



Tattoos?

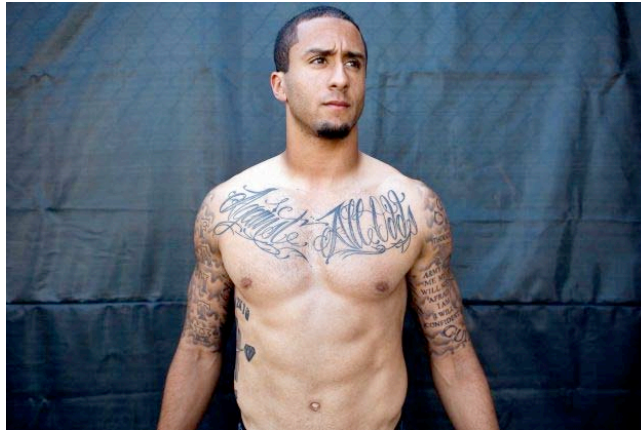
Is it sinful to get a tattoo?

Should a Christian get one?

What does God think?

What should a Christian think about those  
who get tattoos?

By Anthony Ceder



### **Why is it important to address tattoos?**

I'm writing this just before Super Bowl XLVII (47). The San Francisco 49ers are about to take on the Baltimore Ravens in a game that, last year, was viewed by over 111 million people. It was the most viewed television broadcast of any kind in American history. Last year, there were 10,245 tweets per second during Madonna's half-time performance. Zero dollars and zero cents is how much the NFL pays its Super Bowl half-time performers. Justin Timberlake, the Black Eyed Peas, Beyonce, Prince, Madonna and the rest do it for publicity or in Janet Jackson's case, for exposure. At this year's Super Bowl, companies will fork over an average of \$3.75 million dollars per commercial. The most expensive Super Bowl commercial in history was 120 seconds long and it was Chrysler's \$12 million dollar spot featuring Detroit rapper Eminem. When the Super Bowl first started in 1967, a 30 second commercial cost \$42,000. The shortest Super Bowl commercial in history was 0.5 seconds and it was by Ivar's Seafood of Seattle. It is estimated that 1.5 billion pounds of Chicken wings will be consumed during Super Bowl weekend. This weekend approximately 49.3 million cases of beer will be sold. It is estimated that approximately 7 million people will take off work on the Monday following the Super Bowl. When the Super Bowl first began, the tickets started at \$6, \$8, \$10 and \$12 dollars per ticket. Last year the face value of the tickets was \$600, \$800, \$900, and \$1,200 per ticket. The San Francisco 49ers have won all five of their Super Bowl appearances and the Baltimore Ravens won the only time they played in the game. If the 49ers win, they will tie the Pittsburgh Steelers for most Super Bowls and will own six Lombardi trophies.

This year I'm curious about a statistic that I'm not likely to find. Ready for this? Which team's players have more tattoos? Meaning, if we counted the tattoos of

all 53 players on each team, which team would have more? One thing is for sure, if a team scored points for having a lot of tattoos on their players, then the quarterback of the 49ers offense certainly would score more points for his team than the Raven's quarterback would.

The quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers is named Colin Kaepernick. He's a young kid that has taken the league by storm. He has a fascinating story. He's only 25 years old and he's going to start his 10<sup>th</sup> game in the Super Bowl. He has a soul patch on his chin and he is covered in tattoos. He is half black and half white and has never met his birth mother and isn't interested in doing so. He was adopted by white parents and taken to live in Wisconsin. When asked if it was socially awkward growing up with white parents he replied, "growing up I would always get asked at hotels and other places if I needed help even when I was standing right by my parents." He carries himself with a chip on his shoulder, in part, because he had only one scholarship offer coming out of high school, to the school he attended and quarterbacked, the University of Nevada. The other reason he carries himself with a chip on his shoulder is because five quarterbacks were drafted ahead of him in the 2011 draft. He has "Against All Odds" chiseled across his chest as a permanent reminder of his journey. When asked what his favorite tattoo is he replied, "it's the one inside my biceps: 'My Gift is My Curse.' There are a lot of different meanings to it. One that applies right here is that there are a lot of great things about being an NFL quarterback, a lot of perks. At the same time there's a lot of things you can't do as an NFL quarterback – just walking around as a normal guy. I don't get to go home for Thanksgiving and see my family either." He got his first tattoo when he was 19 because his dad wouldn't let him get one while he lived under his same roof. When asked what he would tell kids waiting for adoption he replied, "just keep your head up, God has a plan for you. You might not be able to see it right now but he has one."

