not get one, knowing it was wrong to do so; therefore, you sinned unintentionally.

There is a difference between intentional and unintentional sin in scripture. Someone who knows that something is a sin and does it anyway intentionally sins. Intentional sin comes with a heavier punishment than someone who sins unintentionally.

Should you have your tattoos removed?

You are not required by scripture to remove your tattoos. If they are offensive to others, then cover them up. If you have the financial means to remove them, you can choose to have that done, but it is not required.

Having your tattoos removed is a personal choice between you and God.

Many people do not like to look down and see a perpetual reminder of their sins. We know that God forgives us, but often, we have trouble forgiving ourselves and letting go. Having a tattoo removed might help in putting past sins behind us.



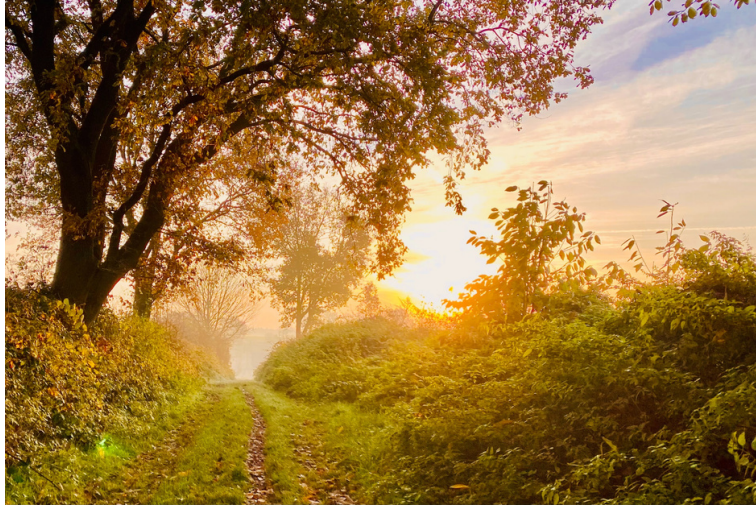
Why are Tattoos Wrong?

Let's be clear. The Bible doesn't say specifically why it's wrong to tattoo yourself. However, it does provide us with some clues.

First of all, we are made in the image of God. We reflect His image. The God that created us is not inked up, nor does He have images etched onto His body. As Christians, we are called to reflect His holiness, not just in our deeds but also in our outward appearance.

Paul exhorted the believers in Ephesus to “put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:22-24, ESV).

To the believers in the Corinthian church Paul wrote, “You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies” (1 Corinthians 6:20, ESV).



A calling to be separate from the world

The second clue the Bible gives us about why tattoos are wrong has to do with our calling to be separate from the rest of the world.

This does not mean we are meant to live like a bunch of hermits in the middle of nowhere.

It means we are to live in the world but not conform to the desires and practices of the society we are living in.

“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” (Romans 12:1-2, ESV).

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 6:16-18;

“What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said,
“I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them,
and I will be their God,
and they shall be my people.

Therefore go out from their midst,
and be separate from them, says the Lord,
and touch no unclean thing;
then I will welcome you,
and I will be a father to you,
and you shall be sons and daughters to me,
says the Lord Almighty."

Israel was called to be separate from the other nations

The message that the apostle Paul gave to the believers in the church is not a new message. This was the same message given to the Israelites in the desert by Moses.

The other nations that lived in the Middle East (the land of Canaan) at that time were pagan. They worshiped other gods and did not recognize the one true God. They practiced idolatry, sexual immorality, and numerous other sinful practices that God did not want Israel to take part in.

Israel (the descendants of Jacob) were not to participate in anything that these other nations did nor worship in their manner. They were called to worship God according to His laws, judgments, and statutes given to Moses, who instructed the people on how to live in the land.

"And you shall not walk in the customs of the nation that I am driving out before you, for they did all these things, and therefore I detested them. But I have said to you, 'You shall inherit their land, and I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey.' I am the Lord your God, who has separated you from the peoples" (Leviticus 20:23-24, ESV).

"You shall be holy to me, for I the Lord am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine" (Leviticus 20:26, ESV).

If God instructed Israel not to tattoo themselves and at the same time told them to be separate from the surrounding peoples, we could conclude that it's possible these other nations tattooed themselves or mutilated themselves in some form.

As a Christian, why would you want to imitate people who have nothing to do with God and practice things that are offensive to Him and violate His commandments?

This is not to say that all people who have tattoos are bad. Not at all. But it is the practice of tattooing oneself that is offensive to God. We are called to be separate from the rest of the world, including the practice of tattooing.



Does Jesus Have a Tattoo?

The book of Revelation says that Jesus will have a name written on His thigh.

“On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and LORD of lords” (Revelation 19:16, ESV).

It kind of sounds like Jesus went and got Himself a tattoo.

Does He really have a tattoo on His thigh?

The Greek word used for thigh in this verse is meros, and it's the only place that appears in the Bible. Strong's concordance says it is used figuratively (where the sword would be worn) as used in Psalm 45:3:

"Gird your sword on your thigh, O mighty one,
in your splendor and majesty!"

Strong also mentions that His title King of Kings and LORD of Lords written on His thigh is symbolic of His strength to tread down His foes.

In other words, He doesn't literally have a name tattooed on His thigh; it is just a figure of speech.

Conclusion

As followers of our LORD Jesus Christ, we must uphold the law of God the best we can. God does not have one set of rules for Jews and one set of rules for Christians.

Believers are called to come out of the world and be separate from other nations and peoples.

We are not to partake in the rituals and customs that are pagan in origin.

Even though we must live in the world and interact with the world, we must not conform to this world and what the world thinks is acceptable.

It's not easy to be different when everyone around you does the same thing. It's natural for us to want to fit in and be accepted by our peers, but you have to make a choice at some point. Going along with the world and its temporary pleasures means living contrary to how Jesus wants us to live.

The instructions laid out for us in the Bible are not there because God is mean and doesn't want us to have any fun. Getting a tattoo doesn't disqualify you from eternal life. Grace is a gift, and works do not earn salvation, but getting a tattoo when you know the Bible says it is wrong is rebelliousness towards God.



If you struggle with your walk with Jesus Christ in this world, take comfort knowing that **“Everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith”** (1 John 5:4, ESV).

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Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

Biblical definitions, Hebrew and Greek words and their meanings are drawn from the following resources:

Strong's Exhaustive Concordance by James Strong,
S.T.D., LL.D. Published in 1890; public domain.

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