

Northwest University's Student Magazine

# TALON

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## TATTOOS & CHRISTIANS: DO OR DON'T?

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Photo by Luke Pamer



As a believer in Jesus Christ, I have nine tattoos. Some Christians have tattoos that cover their entire body, while others are completely against the idea of Christians having tattoos at all. We have to ask ourselves: what is the argument and why are we questioning tattoos at all?

I met with Professor Bob Stallman, the Professor of Bible and Hebrew to greater understand how tattoos are perceived from a Biblical perspective.

The Bible only ever blatantly speaks on tattooing in Leviticus 19:28, of which Professor Stallman and I discussed at length. It is important to note the context of the passage from which we are reading.

"Impure does not always mean immoral," Stallman elaborated. "In Leviticus, it has a lot to do with your ability to participate in worship. If you touch a dead body, it is not wrong, but you cannot participate in worship for a week because of impurity."

Leviticus 19 lists 7 things that Israelites are not supposed to do in association with the mixing of life and death. They are not to eat meat mixed with blood because the dead animal still has remnants of life within it. They were not to do sorcery, cut their hair or beard, cut their bodies for the dead, or get tattoos. Particularly, these laws are associated with mourning. Mourning the death of someone is not wrong, but Leviticus tells the Israelites not to do it by defacing their bodies.

Stallman informed me that there are several reasons why someone would mark their body. A slave could be branded to belong to a certain human owner, a prisoner of war could be marked or branded, or people would brand themselves to be linked to a certain religion.

"Something to note here," said Stallman, "is that Israel was completely against kidnapped slavery, and it was a movement in the Bible against this type of slavery to make it more humane and limiting. Thus, 'do not cut yourself,' could mean, do not put yourself into the slavery of another person."

The real debate about tattoos comes when we get into the rabbinical literature discussed and written within the first 400 years of Jesus' ascendance into Heaven.

Rabbis discussed Leviticus in attempts to try and figure out what sorts of tattoos were permissible and which ones were wrong to get. Stallman confirmed that certainly, the Rabbis would not allow a Jew to bind themselves to another god or one that was applied in mourning for a deceased person. This was a pagan practice.

Rabbis constantly disagreed with each other in these discussions and went back and forth on what the standard was with regard to tattoos. One rabbi said that tattoos are wrong and you are completely liable when the tattoo is written in a lasting mark, such as an ink tattoo. Another rabbi thought that tattoos were okay as long as you did not write the name of God (YHWH), for His name is too holy.

"Something to keep in mind," Stallman said, "is that the Rabbis were discussing tattoos not for all people, but only for Jewish people, not the Gentiles." Any tattoo would probably make them wonder if it was towards another god or not.

It was the rabbinic way to for Jewish people to follow different rabbis, so Jewish peoples' opinions on tattoos varied depending on which rabbi they followed.

In the New Testament, Jesus said, "Do not call anyone rabbi" (Matthew 23). According to Stallman, Jesus' point in saying this was that rabbis get into endless debates. The people should be focusing on following God and not on which rabbi to follow. This point leads into the summation of his opinion on tattoos and how they apply to the New Testament believer.

According to Stallman, "If a person was Jewish already, they would continue to follow tradition. If the Gospel came to a non-Jewish family, you do not have to become Jewish to become a Christian."

"According to Leviticus, people should not get tattoos that have any connection with the dead or following another god. So, while tattoos are not as a whole category ruled out, some tattoos are inappropriate. If a person's tattoo connects them with another god or occult practice. It would be questionable."

Ultimately, we ended on the notion that it is all about our relationship with Christ and what springs out of that. While God did not specify every law or rule in the Bible, Christianity is ultimately not a set of rules, but a relationship that all else revolves around.

Jonathan Foster, a senior at Northwest University, has three tattoos, each of which has a very specific meaning. He stated, "Each of my pieces are on my body to remind me and encourage me. I don't regret any of my art and I look forward to each new session." Regardless, he recommends thinking long and hard before getting a tattoo because it will be on your body for your entire life.

Junior Stephen Ricks remarked, "It's okay for Christians to have tattoos because God does not judge based on the outward appearance, but on the heart. Tattoos are another way to express the Gospel just as clothing or logos do, and they open doors for people to talk to others [about Christ]. The Levitical laws were there to show the depraved state of man and the need of a Savior because no man can uphold all the laws. Only a God-man can, who is Jesus Christ."

Laura Ritchart, another Northwest University senior, believes that there is nothing wrong with tattoos as long as they are not slanderous or against God. They have the ability to be very tasteful and artistic. She says, "I think Christians are too quick to judge people with a lot of tattoos because they make a quick assumption that could be completely false."

There are still people who feel strongly opposed to tattoos.

Professor Gillespie believes that, because God specifically forbade the people of God from permanent tattoos, Christians should not associate themselves with the worship of false gods.

"Disfiguring the body with indelible images on the skin is associated with primitive, stone-age, pagan or non-Christian and non-Jewish cultures. ... Christians today should recognize that they differ from non-Christian cultures by also not disfiguring the body, just as proscribed in the Bible," said Gillespie.

Gillespie also said that to justify tattooing as an expression of "individuality" reveals weakness of character. If you have to permanently disfigure your body to stand out as an individual, then that doesn't make sense as a criterion for self-worth.

Over all, whether you leave believing that tattoos are right or wrong, it is extremely important to become educated in either decision you make, especially if it is to get a tattoo.

