

Some Pastoral Thoughts on Tattoos

A bunch of years ago, I was eating lunch by myself at a Tim Hortons. I was just about to dig in, when 2 men approached my table.

“You must be a Christian” said one. I wasn’t so quick at putting one and one together, so I said, “What makes you say that?”

“Well, we saw you pray before you ate. You don’t see that much anymore. Are you part of a church?”

I explained that I was a pastor, and their faces lit up. I forget the name of the group that they belonged to, now, but they told me that they also went to church, and they asked about mine.

I told them I was Free Methodist. And then waited for the usual question: “What’s Free Methodist,” they asked.

I said: “Well, there was this Methodist minister back in the 1800s named B. T. Roberts, who sort of felt like the church had gotten off track with the Message of Jesus. So he started calling the people back to holiness. Eventually he ruffled too many feathers, so they kicked him out. And that’s when he started the Free Methodist movement.”

Well. When I said the word “holiness,” these two guys lit up even brighter. I was starting to think I’d met two long lost brothers in arms.

“Oh. Our church is all about holiness, too,” they said. “We feel that worldliness is killing Christianity. God’s people need to get back to holiness.” And I nodded.

And then he said, “Like, for instance, our women don’t wear pants. Or cut their hair.” And then he looked at me and said, “Do *your* women wear pants?”

And I didn’t know what to say. I told this story to Dani later on, and she said: well: did you tell them you don’t *own* any women?

Which is a good point. But the point I want to make in bringing this up, is that for these guys, whoever they were, one of the signs of whether or not you’re a *holy* Christian is whether or not the women in your community *wear pants*.

Now: let me make it clear that I completely disagree with that perspective.

But let me also say that if you wanted to: you could actually argue their point from the Bible. After all: doesn’t Deuteronomy 22:5 say, “A woman shall not wear anything that pertains to a man, nor should a man put on a woman’s garment, for all who do so are an abomination?”

And doesn’t 1 Timothy 2:9-10 say “Women should dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair, or gold and pearls” (incidentally, that would rule out wearing braids, too).

Certainly, for Paul, in his era, it was not considered modest for a women to wear something that exposed the shape of her legs. In the Greco-Roman world, women generally wore an ankle-length dress called a *stola*, which they wore overtop of a tunic called a *peplon*, and sometimes they wore a mantle over top of that, something called a *palla*.

So it's unlikely that any ancient writer in the ancient world would have thought that pants were respectable attire for a women.

And yet, let me go on the record one more time, and say that I disagree with those two guys I met in the Tim Hortons: I don't think holiness has anything to do with whether or not women wear pants, and I don't think there's anything wrong with women doing so in our culture.

Maybe you're thinking: I thought this was gonna be about tattoos....

And it is. Because here's the point: it is very difficult to make a case *strictly from the Bible* for how a person ought to look, or not look, without first acknowledging that how we look—what is considered acceptable, or respectable—is *always* conditioned by our culture.

Is it okay to wear jewellery? 1 Peter says that our beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry.

Is it okay to shave? Leviticus 19:27 says that men must not trim the edges of their beards.

Here's the thing: you cannot apply any of these verses *directly* without recognizing that the Bible says *these things* because in the culture that the Bible was first written in, these things—braided hair, shaved faces, gold jewelry, wearing pants—they had a certain meaning *in that culture*.

If we lived in a culture where only prostitutes wore clothing that exposed the shape of their legs—which was the case for the Greco-Roman world, incidentally—then you might have a case for forbidding pants in our culture, too.

But we don't, and so the way we apply the verse that says “dress modestly” has to relate, in some way, to what our culture understands as *modest*.

So let me finally ask it: is it okay for Christians to have tattoos?

The answer is: it depends. What do tattoos *mean* in our culture, and do they mean something that is contrary to the Way of Jesus?

They *did* mean something that was contrary to the Way of Jesus, in ancient Israel.

This is why the one place—the only place—in the Bible where it mentions tattoos, it says we should not get them.

