

121” Disarming the Arguments
John 3:19-20; Ephesians 4:17-19

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Scripture: John 3:19-20; Ephesians 4:17-19

Sermon:

Introduction...

[pic] “The Emperor’s New Clothes” is a powerful fable about how easy it is to be fooled into going along with the crowd. People would rather walk around naked than be thought a fool. They would rather rationalize the craziest things if it means being accepted by society and not being singled out as a fool, or closed minded, ignorant or simple. **Rationalization is a powerful force.** It makes naked people think that not only are they clothed, but that they are the height of fashion!

While we may scoff at the tale of “The Emperor’s New Clothes” we have fallen into an equally ludicrous trap. We are spiritually naked, walking around like we are the height of fashion. We can all see that we are naked, but nobody wants to say anything because they fear they will be singled out as simpletons and fools. The Bible speaks of the world as loving darkness because the light reveals our evil deeds.

Years ago my Dad told me about something he saw on TV. They were interviewing a mobster who was in prison for life for multiple murders. He said, “I never had anybody killed who didn’t deserve it.” The power of rationalization! The people he had murdered “deserved it.”

Now murder is still generally frowned upon, but we rationalize all sorts of other things. In particular, our society rationalizes all sorts of sexual misbehaviour, rationalizing it with phrases like, “If you’re both consenting adults...” Or “as long as you don’t hurt anybody...” Or “What you do in private is your own business...” We rationalize all sorts of sinful behaviour, not just in ourselves but even in others, because we don’t want to be called to account for our own sinful behaviour. We don’t want to be told “no.”

The saddest thing is that even within church circles people are rationalizing sinful behaviour. Sometimes it’s even as simple as saying, “Who are we to judge?” In the context of our series, dealing with homosexuality, this is a common one. In addition, there have been a number of attempts to rationalize homosexual behaviour or even gay marriage within church circles, intentionally trying to dismiss the Bible’s teaching on the subject.

Today we are going to address 4 such arguments. Hopefully you will see that if you scratch these arguments they are only an inch deep. They don’t have much substance to them, but when you first hear them it may be difficult to disarm them.

Those 4 arguments are, “**The Old Testament doesn’t matter anymore.** After all, look at all the other commands we don’t follow, like wearing clothing made of two fabrics, eating specific foods, etc.” The second argument is, “**Jesus never said homosexuality was wrong.**” The third argument is, “**We don’t have to listen to Paul.** He didn’t think what he was writing was divinely inspired when he wrote it. Paul is a bigot anyway.” Finally, the fourth argument is, “In the Bible they weren’t talking about a long term, committed homosexual relationship. **They weren’t talking about homosexuality within a covenant relationship.**” This last argument is based on the assumption that in the ancient world the only forms of homosexual activity were those in which an older person influenced a younger person; that there were no mutual, long-term homosexual relationships based on mutuality.

These are not the only arguments people make defending homosexual behaviour and marriage, but they are illustrative of them. If you have heard other arguments, hopefully this will give you a foundation to start analysing them for yourself. If you’ve heard other arguments that you can’t pick apart, or want help doing that, feel free to ask me. I’d be happy to help you use some critical thinking skills to see how to approach it.

Text

Let’s begin with our two scripture passages. Neither of these mention homosexuality specifically, but they lay the groundwork for understanding why it is that people come up with convoluted arguments, explanations and defences for sinful behaviour.

The first is John 3:19-20. Remember, John 3:16 is the famous verse about God loving the world. Verse 17 talks about how Jesus came to save the world, not condemn it, but listen, now to verses 19-20.

Our second passage is taken from Ephesians 4:17-19. Paul, here, exhorts his listeners to live differently from the world around them.

Theological Foundation

Our two passages lay a theological foundation for us. **Our hearts and minds are darkened.** Our intellects are fallen. We use our minds to justify sinful things. We don't like the light because it exposes our sinful deeds and destroys our rationalizations. We've talked about this before. Our hearts are not just our feelings, but includes our minds, wills, desires and imaginations. A key part of this series has been the difference between Christians and our contemporary culture in that Christians believe there are some desires that should not be gratified, whereas our culture encourages us to gratify all the desires we have.