The first tattoo he ever got was Psalm 18:39 which says, "You arm me with strength for battle. You make my adversaries bow at my feet." Kaepernick elaborated on the meaning of the tattoo by saying, "it's saying the Lord is giving me all the tools to be successful, I just have to go out and do my part to uphold that."

Colin Kaepernick claims to be a Christian. His tattoos are spiritual and full of meaning and significance. But some Christians might be asking a fair question, "is God pleased with his tattoos or any tattoos for that matter?"

It isn't an easy question to answer. There is a place in the Bible that clearly forbids tattoos, but, put in its proper context, its application isn't easy to discern this side of the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

What does God think about tattoos? Is it sinful to get a tattoo? Should a Christian get one? What should a Christian think about those who get tattoos?





### **Grace & Truth**

Perhaps the verse that has impacted my ministry to teenagers more than any other verse is John 1:14: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of *grace and truth*.”

The author of this verse was one of the disciples and he was perhaps closer to Jesus than all others. He was the man Jesus entrusted to care for his mother when he was dying and repeatedly is referred to as that disciple “whom Jesus loved” throughout the gospel of John. In John 1:14, the author claims to have “seen” Jesus and claimed that he was indeed an eyewitness to his life. Essentially he was saying, “I had a front row seat when God came to earth. I saw Jesus, I ate with him, walked with him, talked with him, slept near him, heard the things he said and saw the wonderful things he did.” He could’ve used a million words to describe what he saw in Jesus but he intentionally chose to boil down what it was like to experience Jesus on a daily basis through two key words. He says that Jesus was full, not lacking any measure, of *grace and truth*. Essentially when he was trying to make the person of Christ come to life he wanted you to think of a man filled to the brim with both *grace and truth*. Notice what he didn’t say. He didn’t say, “he was merely full of grace.” He also didn’t say, “he was merely full of truth.” I know a lot of people who beat people up with the Bible. They use it as a weapon and often don’t seem to possess much love, compassion or grace, but instead just memorize bible verses and

spit them out of their mouths with the force of a hammer. John doesn't want you to think of Jesus that way. I know other people who are so full of grace they are almost like soggy cereal. They don't care much for truth. They are loving, gracious and compassionate, but in their effort to show kindness they don't demonstrate any commitment to the truth of God's word. John doesn't want you to imagine Jesus that way either. Instead he says he was full, not lacking any measure, of *grace and truth*. He was loving, gracious, and ready to pardon people no matter what they had done. At the same time, he was always fierce in his commitment to the truth of God's word. He was full of *grace and truth*.

It seems to me that we would be wise to try and answer the question of tattoos and all other theological questions while aiming to be full of *grace and truth*.