Leviticus 19:28 says, “Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the Lord.”

Now that seems cut and dry. But that's why I did the long preamble: because it's no *more* cut and dry than the question of whether or not it's okay to wear pants.

And here's the thing: I do not believe that Leviticus 19:28 applies to the modern-day practice of getting tattoos. And I think if you try to use *Leviticus 19:28* to build a case against getting tattoos, you are on very shaky ground.

Here are my reasons:

First: The phrase that we translate as "tattoo marks" in this verse is very rare. This is the only occurrence of it that we have in the Hebrew Bible. So it's not *even* exactly clear what it's describing. It's clear that it's talking about putting some sort of a mark on your body, but this could be by tattooing, or it could even just mean *painting* your body in some way.

But let's assume our translation is accurate and it means permanent tattoos like what people get today. That brings us to this:

Second: The context seems to describe a specific *kind* of "tattooing practice." It says don't do this "for the dead," i.e. as a way of mourning the dead. Many commentaries suggest that this is probably connected to some pagan mourning ritual, where you marked your body in some way to honor your dead loved ones. So, if it is prohibiting tattoos, it's not necessarily a general prohibition, but a specific cultural practice.

(Think about it like this: If I said, we shouldn't "sing Taylor Swift pop songs" in church (which we shouldn't) am I prohibiting *singing* in church generally, or am I prohibiting singing specific *kinds* of songs?)

You see: here's the reason that the Book of Leviticus prohibits the practice of getting tattoos for the dead: because in that culture, *tattoos had a pagan association*. If people saw you wearing a tattoo, they'd think you worshipped Molech, maybe, or Ba'al, or they would think that worshipping Israel's God was no different from how you worshipped them. And *because tattoos were associated with worshipping false gods*, the book of Leviticus says don't do it.

Do tattoos *today* have that same association?

I'd say in most settings, they don't.

I could imagine a situation, maybe, where, let's say there was an ex-biker, who was part of Hells Angels. I don't know. And he got tattoos as a biker, to show his allegiance to the gang... right? But then, let's say he comes to Jesus and gets saved; and then later on, let's say, he comes to me and He says, hey pastor should I now get a tattoo of Jesus to show I'm part of *his gang now*?

I'd probably say, Hey Rocky, you left that life behind, you can't honor Jesus in the way you used to honour the Hells Angels. So don't get a tattoo.

But outside of those kind of specific cases, do tattoos have the same spiritual connotation to us as they did in the ancient world?

Before you answer, let me say this: Third: This verse comes in the Old Testament Law, as part of a long series of prohibited practices, including, but not limited to: wearing clothing with two different kinds of fibres woven together, or shaving your beards.

And according to Galatians 5:3, if anyone tries to “justify themselves by keeping the law” they are now obligated to keep the *entire law*.

In other words, if I say, I’m a good Christian because I keep Leviticus 19, and *don’t have tattoos*, and you’re a bad Christian because you *broke* Leviticus 19 and got a tattoo anyone who does that is now *immediately obligated* to keep every rule *in* Leviticus, too: are you wearing a nylon/cotton blend? Do you eat shellfish? Do you shave your face? Do you do any work (at all) on a Saturday?

These are all *equally prohibited* by the same book that prohibits tattoos. And if you’re gonna justify yourself by keeping one, you’ve *gotta keep them all*.

But this brings me to fourth: The Old Testament Law—Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, the whole bit—has been fulfilled by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As Christians, we “keep Leviticus,” the whole of it, rules about tattoos included, not by *following it*, but by following Jesus. And Jesus says, here’s the way you fulfill the Law: by putting your Faith in me, and then, from that faith, start Loving God with all your heart, and loving your neighbour as yourself.

There’s a place in the New Testament where the Jewish Christians—Christians who had followed Leviticus all their lives, mind you—they were trying to figure out what to do with all these Gentile believers who were coming to Christ. Should we require them to keep the Law?

That was the big question: should we tell them they can’t have tattoos (among other things).

Anyone know what they said?