As an extension, we also use our minds to justify our gratification of these sinful desires. We rationalize our behaviour, making excuses for it and trying to explain to ourselves and others that it is ok. This is why the world doesn't like Jesus. It doesn't like Christianity because Jesus is the light that shines on our sinfulness and exposes it.

Even as Christians, **we are masters of rationalization.** That is why so many of us struggle to live differently from the world. It's not because we believe wrong things. It's not for a lack of the Spirit at work in us. It's because we rationalize our sinful behaviour, hardening our hearts against our consciences and the work of the Holy Spirit and so God, being a gentleman, respects our decision not to grow or mature.

Remember, Ephesians was Paul's letter to the Christians in Ephesus. He wasn't writing to non-believers, but to those who had committed themselves to Christ, seeking him and the forgiveness he offers. These are people who have asked Jesus to be their Lord and Saviour both. And yet Paul has to continue to urge them not to live as the rest of the world, the "Gentiles" as he calls them.

Paul talks about how the world has hardened hearts and, having lost all sensitivity to what is right and wrong, to what God wants and doesn't want, the world gives in to every kind of sensual urge and indulges all kinds of impurity, constantly consumed by an overwhelming desire, a "lust," for more. This sounds an awful lot like our culture! And sadly, the church is not very different!

So this is the foundation from which we are starting. Our world is in darkness. We are liable to get sucked into that darkness, which includes our thinking. Our darkened thinking is very good at rationalizing our sinful behaviour. We go along with our culture's rationalizations too, not wanting anybody to start shining light on what is actually happening. That is, like the emperor and his officials, we pretend we can see the beautiful clothes instead of risking being thought foolish by pointing out the emperor's nakedness.

Argument 1

Let's then consider the first rationalization, the first argument I mentioned used by some in the church to justify homosexual behaviour. That is, "The OT doesn't apply anymore" and therefore, by extension, we can dismiss what it says about homosexual activity. At first glance, this argument seems to carry some weight! After all, we no longer have to follow all the laws in the OT. We can eat pork. We can work on Saturday. We don't have to go to the temple. We don't have to be circumcised, etc. So why do we have to follow what it says about homosexuality?

The danger in this argument is that it treats all the commands in the OT the same. It fails to take into account the different nuances of OT law. **The purity laws in the OT had to do with spiritual cleanliness.** They were a reminder that God is holy and we are unholy. But not all the laws had to do with spiritual cleanliness. For instance, the OT's command not to murder goes deeper than ceremonial cleanliness! [William Webb, *Slaves, Woman and Homosexuals*, p. 168ff]

The two main passages in the OT that speak on homosexuality are found in Leviticus 18 and 20. These two chapters contain detailed lists of prohibited sexual activities, including incest, homosexuality and bestiality (sex with animals). Most of these prohibitions we would still agree with, such as not sleeping with a brother or sister, a son or daughter, an aunt or an uncle, etc whether biological or through marriage. That is, we shouldn't be having sex with family, even our in-laws.

One of the things prohibited in these lists is deliberately having sex with your wife during her time of the months. Forgive me for the graphic content, but we are talking about sexuality! This one prohibition has to do with blood being considered unclean. Leviticus 20 demonstrates by listing the punishment that this rule had to do

with spiritual or ceremonial cleanliness. Today we would not see this as a spiritual or moral wrong. Because of the holiness we receive through Jesus, we are not bound by the OT cleanliness laws. [Webb, p.]

Some say that because we are no longer bound by these cleanliness laws, including a cleanliness law about sex, that we are not bound by *any* of the laws about sex in the OT, including the law about homosexuality listed with the one about your wife's time of the month. But think about that for a second. These two verses are listed along with all kinds of verses about incest as well as a verse about bestiality. If the argument holds that we don't have to follow any of the OT, then we don't have to follow the incest laws either! Suddenly it's ok to sleep with your son or daughter. Suddenly it's ok to have sex with animals too!