## Grace

Colin Kaepernick was adopted. It seems his biological mom chose to place him in a good home because she feared she wouldn't be able to take care of him. In my opinion what she did was heroic. She no doubt felt love for her child but decided it was best to place her son in a better home than she felt she could provide. The Kaepernick's were the benefactors of her loving choice. As loving as Colin's biological mom was in not aborting her child and loving him enough to place him in a great home, I think it's at least possible that Colin still has scars because of his adoption. My father was adopted. His parents are amazing Christian people. They are the sweetest, most God-honoring people I have ever met. My father loves them deeply and wouldn't trade them as parents for the world. Yet he still is scarred by the fact that his mom placed him in the home he was raised in. He feels he was "given up" for adoption by his birth mother. Sometimes the thought overwhelms him with sadness. It's hard to convince him there was nothing wrong with him or that his mother didn't want him. He is 58 years old and his adoption can still make him tear up on occasion. Once again, he loves the people that adopted and raised him with every fiber of his being, but it still hurts to try and comprehend why his birth mother "placed him" instead of "keeping him." Colin Kaepernick is half white and half black, and he was raised by a white Wisconsin family. His adopted parents, like my grandparents, seem amazing. It seems that Colin loves them like my family loves my grandparents. My dad has no interest in knowing his biological mother and neither does Kaepernick have any desire to know his. Only adopted children fully understand what it's like to be adopted. It is a beautiful thing for a mother to give away her child to parents who will love the child unconditionally and provide for the child in ways that she simply can't. It's also a beautiful thing when a mother and a father adopt a child and love the child as their own. In my opinion, it's one of the most godly things a person can do. Even still, as beautiful and inspiring as adoption can be, those who are adopted sometimes bear insecurities from the adoption all their lives. I wonder if Colin Kaepernick likely deals with some of the same emotions my father deals with? He can love his parents with all his heart, while still be wondering in the depths of his being why his mom placed him instead of keeping him. Compound his situation with the fact that his adopted parents are white and he is only half white, and the insecurity has the potential to get deeper. I wonder how

he felt growing up when he was around other black kids? I wonder if people made fun of him for being “too white” even though he’s half black? Meaning, I wonder if people made fun of him for being an “Uncle Tom” black person, or one who sells out his true nature as an African American to fit in to the white culture? I wonder if he felt like a black man living in a white man’s world? I wonder if his tattoos are part of his desire to gain acceptance by the black culture that he feels is part of his identity, even though he wasn’t raised by black parents? I wonder if growing up he felt comfortable in his own skin? Kaepernick has made it clear that his tattoos have meaning, but this week I’ve been wondering if even he knows just how deep the meaning of his tattoos are. Before we can even begin to discuss the righteousness of tattoos, these types of thoughts should help shape the spirit of our convictions, especially if we aim to be like Jesus and be full of grace. When Jesus approached the woman at the well in John 4 before he spoke the truth to her, he revealed that he was aware of her five divorces and that he knew she was in a sexual relationship with a man who was not her husband. He didn’t judge her, scold her or belittle her. He simply made sure she understood that he was aware of her past and still wanted to talk to her anyway. She felt loved and known by Jesus. That should be our goal whenever we discuss truth with someone. Jesus was always full of grace and we should be too.



## Truth

By the time Jesus had finished his conversation with the woman at the well he had boldly declared the truth to her even as he was lavishing her with grace. To paraphrase his words he essentially told her that she needed living water. He told her that the arms of a man would never satisfy the deep longings of her heart and that only he (the long awaited Messiah) could. Essentially, he wasn't soggy cereal. He didn't say, "God loves you no matter what you do." He didn't sweep her sin under the rug. No, he shared the truth. Even better, he introduced her to the embodiment of truth (himself).

What is the truth about tattoos? Does God's word have anything to say to us regarding whether or not a Christian should permanently mark up their body with artistic expressions?

The main verse in the bible that people use against tattoos is found in Leviticus 19:28:

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

When you first read that sentence it seems pretty clear. It very clearly says that the Lord is not okay with putting tattoos on our bodies. Here's the problem. The verse right before verse 28 says this:

*"Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard."*

This means only James Harden of the Houston Rockets, a man with an unkempt beard, is one of the few men in the city I live in that seems to be following this Levitical law. Here's another problem. Earlier in Leviticus 19 it says this:

*"Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material."*

Ouch! If I were to follow this Levitical law I would have to toss a lot of my favorite shirts in the trash!

The bottom line is that it's a dangerous practice to zero in on one verse of the Bible and create a theological truth. As Christians, we are to arrive at truth using the whole of scripture and be careful never to recklessly quote bible verses without measuring how they fit into the larger context of scripture. So what is going on in Leviticus and how do these verses fit into the larger context of the Bible?