In Acts 15 it says they said: “Why should we *try to test God* by putting a yoke on their necks that we ourselves, as Jews *weren’t even able to bear*. No! It is through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that we are saved, just as they are.”

Did you catch that? We are not saved by keeping the Law (the bit about tattoos included). We are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus. And, if we try to put the burden of the Law on other believers—especially believers coming to Jesus brand new—when we do that we are actually putting God to the test.

To be clear: the principle that underlies Leviticus 19:28 still applies for Christians.

The principle is: the way we worship *our God* should be distinct from the way non-Christians worship their gods. There should be something about us that sets us apart.

But I believe very strongly that Jesus would say: listen: if you think the thing that’s gonna set you apart from non-Christians is whether or not you have tattoos, then you’re kind of missing the point. The way I want you to be set apart (this is still Jesus speaking) the way I want you to be set apart is by *excelling everyone else* at being peacemakers, and extending love to the excluded, and generosity, and honesty, and sincerity.

Heart-change stuff.

Because you could go your whole life and never get a tattoo, and still be full of selfishness, arrogance, judgementalism, and whatnot on the inside. Jesus called that being a white-washed tomb. And he had no time for white washed tombs.

This actually brings me to the main thing I want to say about tattoos today: Just that Jesus wants us to excel at the heart-change stuff—you know: showing this neighbourhood his love, and peace, and generosity, and grace—he wants *us* to be so single-mindedly consumed with loving him and loving other people that we just don't have *time* to sit around and debate something as superficial as tattoos.

And for the record: the New Testament is full of examples of churches that did not survive because the people in the church kept judging one another based on superficial measures of holiness, like tattoos, let's say, instead of the *real measures of holiness*—our passion to walk by Faith in the Love of God and the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

As an example: there's a place in Galatians where Paul's writing to a bunch of Christians who are debating circumcision. Does a Christian male have to be circumcised? It's interesting, they were debating the propriety of putting a mark on your body, too, but in this case it's a totally different kind of mark.

But the thing is, I mean: Leviticus says circumcise your males, right? And a lot of Jews in the Galatian Church were circumcised, and none of the Gentiles were, right? So, who's holier than whom?

Is it okay for a Christian *not to be circumcised*? (We can't imagine debating that, probably, but this question was tearing that church *apart*)

And here's what Paul says (among other things): Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means *anything*, but what counts is being a New Creation. The entire Law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' And then he says, "But watch out: if you guys keep biting each other, and devouring each other, you will destroy each other."

I.e. If you get hung up on these superficial measures of holiness, you will *destroy this church*.

Says Paul.

So: You ask me: As Pastor, what's your opinion about tattoos?

I'd say: I'm completely indifferent to them; like Paul says about circumcision, I'd say, neither *having a tattoo* or *not having a tattoo* means *anything*. What counts is being and becoming a New Creation.

And if you asked for more, I'd say: well: there is no *biblical case* you can make to say that tattoos are wrong.

There is no *theological case* you can make to say that tattoos are wrong.

And there is a very strong biblical case to make *against* judging other believers for superficial things like circumcision... or tattoos... or what not.

Of course, if we lived in a culture where tattoos had the kind of connotation that they did in the ancient world, where they were associated with the pagan worship of pagan idols, I'd say don't touch them with a 10-foot pole.

But they don't have that association in our culture.

I've been asking around. And it turns out that people get tattoos today for a 1001 reasons: To express their individuality. To mark a special moment in their lives. To fit in with the group. Conformity. Vanity. You name it.

Not all of these are good. But not all of them are bad, either. And *every* Christian needs to go to God for themselves, in faith, and decide before God, in faith, whether *their* tattoo is a good idea or not.

I would love it if our church was the kind of church where we just expected each other to do that—to go to God with all of our decisions, big *and small*—if we trusted each other to do that—and then we devoted the bulk of our time to the New Creation stuff, the heart-change stuff, the mission that Jesus has us on, to show his unconditional love to this neighbourhood.