Now, some in our culture may turn a blind eye to bestiality, but very few would turn a blind eye to incest! Even when the children are of the age of majority it's still seen as wrong to have sex with your children! But the argument that dismisses the OT's law about homosexuality, if it holds, must also hold for the other laws listed too. **If you can justify homosexuality by throwing out the OT, then you can also justify incest and bestiality.**

When you read Leviticus 18 and 20 in their entirety, there are two things we see. First, God is calling his people to be counter-cultural. He is calling them to be different from the nations around them who engage in these kinds of behaviour. That is why these lists include the surprising law not to sacrifice your children to the pagan god Moloch! This command seems really misplaced because it has nothing to do with sex. But it does have to do with offspring, which come from sex. It also has to do with being different from the surrounding nations.

The tie-in with the law against sacrificing children actually gives us a clue as to the core value in these laws about sexual practices. Relationships matter. They matter in the Bible, including the OT. **God's laws about sex are about setting appropriate relationship boundaries for all kinds of relationships.** So it is a violation of the parent-child relationship to sleep with your son or daughter. It is a violation of the brother-sister relationship to sleep with your brother or sister. It is a violation of relationship boundaries between an aunt or uncle and their niece or nephew if they sleep together. These relationship boundaries include relationships through marriage, not just biological aunts or uncles. It includes in-laws, like a brother-in-law or a step-mother. This is why adultery is wrong, too. It is a violation of the husband-wife relationship. [Webb, p. 200]

Sacrificing children to the god Moloch is a violation of the parent-child relationship. That's why this command is included in this list! So we see that homosexual activity is a violation of the male-female relationship, especially the husband-wife relationship. Sex with animals is a violation of the boundaries between humans and animals. We are to be stewards of animals, their caretakers, and not to have sexual relations with them. **Relationships are sacred to God**, which is why he gives commands about not violating the boundaries of those relationships.

We've just looked at two related passages in the OT that prohibit homosexuality. There are others, but these are the main ones. Hopefully you can see the danger in the arguments that dismiss the OT out of hand. Yes, it is true that Christians do not have to follow all the ceremonial purity laws of the OT. But that does not mean all the OT laws can be dismissed!

Argument 2

Now let's consider the second argument, that Jesus never said anything about homosexuality. That is true. Jesus never said homosexuality is wrong. However, Jesus also never said rape was wrong, nor incest, nor bestiality, nor sacrificing your children to Moloch, for that matter. Why? Because he didn't have to! **In speaking to Jews, Jesus didn't have to tell them what they already knew!** These things were clear to Jesus' audience. They would never consider homosexuality as ok. This was one of the things they agreed with Jesus about.

Instead, let's consider what Jesus did have to say about sexuality. Jesus actually lessened the punishment for adultery. He tacitly reduced it from execution to grounds for divorce. (See Matthew 19:9) But, in the same passage, he raises the bar for what counts as adultery! He says that for a man to even look at a woman with lust in his heart is to commit adultery! **Jesus actually raised the bar for sexual standards by moving the offense from actual actions to a person's imagination.** To look at a person other than your spouse and imagine having sexual interactions with them is to commit adultery according to Jesus. What do you think he would have said about homosexual activity, given the bar already set in the OT?

Argument 3

This brings us to argument 3, that we don't have to listen to what Paul says. The second argument is that Jesus doesn't say anything about homosexuality. The third is that Paul does say something about homosexuality but we don't have to listen him. Often this boils down to questions of Paul's authority. Sometimes people dismiss Paul because Paul didn't know he was writing scripture. That is, Paul didn't know that what he was writing would one day be considered part of the Bible.