First of all, it's important to note that in Leviticus 19 God is addressing the entire nation of Israel many years before the arrival of Jesus on earth. Leviticus is a book that God gave Israel to establish them as a nation and to lay out for them with specificity how to honor him with their lives. God was carving out a distinct people for himself in Leviticus and he is exhorting his people to a lifestyle that was very different than their pagan neighbors. When God exhorted his people not to "cut their bodies for the dead or put tattoos marks" on themselves he was essentially saying, "don't mourn like your neighbors." He was telling his people not to cut themselves at funerals like heathens that didn't have hope. He was telling them not to make themselves bleed as a way of interceding for the dead or to please gods that didn't exist. He was teaching them how to trust him in the midst of life's hardest circumstance and not to imitate the mourning patterns of those who were aimless in their grieving. It was common practice in the days Leviticus was written for deep gashes on the face and arms and legs to be made during times of bereavement. This was a common way to show respect for the dead and it was a sort of an offering to the deities that presided over death and the grave. You may recall the story of Elijah in 1 Kings 18 when the prophet of God was squared off against the prophets of the pagan god Baal. When the prophets couldn't get their false god to answer them they began to "cut themselves, as was their custom, with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them." Essentially God was saying in Leviticus 19:28, "don't be like the prophets of Baal and cut yourselves to make me hear you when you are mourning the loss of a loved one." So, in Leviticus 19:28, God exhorted his covenant community to not tattoo or cut themselves in imitation of the pagan cultures that surrounded them and was teaching them to trust him in those times, grieving in a distinct way. I believe the Old Testament foreshadows Jesus over and over again. In Leviticus 19:28, I think it's also possible that God was preparing his people for what he planned to do through Jesus. God didn't want his people cutting themselves and making themselves bleed or marking themselves like hopeless nations in the midst of mourning. Instead he was preparing them to recognize the fact that Jesus was coming to allow himself to be cut and to bleed to take away mourning and ultimately annihilate death for those who would trust in his death and resurrection.

Perhaps most significantly, on the night Jesus was betrayed by Judas Iscariot he made it clear at his last supper that he was initiating a new covenant. Meaning the law of Leviticus would no longer be the standard of pleasing God. Through his cross and resurrection, we are no longer bound to obey Leviticus verse by verse but now we live by faith in Jesus and live empowered by the Spirit to please God. That doesn't mean Leviticus is now worthless. It does mean that it isn't a sin to put cheese on your burger, that you don't have to worry if it's a sin to mix fabrics and you have liberty to cut your hair however you want. Praise God for the freedom we have as Christians because of what Jesus has done for us!

It seems to me that the Christian should not feel constrained by Leviticus 19:28 in regards to whether or not to get a tattoo. As best I can tell from the whole of scripture, it is no sin to get a tattoo. Now days people like Colin Kaepernick get tattoos to express themselves. It seems to me that people in today's culture permanently mark up their bodies to constantly remind themselves of who they aim to be or to express values or maybe to rebel against certain aspects of life. In most cases, it doesn't seem that people get tattoos as a way of self-inflicting bodily harm to please pagan gods. If that were the case, my answer would perhaps be different. In today's culture people are decorating their body with tattoos either to make it look better or to express themselves in some capacity. People modify their appearance in our culture for a lot reasons and in a lot of ways. Some people use clothing, others use sun tans or fake tans, others use make-up, plastic surgery, hair cuts, body building, piercings, weight loss plans and yet others use tattoos. Unless we are prepared to call all of those things sinful, I think we would be wise to abstain from alleging that it is a sin to have a tattoo.

However, with these things in mind, the New Testament does make it clear that we are not to abuse our freedoms and that our bodies are sacred temples of the Holy Spirit. 1 Corinthians 6:12 & 19:

*"Everything is permissible for me"—but not everything is beneficial....*

*Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body."*

We must never abuse our freedom. Just because it isn't sinful to get a tattoo, that doesn't mean it's necessarily wise or God honoring to get one. The Christian isn't entirely free. We have joyfully surrendered our lives to the Lord Jesus. Paul calls himself a slave to Jesus in the New Testament. Salvation is free but we are not necessarily free to live however we wish. Jesus has bought our lives (including our bodies) with his blood. We are a part of his body and we belong to him. We have joyfully and willingly given ourselves to him. Therefore the Christian shouldn't make a decision to get a tattoo flippantly, nor should the Christian make any important decision flippantly. Tattoos affect our bodies and it's important to remember that our lives, including our bodies, belong to Jesus. Therefore we owe it to him to enter into the decision of whether or not to get one with wisdom and concern for what he thinks. The Christian doesn't live with a belligerent spirit as though no one can tell them what to do and not to do. The Lord Jesus commands the Christian and the Christian delights to submit to his authority in all areas of life.

