

The following is my response to a Flatirons attender who emailed me asking for clarification on a previous series, Flatirons Ink. This is my (Jim Burgen) response and conclusions on tattoos and piercings per my study of Scripture and does not represent in any way an “official” stance of Flatirons Community Church.

Dear _____,

First of all, thank you so much for the tone of your letter. Sometimes, we receive “heated” responses with the single intent of criticizing or condemning actions or teachings with which the writer disagrees. I wanted to begin by thanking you for your attitude of seeking clarification and assuming positive intentions, even though you have concerns about what was seen and heard. Thank you.

Our intent is not to promote or condone any behavior that would be contrary to Scripture. My son has wanted a tattoo since his early teens. Last week, he turned 19 and he finally got a tattoo. My argument against the tattoo had nothing to do with a Scriptural conflict as much as it had to do with waiting until he was a certain age to make a decision to make a permanent mark on his body. The tattoo that he wanted was actually a verse from the Bible. His “argument” was that it would be a great testimony to several of his unchurched friends. Robin and I had a great talk about first letting his friends see it written in his life and on his heart. He pushed some, but knowing that we weren’t saying “no” forever...simply “no” for right now, allowed us to have a great conversation. We never want to cause conflict in a family, but if something that is said or portrayed in our presentation causes good conversation and dialog in a family...that’s a good thing...even if the result is that you make a decision that is different than the one we are trying to present. In any case, my son submitted to our leadership about waiting on the tattoo...and even at 19, would have waited longer had we asked him to.

As for the statement, “the coolest church” based on tattoos, yeah, we might want to rephrase that. We never want to be known or base our “reputation” on externals, but more so, Flatirons is a place where people who might be judged or condemned by other religious organizations find that they are welcomed here.

Let me see if I can answer some of the great references you mentioned regarding our bodies.

The most important thing when studying Scripture is to keep everything in context. Verses pulled out randomly or isolated can be used to build a case for or against something that they were never meant to address.

For example, Leviticus 19:28...do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves...was a law for the Jews who were entering a pagan land where the RELIGIOUS practice...witchcraft, idolatry, occult practices...included using cutting and tattoos as acts of worship to false gods. The prohibition was against worshipping false gods, not simply a physical act. The Jews were actually told to cut their bodies as an act of worship to God (circumcision) with Abraham. So all cutting is not bad. Idolatry is bad. Worshipping false gods is bad.

Laws in the Old Testament were more fully explained by Jesus when he taught in his first message...the law is not simply about externals...it comes from the heart. Don't murder...but I tell you, don't hate. Don't commit adultery...but I tell you, don't lust.

I believe it is consistent with the teachings of Jesus that it is clear that tattoos or piercings that are cultish, self-destructive or obscene in nature are sinful...not because of the physical act, but because of the overflow of the condition of the heart that they are demonstrating.

Keeping the rules and regulations in Leviticus 19 alone would be overwhelming and none of us can keep them...don't cut your beard, don't plant two kinds of seed in one field, don't wear clothes made of mixed materials...and on and on. While grace is not permission to pursue sin, grace also tells us to withhold judgment based on externals and law keeping.

The other teaching that I'd want all of us to keep in mind would be "culture". We must be careful not to project our American, Western, or even traditional church culture onto people who are not like us in culture, lifestyle or experience. While sin is sin, many times we confuse tradition or cultural "norms" with right and wrong.

Is it right or wrong for a woman to go without a shirt in public? In Colorado, mostly, yes. Most American Christians would regard a bare-chested woman to be immodest, sexually explicit and...sinful. However, in my trips to Africa, they would consider a woman who constantly covers herself to be impractical or arrogant. Historically, many missionaries have done more harm than good by first, trying to turn indigenous people into westerners as an equal part of becoming Christians.

It's the same thing in America. I grew up believing that in order to worship God, you dressed up to go to church...it was a "sin" to show up at church in anything less than your "best". Jesus taught exactly the opposite...come as you are. Actually, dressing up all started in England as a way to impress the king if he happened to show up in church. Now, there is nothing wrong with dressing up for church. However, when we start making dress code a litmus test for loving God, then we begin to be a bit Pharisaical and we start alienating people who need to come, but feel unworthy due to their externals.

Paul instructs Christians in Romans 12, not to conform any longer to the pattern of this world. The word, "pattern" doesn't translate "style" as much as it translates "mindset, value system, operating system". Instead of operating by the values of this world which says that what you do physically has little to do with what you believe spiritually...present your physical bodies to God as a living sacrifice.

Later, Paul instructs that whatever you do, in word or deed, do it all to the glory of God (1 Corinthians, Colossians). He also goes on in Romans 14, the kingdom of God is not based on eating or drinking...what is considered as clean or unclean...but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

In the 2000+ years of the Church, Christians have taken pagan symbols, changed their meanings and embraced them as symbols of the faith.

The cross was originally, a symbol of shame and curse. Now, we wear them as jewelry and place them on tops of buildings. Christmas trees were originally idolatrous poles used in pagan worship...we place star on them and celebrate the birth of the Savior. Throwing rice at weddings and hiding Easter Eggs at Easter both have their roots in fertility rituals...but what man might have meant for evil, God has used for good.

I agree, the Bible is clear that our bodies are God's temple...both our physical bodies as individuals...and our church body corporately. We should not do anything to bring harm or dishonor to our bodies...our diets, our lungs, the sexual or immodest presentation of our bodies for vanity or self-glorification. But some people honestly use their bodies as a canvas to express their art and their worship for God.

Again, nothing can justify cultish, violent or pornographic images on paper or skin, but one would be hard-pressed to build a case of tattoos or piercings as in and of themselves, sinful or wrong. I don't know what method is used, but in Revelation.19:16, Jesus himself has written on his robe and on his thigh, his name...KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS. In the same book, those who follow the beast will have a mark written on their foreheads. The issue in both cases comes from content, context and intent.

For me, after considering the above, the other question would be, is this the wisest choice for me to make? Do I want to put a permanent mark on my body? Will I still want this in 20 years? Could this act, even if done with the purest and best of motives, be a hindrance to my presenting Christ to someone? Am I doing this for self-promotion, self-glorification or vanity? Those are questions that one must ask one's self as well as pray through and ask God's Spirit to search our own hearts, and then, in faith, make a decision.

For my family, Robin and I made the decision that we would not allow our children to pierce, gauge or mark themselves in anyway that was irreversible until they reached a level of maturity that we trusted them to make and live with the consequences of their decisions.

I'm not sure that I got to all of your questions or concerns but this is my feeble attempt to convey the conclusion that I have come to based on my study of Scripture and my conversations with God. I hope that it is helpful as you wrestle with this issue.

Again, thank you for your attitude and desire to reach deeper understanding so that you can continue to make wise and honorable decisions. Let me know if I can be of further help.

Jim