

Are tattoos permissible?

by: Fr. Gregory Naumenko

Who of our readers has not experienced something similar to the following? You walk into a convenience store to buy a loaf of bread. Ahead of you at the check out counter there is a middle aged man in a sleeveless shirt. His arms and seemingly the rest of his entire upper body are covered by the most colorful and varied tattoos. You try not to stare, but the sight of this "art" disgusts you none the less. The man makes his purchase and departs. It is your turn at the cashier, where you are met by a pleasant young lady. You look up at her and notice that she is "adorned" by various piercing in her nose, ears and even her eyelids. It is painful to look at her. You pay for your loaf of bread no longer looking at her and depart as quickly as you can, making a mental note to buy your bread elsewhere next time.

We live in a free society. Everyone has the right to do whatever one wants with one's body, disfigure it any way one pleases. But is this right? Is it permissible for an Orthodox Christian to pierce his or her body, to discolor it with tattoos? Our gut feeling, the one we had at the convenience store counter, tells us that it is not. But why is this? Can we bolster our inner innate revulsion to such physical disfigurement with some rational explanations and arguments? It turns out that we can.

First of all, there is a direct and clear prohibition of this in Holy Scripture. In the third book of the Bible, Leviticus, we read the following: *"Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you: I am the Lord"* (19:28).

Further, if we look at the history of tattoos and piercing we can clearly see that there is a direct correlation with paganism. Here is what Terry Watkins, an internet researcher, has to say about this in his article entitled Tattoo... Ye Worship Ye Know Not What: *"Throughout history the tattoo bears the mark of paganism, demonism, Baal worship, shamanism, mysticism, heathenism, cannibalism and just about every other pagan belief known. The tattoo has NEVER been associated with Bible Believing Christians. And whenever and wherever, in history Christianity **appears** – tattoos **disappear**. The only exception -- 20th century, lukewarm, carnal, disobedient Christians. The birth of the tattoo has always borne the fruits of pagan religion and mysticism. Without exception, research after research, study after study, book after book, the roots of the tattoo never wavers"* (www.biblebelievers.com/watkins_tattoos).

Piercing and tattooing are not without their medical hazards. The high risk of transmission of blood-borne diseases such as hepatitis B and C, tetanus, and HIV during these procedures has been clearly defined and extensively

documented by the CDC. A good example of this is the 1961 hepatitis B outbreak in New York City after which the tattoo was outlawed there until 1997, when it was again legalized. Up to this very day the American Red Cross will not allow you to donate blood for 12 months after you have had a piercing or tattoo applied. You are too high a risk as a transmitter of hepatitis or HIV to the recipients of your blood.

If this is not enough, let us consider the following. The Church teaches us that in the life to come, our bodies will be resurrected and reunited with our souls. What do we know about these bodies which the righteous will have after the general resurrection? First of all, in essence these bodies will be the same bodies which we possess now. The holy apostle Paul tells us: "*For **this** corruptible [body] must put on incorruption, and **this** mortal [flesh] must put on immortality*" (1 Cor. 54:53). Furthermore, the holy Fathers of the Church tell us that the bodies of the righteous will be like the Body our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ after His glorious Resurrection. They will be transformed, more spiritual bodies, but they will retain characteristics that they had in the previous life. When after His Resurrection our Lord appears to His disciples, they are terrified and afraid because they suppose that He is a spirit. Yet He reassures them by saying: "*Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have*" (Luke 24:39). He is able to walk through locked doors (John 20:19), yet the disciples recognize that this is without a doubt their Teacher before them. Our Lord eats a piece of fish and some honeycomb in the presence of His disciples (Luke 24:42), yet He is capable of vanishing out of plain sight (Luke 24:31). Most notably, when the Apostle Thomas is told that the Lord is risen, he responds with his famous words of doubt: "*Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe*" (John 20:25). In eight days the Lord once again appears to the disciples and removes all doubt from Thomas' heart by saying: "*Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing*" (John 20:27). The Lord's Resurrected Body was a transformed, more spiritual body, yet it retained the scars from His Passion upon the cross. The imprint from the nails on His hands and feet from being nailed to the cross and the scar from the wound inflicted by the Roman soldier from which came blood and water are clearly visible. Does it not stand to reason then, that any marks with which we imprint our bodies, any holes we make in our flesh with pins and nails will be visible on our resurrected bodies? These will be remnants, scars of sinful, defiling behavior. And we know that nothing defiled can ever enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Now I know that this note will be read by some pious folks who at some point in their life, perhaps after one too many drinks, on the spur of the moment decided to get a tattoo or piercing. The Lord is merciful. There is no sin of which if we sincerely repent that the Lord will not grant remission. If one has a tattoo that

can be removed without risking one's health, it should be removed. If one has those nails or pins in some part of their body, they should be removed at once. Then one should go to their spiritual father (usually their parish priest) and ask God forgiveness for this sin in Holy Confession and He will forgive, for He is merciful. And those of us who have been contemplating tattooing the name of our girlfriend or boyfriend on our ankle or putting that spike through our nose, let us once and for all realize that this is not such a good idea.

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