There are at least two flaws in this argument. If we dismiss what Paul has to say about topics with which we disagree with him, then we must be consistent and also throw out the parts we agree with. The standard for following what Paul says is not whether or not we agree with what he says! If we dismiss one part of Paul because it's Paul, we need to dismiss all of Paul! That includes his statements that in Christ all are considered equal, "There is no Greek, nor Jew, slave nor free, male nor female." We have to dismiss what he says about being justified by faith. We have to dismiss what he says about agape love in 1 Corinthians 13.

But it goes beyond that. The reason we include Luke and Acts in the New Testament is because Luke was a companion of Paul's. If Paul does not have authority over the church, then Luke loses his authority too. And Luke and Acts put together compose over 1/3 of the NT. Add in Paul's letters and you have most of the NT. So if we call into question Paul's authority to speak as an apostle, we have to jettison most of the NT and what we know about Jesus and Christianity. **It's a very dangerous path to dismiss what Paul says.**

So why do we hold what Paul says to be authoritative? The authority of scripture does not rest on whether or not the author knew or thought they were writing something divinely inspired. In fact, I would hazard a guess that few of the authors of scripture had any idea they were writing scripture! I don't think Matthew thought that when he was writing Matthew that it would become part of the Bible. I doubt John thought John 3 would be part of the Bible and held to the same level of authority as Deuteronomy!

The authority of scripture lies in the authority Jesus gave his apostles. It's called "apostolic authority." It means each book of the New Testament can trace its information back to an apostle, who in turn received his authority from Jesus himself. Luke wasn't an apostle himself, but was a companion of Paul's. Paul was an apostle. Matthew was an apostle, as was John, but Mark was not. Mark recorded the preaching and teaching of Peter, who was an apostle. There are a couple other criteria that were used to include the books of the NT in the NT. We don't have to go into them today, but never was one of the criteria that the author knew they were writing scripture. Essentially, the authority of Scripture is authority that comes from Jesus either directly, as in the case of Matthew, John or Paul, or one step removed, as in the case of Mark and Luke. When we start dismissing the authority of the NT, we are dismissing the authority of Jesus himself!

Argument 4

The fourth and final argument is that when the Bible condemns homosexual conduct, it is condemning abusive relationships, or promiscuous relationships, but not long lasting, mutual relationships that today some are calling "covenant" relationships. That is, they Bible never condemns homosexual marriage, just homosexual promiscuity. Why? Because in the ancient world there were no examples of long term, mutual, homosexual relationships.

Or so goes the argument. Again, this is an argument that is subtle enough to at first seem like it may be reasonable. [Webb, p. 155ff] And yet, when we scratch the surface, there are two flaws in this argument. First and foremost, **there is actually increasing evidence that long-term, mutual, loving homosexual relationships did exist in the ancient world.** [Webb, p. 156] So we need to be slow to dismiss Scriptures condemnations of homosexuality as merely those relationships that also involved a power difference, such as between mature men and adolescent boys. That's the first flaw in the argument.

The second flaw is much more telling. This argument does a "bait and switch." That is, they smuggle in an assumption that they don't actually state, but assume to be true. By not stating the assumption, they come to a reasonable conclusion and their opponents feel pressure to agree with them. As stated, without examining the unstated assumptions, the argument seems solid.

What is that unstated assumption? **The unstated assumption is that the problem with homosexual behaviour is one of power imbalance and duration of the relationship.** That is, the assumption is that if a relationship, any sexual relationship, is long-lasting and the people in the relationship live in mutual love without an abuse of power, that the relationship must be acceptable. This is also the unspoken definition of marriage that

the gay marriage lobby uses, whether they state it openly or not.

But as we talked about a few moments ago with Leviticus, the sexual laws in the OT were not about ceremonial cleanliness. They were about the appropriate boundaries in different kinds of relationships. What if we applied this unspoken assumption to some of the other relationships in Leviticus? If a brother and sister enter into a lasting, mutual, loving but sexual relationship, is that ok? If an adult woman enters into a lasting, mutual, sexual relationship with her step-father is that ok? What if it's a grandfather? Or an uncle? In other words, if the only criteria for a marriage or covenant relationship is that the two people love one another, that there is a mutuality with no power imbalance and that the relationship lasts and isn't just a fling, then why is incest wrong? Or polygamy?

