

#190 “Are Tattoos Taboo?”

by Brent Barnett

www.relevantbibleteaching.com

Whether it is acceptable or not to get a tattoo is a hot topic among Christians, especially young people. Just as there is great peer pressure to sleep around, to experiment with drugs, to watch garbage on television, and to compromise in music, there is also great lure surrounding tattoos. To further confuse matters, those who support tattooing can be found inside evangelicalism. I went to a “Christian” college, and the president of the college said on welcome weekend with all of the parents present that parents should not get worked up if their son or daughter were to come home with a tattoo as long as it said Jesus or was “Christian” in nature. I couldn’t disagree more. Leviticus 19:28 says explicitly, “You shall not make any cuts in your body for the dead nor make any tattoo marks on yourselves: I am the LORD.” (The Hebrew word for tattoo means an imprintment, impression, inscription or mark in the flesh.) Despite this very clear command in the Old Testament not to get tattoos, the arguments for disregarding the passage continue to be made.

Many argue that since the command not to get tattoos is part of the Old Testament Law that it no longer applies given that we are in New Testament times. But this is a misunderstanding of how to read and apply the Old Testament Law to our lives today as the church of Jesus Christ. It is true that we are no longer under Law but under grace. However, this doesn’t imply that the moral imperatives of the Law no longer apply. For example, Leviticus 19 is full of other commands that certainly still apply today. Included in the same chapter that condemns tattooing are commands to respect parents, not take vengeance, not drink blood, not practice divination, honor the aged, use fair business practices, etc. In fact, a great many highly relevant sermons could be preached in modern churches from the moral imperatives in this passage. All of these commands are highly applicable to our lives as believers today. It is only reasonable to also conclude that the command to not get tattoo marks is also still valid. The only aspects of the passage that don’t carry over to the New Testament world pertain to the religious and ceremonial aspects of the Law such as making guilt offerings. Jesus died once for all (1 Peter 3:18), so there is no point to continuing the sacrificial system. However, there is merit in still obeying timeless commands.

The New Testament does not cast aside the moral commands of the Old Testament. Rather, it gives them increased meaning. Jesus said that not one jot or tittle (the tiniest of grammatical marks in a text) will be changed from the law (Matthew 5:18). Scripture is as it has been given. In other words, there were no mistakes in the Law. Modern Christians act like the Law is a mistake, when in reality, it is merely a shadow of the covenant of grace which has come in Christ. It is inferior because it cannot save, whereas the gospel of grace can and does. But it plays a valid part in the gospel message of pointing sinners to the seriousness of their sin (Galatians 3:22). Jesus ushered in a new covenant of grace, for He was full of grace and truth (John 1:14). No man could keep the Law (Romans 3:23), but Jesus fulfilled its righteous requirements so that we could be saved through Him (Romans 8:4). But just because Jesus fulfilled the Law doesn’t mean

that its moral imperatives can now be ignored (Matthew 5:17-19). Rather, those who are redeemed fulfill the intent of the Law by loving God with all of our hearts as well as our neighbors as ourselves (Romans 13:9-10, Galatians 5:14). At the root of all of the moral commandments in the Old Testament is a command to love God or to love others. The moral principles of the Law, therefore, are still there to guide us. For example, we should still not take God's name in vain. That didn't expire just because of the new covenant. The commands such as do not covet, do not steal, or do not lie, still apply. Children still must honor their parents, and we should still not make or worship idols. If we love God with all of our hearts and others as well, then we, of necessity, must keep these commands. We don't do it to earn God's favor, but we do it as He gives us grace as redeemed children of God. Christ fulfilling the Law doesn't mean destroying or invalidating the Law (Matthew 5:17). It means that He fully validated it by keeping it because He knew that we never could. Now, as we live by grace through faith, He empowers us to keep the commands of Christ, which we cannot possibly know or understand without looking back to the Old Testament with eyes now wide open by the Holy Spirit.

God's intent was for His people then and now to live uprightly, to be distinguished from Satanic and pagan practices in the world around them, and to love Him and others in a way that the world cannot and does not do. Tattooing is a practice that is very much integrated with worldliness and being connected to the ways of the world. The very nature of a tattoo parlor is far from being a sanctified place to be. If a young person wants to connect with the world, then a tattoo is a great way to do it. That is the bottom line.

Impure motives for getting a tattoo are obviously a sign of being in sin. Getting a tattoo to be liked by the world is wrong because we cannot love God and the world at the same time. Yet some will argue that they are getting a "Christian" tattoo to permanently show that they are Christian or to share the gospel. This is nowhere commanded in Scripture or practiced in Scripture. Tattooing John 3:16 to share the gospel is a right message with a wrong methodology. The methodology can undo the effectiveness of the message. Doing good things the wrong way is a wrong thing. Jesus never told the disciples to go out and tattoo themselves with Scripture, but He told them to preach. Getting a tattoo as a means to identify with Christ has no Biblical support and even condemnation. If we want to stand for Christ, the Bible has given us plenty of ways to do it, one of which is by heeding God's Word.

A tattoo mark isn't something to brag about, but it is something to be ashamed of. The church needs to take a stand by being different than the world rather than claiming to be trying to relate to it by succumbing to its corrupt practices. May God enable His people to shine brightly because of their love and good works such that they expose the darkness for what it is rather than trying to relate to darkness with darkness. The world needs light whether it likes it or not, and it is up to us to give it to them. Let us purify our motives and not be afraid to be different. Our testimony depends upon it.