

Do Commandments On Tattoos and Hair Still Apply?

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul provides some pretty specific instructions about hair length. Similarly, Leviticus 19:28 commands, "Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the LORD." Do these commands still apply today? Can someone worship Jesus just as well with long hair, earrings or tattoos?

It's important to begin by understanding the difference between a cultural custom and a law. Culture, customs and societies change, but God and His laws do not. However, that does not mean we can ignore ancient, biblical commandments simply because they apply to a culture which existed long ago and far away. Underneath every custom or culturally accepted practice which we are commanded to follow, there lies some unchanging truth or principle. Our challenge is to uncover that law or principle and apply it to a modern society. In the example of 1 Corinthians, maintaining hair short for men and long hair for women is a cultural custom, but there is nevertheless some deep truth of God's law which Paul is trying to express in this teaching. Whatever that truth is, we need to get to the bottom of it and ensure that we are faithfully following it.

In almost every case, when Paul or another apostle commands us to obey some cultural custom, the goal is to demonstrate to the world that we are children of God and to distance ourselves from the pagans. This was a very serious issue in the 1st century. Many new Christians had been gentiles or pagans and the early Church leaders wanted to ensure that they did not slip back into their old ways. It was also important that they did not have any kind of external appearance which made people think that they were still worshiping their old idols. This is the main reason for the decree that men should not have long hair, tattoos, or body piercings. These were things the pagans did, so any Christians who looked that way might cause others to be concerned.

That principle remains the same thousands of years later. Rightly or wrongly, people judge by appearances. As Christians, we need to avoid doing anything that would cause others to be uncomfortable with the way we look, or would cause them to fail to recognize us as followers of Christ. This is particularly true when we are witnessing to non-Christians.

A follower of Christ may deliver the Gospel very well with massive tattoos, long hair, and a nose ring. Unfortunately, with this appearance, some people may never be able to look past the image and focus on the message. They may assume that he could be a criminal or something worse, and this could be a serious obstacle in leading them to Jesus.

For this reason, we should avoid extremes. God commands us to look the part of His children, respect our bodies and understand that others will judge us by our appearance. We need to present an image which clearly sets us apart from the rest of the world.

The essence of the commandments given to us by Paul and Moses thousands of years ago still apply today even though the cultural specifics have changed. We must not give our fellow Christians a reason to think we have slipped into "pagan" ways. Likewise, we must not give unbelievers any reason to judge us and reject us before we have had a chance to present the Good News.

As with all things, we must approach this teaching with a healthy dose of common sense and Spirit-led guidance. If you have a tiny, inconspicuous tattoo or wear your hair a little longer or shorter than Paul commands, spend some contemplative time in prayer seeking what God would have you do about this issue, if anything. On the other hand, you absolutely must pause, pray and seriously seek to understand God's will before getting a new tattoo. You can be certain that if your appearance in any way presents an obstacle to someone knowing you are a Christian, or hinders you from leading them to Christ, then you have an obligation to make the right choice.