This brings us back to the statement that in God's eyes relationships are sacred. **Sexual relationships are sacred** too, which is why God says that sexual relations should only happen in the context of a man and a woman who are married. That's why rape is wrong. That's why incest is wrong. That's why bestiality is wrong. That's why homosexual behaviour is wrong too. The problem with homosexual relationships has nothing to do with power imbalances or mutuality. It has to do with the nature of male-male relationships, female-female relationships and heterosexual relationships. Paul, in Romans 1, talks about how the fallen world traded in natural relationships and desires for unnatural ones. This is what he's talking about. Our world has traded natural, or God's intended relationships for unnatural ones. It's about violating boundaries between men and women, family members and species.

Conclusion

So where does this leave us? Certainly I have not addressed all of the arguments used within church circles in favour of homosexuality and gay marriage. I haven't heard them all and we wouldn't have time to address them all either. But hopefully I have given you a foundation for addressing these arguments for yourselves. First, remember that an argument in favour of a sinful behaviour reflects a fallen intellect trying to justify or rationalize sinful behaviour. Our minds are darkened. Even as Christians, we have not been fully sanctified and cleansed yet by the Holy Spirit, so even Christians fall into this trap.

Second, when we start to question the authority of Scripture, whether it be the Old Testament or the New, we are on a very slippery slope. It's one thing to examine Scripture. We need to do that. We must examine it to understand it. We need to hold in tension different passages and the unfolding of God's plan throughout the narrative of the Bible. There is an upward trajectory of redemption that moves through Scripture which means the New Testament often sheds light on the Old. But that does not mean we can just throw out the parts of the Old Testament that are inconvenient today.

Similarly, we need to be careful throwing out parts of the NT that are difficult or socially unacceptable today, too. We need to be diligent in discerning the meaning of different passages. We can acknowledge that there are troubling, confusing or difficult passages. But that difficulty lies in our finite nature, our lack of comprehension, not in Scripture itself. When we come to difficult passages we may not all agree on what they mean or how they apply, but we must not just throw out those passages because they are difficult to understand, or in other cases, because they are difficult to live by.

As we come to a close, let me address one more "argument," which hardly deserves to be called an argument. Rather, let's call it an objection. Often people say things like, "Well, who are you to judge?" or "Judge not, lest ye be judged." This line of conversation, too, can leave us stuck. It can cause us to stop in our tracks and not know what to say.

When we are warned not to judge, we are being warned not to condemn. That doesn't mean we are not to evaluate things in terms of right and wrong, good and evil, acceptable and unacceptable. **We are warned against condemning people, not evaluating their actions**. Ultimately, it is up to Jesus to judge people, to make a final decision about their fate. But we are called to evaluate people's actions. We are called to evaluate good and evil, right and wrong. We need to evaluate these things for ourselves, but also help others evaluate them too. We are called to love other people, which includes warning them of the harm they can anticipate if they continue in their wrong actions. This means evaluating their actions! It means judging what they are doing. But it means doing it in an atmosphere of love for the person, being primarily concerned with their well-being, in particular their spiritual well-being.

As I have tried to bring out in this series, **Christians are to love people who battle same sex attraction.** We are to walk with them, bear their burden with them, pray for them and support them as they grow in spiritual maturity. If they don't know God, then we need to work with them to see God. It is not up to us to decide if they are going to heaven or hell. That's not our decision. But we are called to warn people when they are running away from God, disobeying him, ignoring him or hardening their hearts towards him. We are not to condemn people, but we really should tell them if they're heading down the broad road that leads to destruction and not the narrow road that leads to salvation.

Another way to put it is that we are all called to tell the emperor he isn't wearing any clothes. People will call us ignorant, bigots, fools, old fashioned and closed minded. But we have to have the courage to tell the emperor he's naked. We have to have the courage to be counter-cultural. We have to have the courage to think different and live different from the culture surrounding us. Amen.