## **Application for parents**

If you are a parent, you are strongly against tattoos and your child wants one, before you start whacking your child over the head with the Bible, I would encourage you to slow down. Realize it's not necessarily sinful to do so and that you can't use the Bible to talk your child out of getting a tattoo. At least, I don't think you can but you are free to disagree.

Here's what you can do though if you are not a fan of tattoos. Get to know your child's motive for wanting one in the first place. Show your child grace. It could be that your little girl doesn't feel as pretty as other girls. It could mean that she doesn't fit a certain mold and that she is trying to carve out a niche with a social group that accepts her more unconditionally. That particular girl doesn't need judgment, she needs a listening ear, a compassionate tenderness and to feel affirmed by her parents over and over. It doesn't mean you have to acquire a taste for tattoos or to give your child permission to get one, but your argument and rationale won't go far unless you show your child grace and understanding. Others of you have sons that may be like Colin Kaepernick and huge fans of tattoos. Maybe your sons are insecure, trying to prove themselves and wanting to express themselves with a permanent artistic expression of who they are. Dig for the motive and then show unconditional love to your son. Once he believes that you have labored to understand what it's like to be him, he may hear you out on what you think of tattoos and why he shouldn't get one. Others of you have kids that just like the music scene or rap culture, they are right-brain creative, and just like the look of having a tattoo. I have no idea what your specific child's motive is, but no matter what it is, you should know it. Mine for it. Listen carefully to what your kids say and pray for discernment and insight into how they feel and for what life is like for them. All of this is what I think John meant when he said that Jesus was full of grace. Now, again, you don't have to muzzle yourself regarding the truth about tattoos. Remember that Jesus was full of grace and truth. The truth about tattoos is that they are permanent, limit your respect from certain segments in society and that they can potentially limit ones job prospects. The truth is that it is very expensive to have them removed. You should tell your kids these things and have every right to. However, you will have a better chance of being heard if you aim to show grace and understanding before you launch into the truth about tattoos.

## **Application for kids**

If you are thinking about getting a tattoo and you are reading this, here's what I want to say to you. Nothing in the Bible forbids you to get one. However, just because you are free in Christ to get a tattoo, it doesn't necessarily mean you should. You might think it would be amazing to have a tattoo right now, but getting a tattoo is a big decision and you really should think long and hard about why you want to get one and discern if it's the right thing.

Here is a list of questions you might consider before making your decision:

- 1) Will I want this tattoo on my body when I am 80 years old?
- 2) Are you aware that if you get a tattoo you may forfeit a chance to get certain jobs? Right or wrong, the reality is that certain people will judge you if you have a tattoo and it may limit your life opportunities.
- 3) What do your parents think about this tattoo? The Bible commands you to honor your parents. It's not insignificant what they think.
- 4) Are you legally of age to get this tattoo? The Bible calls you to obey governing authorities.
- 5) Will your future mate want to see this tattoo every day of your life together?
- 6) Will this image bring glory to God?
- 7) Will you cause another Christian to stumble because of this tattoo?
- 8) Are you doing this because you doubt your appearance? Do you feel sad about who you are and is this an effort to distinguish yourself from others?
- 9) Are you humble in your motives or are you doing this to show off who you are? Are you doing this to help other people, or just for yourself?
- 10) If you do this, will you lose opportunities to share the gospel?
- 11) Can you do this with a clear conscience? Are you convinced that this is what God desires for you to do?
- 12) Can you get a tattoo in a way that glorifies God?