

CONCERNING TATTOOS AND BODY PIERCINGS

Many people ask, “why are tattoos and body piercings a sin? ... where does it say that tattoos and body piercings are not permitted?”

History of tattoos and body piercings

In ancient China, tattoos were considered a barbaric practice, and it was a common practice to tattoo convicted criminals' faces. The ancient Greeks and Romans used tattooing to penalize slaves, criminals, and prisoners of war. Soldiers and warriors in various tribes and societies would tattoo themselves as an intimidating factor against their enemies. At the beginning of the 20th century, in North America the majority of tattoos were found on circus performers, sailors, and criminals. In the 1960s tattoos became popular amongst bikers, and even to this day tattoos are generally considered an important part of the culture of gangs.

In ancient societies, body piercings were also used to identify slaves. Later, body piercings were used by pirates and bandits. In the past century body piercings became common amongst punk rockers.

In general, in the past century in western society tattoos and body piercings were strongly empirically associated with deviance, personality disorders, and criminality. In the 1990s, lamentably, rock stars and actors played a big part in making tattoos and body piercings popular and socially acceptable.

The Holy Scriptures command us not to desire and participate in the sinful practices of the world

As we have all witnessed, in our day and age tattoos and body piercings are used and promoted by worldly celebrities who, by and large, do not follow God's commandments.

The Holy Scriptures, however, command us to neither desire nor participate in sinful practices of the world; for the world is the enemy of our soul, and many secular practices are in direct opposition to the commandments of God:

“Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4)

The Holy Scriptures further advise us that the entire world lies in evil, whereas the children of God who hope to see Him in the next life must purify themselves:

*“We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in evil” (1 Jn. 5:19)
... “And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure” (1 Jn. 3:3)*

The Holy Scriptures advise us not to participate in the customs of the world:

“Do not become yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God” (2 Cor. 6:14-16)

God commands us to segregate ourselves from the ways of the sinful world if we want Him to accept us and be our Father:

“Therefore, come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty” (2 Cor. 6:17)

St. James appoints that preserving ourselves undefiled from the world is a requirement of pure faith:

“Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: ... to keep oneself unspotted from the world” (James 1:27)

The Holy Scriptures command us not to love the world because the world's sinful practices consist of the desire of the flesh and the conceited way of life:

“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the haughty lifestyle—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever (1 Jn. 2:15-17)

What are the things of the world and the flesh that are sinful?

“Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in the past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the Kingdom of Heaven” (Gal. 5:19-21)

The Holy Scriptures command us to live a holy and pure life, following in the example of the saints

The Holy Apostles, the saints of the first centuries, and the contemporary saints of our time neither had tattoos and body piercings, nor did they instruct us to obtain such things. Today, people get tattoos and body piercings in order to follow the current trend, unaware of what they are doing. As followers of the Saints and faithful children of the Orthodox Church, we are obligated to follow the Saints’ example of humility—not the world’s example of shamelessness.

The Holy Scriptures advise us to carry out the remainder of our life according to the will of God, not according to worldly desires:

“that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. For we have wasted enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles—when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries” (1 Pt. 4:2-3)

The Holy Scriptures tell us that we have been called to live a life of virtue so that we may become communicants of God and avoid the corrupt desires of the world:

“of Him who called us by glory and virtue ... that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through desire” (2 Pt. 1:3-4)

The Holy Scriptures advise us to lead a holy life and not to conform to the evil desires we had while living in ignorance:

“as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former desires, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you should also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, ‘Be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Pt. 1:14-16)

The Holy Scriptures tell us that if we believe that God is our Father, then we must live out the rest of our temporal life on this earth working out our salvation in fear:

“And if you call on the Father, Who without partiality judges according to each one’s work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here [in this life] in fear; knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your vain conduct ... but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Pt. 1:17-19)

The Holy Scriptures advise us to desist from bodily desires because they plot against the soul:

“Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims [on this earth], abstain from fleshly desires which war against the soul (1 Pt. 2:11)

The Holy Scriptures advise us that we should not try to become attractive by adorning our external body but by working on our inner soul, which is precious in the eyes of God:

“Do not let your adornment be outward—by arranging the hair, wearing gold, or wearing clothing—rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God” (1 Pt. 3:3-4)

The Holy Scriptures advise us to think of the future heavenly things waiting for us in Heaven, and not to have our mind fixed on the temporary, earthly pleasures:

“If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above ... Set your mind on the things above, not on the things on the earth (Col. 3:1-2)

Through our vows during baptism we have pledged to renounce the world and Satan, and to unite ourselves unto Christ.

As Christians we have pledged an alliance with Christ and professed to wage war against the world and to deny all the sinful and evil practices of the world when we were baptized.

