

April 15, 2018
Third Sunday of Easter
"Controversies of Our Faith: Tattoos"

This sermon is based on *Making Sense of the Bible: Rediscovering the Power of Scripture Today*, by Adam Hamilton. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2014. See Chapter 28.

I heartily recommend Rev. Hamilton's wonderful book. I am covering only a small portion of it, and there are many treasures in it you will discover if you buy and read it.



Mother and son tattoos. Mine's on the bottom.

True confessions. When my son, Devin, turned 18, he was determined to get a tattoo. He had been planning it for years, and to have tried to talk him out of it would just have created friction and not stopped him. So...when you can't beat 'em, join 'em!

He said to me, shortly after his birthday, "Mom, will you come with me to get my tattoo?" When your newly adult son issues an invitation into his life like that, my advice is to say yes. And off we went, together.

So, even though the Bible says not to, I have a tattoo. Maybe you do too. Or maybe your child or grandchild or friend does. As people of faith, we might want to think this through.

There it is, right in Leviticus 19: 28:

Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the LORD.

This is a section of scripture that records God directly giving laws to Moses. The chapter ends with verse 36, where God says, “Keep all my decrees and all my laws and follow them. I am the LORD.” Seems clear-cut...but let’s reflect on it in the light of what we have already learned about the Bible in the several sermon series I’ve done based on Adam Hamilton’s book.

We’ve learned that the Bible wasn’t dictated by God, but written by people who wanted to tell other’s what they believed was God’s will. These authors were grounded in a certain culture and time, which influenced how they saw that will. They further had varying motives for their writing—they sought to address particular needs of particular people at a particular time. We believe, and find evidence, that the Holy Spirit inspired these writings. At the same time, this isn’t the same as saying that every word of the Bible was dictated by God, or even that all the words were equally inspired. Some scriptures correct other scriptures. Some verses contradict other verses. And some of what is in the Bible doesn’t necessarily reflect God’s timeless will.

Finally, we look to Acts 15 for guidance. This chapter tells of the Jerusalem Council, when Paul and the Christian elders of the church, who were mostly Jewish, debated the Law of Moses. They decided to set most of the laws aside, declaring them no longer binding upon followers of Jesus.

So does that include the law about tattoos? Maybe...

Another way to look at this is to consider what it really means to live by ALL the laws of the Bible.

A. J. Jacobs is an editor-at-large of *Esquire* magazine and an agnostic Jew. As a writing project, he spent a year following the Law of Moses as literally as possible. He wrote a book about it, called *The Year of Living Biblically*. As you might imagine, he learned a few things.

He first of all learned that doing good things changed him for the better. Part of the Law of Moses has to do with ethical teachings, and following those teachings altered his thought patterns. Usually, we believe that we first change our heart, and then we change our behavior. Jacobs discovered that the opposite is also true: by changing his behavior, his heart changed in loving, compassionate ways.

Living Biblically impacted his family.

His wife became very irritated with him for following literally Leviticus 15: 19-23. This commands that a man is not to sit on something that has been sat on by a menstruating woman, or sleep in the same bed as a menstruating woman. If he does, the man has to wash his

clothes and take a bath. His wife found this law offensive. In protest, when she had her period, she would purposefully sit in every chair in the house, forcing Jacobs to stand all the time! He eventually purchased a portable chair to carry with him.

Another important thing Jacobs learned was that no one, including those Jewish and Christian fundamentalists who say they take the Bible literally, actually does. All faithful people pick and choose what scriptures they will follow, because it's impossible to literally follow everything in the Bible. Jacobs concluded, "The important thing is picking and choosing the right things."

To help us find God's will for us in all the parts of scripture, maybe it would be helpful to explore *why* the Law of Moses forbids tattoos. Here is Leviticus 19: 28 again:

Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the LORD.

Cutting the body was something done by a person on behalf of a loved one who died. The blood was believed to attract demons away from the corpse, and to appease the pagan gods. Tattoos were also associated with pagan religions; for example, followers of Dionysus, the Greek god of the wine harvest, were known for tattooing an ivy leaf on their bodies.

So what God is really saying when he gives the law to not get a tattoo is, "Don't mark your bodies with signs of other gods." I don't know about you, but that's a law I can get behind. It's meaningful. It has a purpose of keeping me focused on the God of my salvation. I choose to follow God by obeying this law.

A final way to look at our question of whether it's OK to get a tattoo, is to consider what Jesus said in his Great Commandment. Here's the context: the Jewish elders, the Pharisees and Sadducees, are pestering Jesus with questions designed to trip him up. They want him to say something they can declare blasphemy, so they can destroy him. And then we hear this exchange in Matthew 22: 34-40:

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Did you hear that? “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” Jesus is saying that the 613 laws of the Torah, and all the prophets said, is summed up in just two rules:

1. Love God.
2. Love your neighbor.

That’s not to say that following these two rules is simple. Sometimes, maybe often, loving God means a life of sacrifice. Sometimes, maybe often, loving your neighbor means the hard work of putting others first, and caring for people who may not be like you, may not be pleasant, may not return the favor. But if you do your best to do these two things, then according to Jesus, you are following God’s law.

So what about tattoos? I think the main question should be “Does your tattoo keep you in some way from loving God and neighbor?”

If you have a tattoo of an ivy leaf to symbolize your worship of Dionysus, then yeah...your tattoo is a distraction to any love you could have for God. But there are many tattoos that aren’t such distractions. I’ve seen a lot of tattoos that are Christian in nature. I know people who have tattoos that memorialize someone they love, symbolize an important step in their personal or spiritual growth, or are expressions of their God-given individuality. These kinds of tattoos might actually enhance the holder’s spiritual life and make it easier for them to love God and neighbor.



Here is a close up of my tattoo, seen from your perspective as you look at my arm. I told the tattoo artist I wanted it to look like a filigree heart, and I think he did a good job.

But, if you flip the tattoo over, you will see it from my perspective, as I look down on my arm.



Now, you should see three letters, “C,” “L,” and “J.” That stands for “Come, Lord Jesus.” My tattoo is a permanent mark on my body, signifying my faithfulness as a follower of Christ. It is my way of reminding myself that I invite Jesus into my life every day, that I open myself to him and allow him to work in my life.

God tells Samuel in 1 Samuel 16: 7:

The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.

So regarding tattoos, as with many of the commands of the Bible, it’s about where your heart is. And I’m convinced that God knows exactly where your heart is. Is your heart focused on loving God and neighbor, or somewhere else? If you have a tattoo, you are probably displaying your heart to the world for all, including God, to see.

References:

The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Volume I. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994. See “The Book of Leviticus” by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., p. 1135.