Christ tells us to follow Him: *“Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me (Mt. 16:24).* The Apostle Paul tells us to follow Christ’s example: *“Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1).* The Apostle Peter also tells us to follow Christ’s example: *“Christ also suffered for us, leaving for us an example that you should follow His steps” (1 Pt. 2:21).* Our Lord Jesus Christ out of love for us came to the earth to save us from the works of the devil *“Who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age” (Gal. 1:4); “Who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works” (Tit. 2:14); “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil” (1 Jn. 3:8).*

Christ did not have any tattoos, He did not wear earrings, He did not have body piercings. He did not stain any part of His body with ink. On the contrary! Out of ineffable love for us, He willingly stained His entire body with His own blood. His hands and feet were covered in blood from the nails, His side was stained with blood from the spear, His back was dyed with blood from the scourges He received, and His head was covered in blood from the crown of thorns and the rods that were used to beat Him. He did not pierce his ears or any of His other bodily members to accept earrings and jewelry. On the contrary! Out of extreme love for us His hands were pierced by the nails, His head was pierced by the thorns, and His side was pierced by the spear.

Since He is our God, let us follow in His holy footsteps and unpretentious example, with modesty and purity of both our body and our soul.

When Christians participate in worldly deeds, they give a bad example both to non-Christians and Christians

Tattoos and body piercings are harmful because the Christian sporting such unrefined paraphernalia conveys a wrong impression about Christianity to others. Such a Christian becomes a bad example to other Christians; he gives the impression that there is no difference in the lifestyle between Christians and

secular people; he reveals that he desires worldly things that are of no value for him and his soul; and he shows that he desires the approval of the secular world.

As Christians and followers of Jesus Christ, we are expected to become holy: *“You shall be perfect just as your father in Heaven is perfect”* (Mt. 5:48). Furthermore, we are called to be a light to the world with our virtuous conduct and godly way of life: *“Let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven”* (Mt. 5:16). However, when secular people see Christians getting tattoos and body piercings, they say, “look, the Christians are no different than us. They too desire to look fashionable, they too live like us. I don’t see them living a life of purity and modesty as Christ tells them to.” And thus, instead of becoming light for the world, we actually become the cause for Christianity to be misrepresented and disdained, as it is written, *“Because of you, My name is blasphemed among the Gentiles”* (Rom. 2:24). It is an especially harmful example for younger Christians who see us, for they will say, “look, he got a tattoo ... and he goes to church too.” Additionally, it is a damaging example for parents to give to their children, who want to see their parents as models of modesty, purity, holiness, virtue, and love. Saint John of the Ladder says that when someone helps another person to become better, he is working with the angels; whereas, when someone pushes another person to sin, he is collaborating with the demons.

There is no good reason for one to have a tattoo or a body piercing

We have outlined the reasons why tattoos and body piercings are bad. If, then, the world is our enemy, if the Holy Scriptures advise us not to participate in the worldly way of life, and if we have pledged to renounce the devil and sinful worldly practices during our baptism, if we have been called to live this present life with holiness, purity and humility, and if we are taught to prepare ourselves for the next life, we will now ask them who maintain that there is nothing wrong with tattoos and body piercings the following:

Why are tattoos and body piercings *good*?

Is this something that the Church, the Holy Bible, and Christ commands us to do, or that the world tells us to do?

Is this something that the Saints have shown us, or something that rock stars, actors, athletes, and other people who live in immorality and who openly reject God’s commandments have shown us?

Do they contribute to holiness, or do they contribute to worldliness?

Do they help us follow in the footsteps of Christ and resemble the saints, or do they draw us closer to the secular world and make us resemble worldly and ungodly people?

Do they help us to live the rest of our lives according to the commandments of God, or to continue living our lives according to the desires of people?

Are they an expression of humility and modesty, or an expression of vainglory, love for attention, and the desire to look attractive?

Are these virtues through which we become communicants of the divine nature, or are they worldly desires leading to sin and corruption?

Do people receive tattoos and body piercings in order to look good in the eyes of God or to be pleasing to people?

Do tattoos and body piercings express our love for God, or our love for the world?

Everyone with a sincere conscience will admit that tattoos and body piercings, along with many other fashionable practices of the secular world, are not inspired by the Holy Spirit of God but rather by the evil spirit of the devil, who from the very beginning of history has sought to disfigure both man's body and soul, in order to distort and debase man to a state different than that which God created.

Let us, therefore, try to love Christ our God with all our soul, and let us concern ourselves with how we can keep His commandments, and how we can be pleasing to Him. In this manner, we will be a good example to others and also work toward our own salvation. Amen.