

**DOUBLE BIND 2: A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF LUKE**  
**LUKE 3**  
**SEPTEMBER 24, 2017**

Jean Buridan was a 14<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher and priest. He studied and lectured in Paris. Buridan was a brilliant man who added much to the world of academics, but he is probably most well-known for his work in logic. One of Buridan's key contributions was showing how logic was more complicated than we often give it credit for. Depending upon the reference points being used, logic wasn't always logical. In fact, he is famous for creating several logical paradoxes, which are meant to remind us that logic isn't always logical. One of Buridan's paradoxical logic conundrums is now referred to as Buridan's Bridge. As it goes:

*Socrates wants to cross a river and comes to a bridge guarded by Plato, who says:*

*Plato: Socrates, if in the first proposition which you utter, you speak the truth, I will permit you to cross. But surely, if you speak falsely, I shall throw you into the water.*

*Socrates: You will throw me into the water.*

This line of thinking is a logical paradox. Not only does this show that logic isn't always logical, but it introduces the idea of trivalence. Most logic lands on a singular answer, but some logicians realized there could be bivalence, that something could be both true and false. Buridan took it one step further, trivalence, something could be true, false and indeterminate based on the circumstances introduced.

The bottom line was that logic isn't always logical. Sometimes you have to look a bit closer to find the truth. Sometimes it's messy and murky. Sometimes the answer doesn't rise to the top right away, and that's hard to understand and be okay with. We prefer certitude. We prefer everything having its place. That's why people often use that phrase, *there are two types of people in the world, you are a sheep or a wolf. You are a dreamer or a realist. You're an evil person or you're a Cowboys fan.*

In fact, to stress this point, I want to show you a set of slides and take a little survey. Raise your hand when you see yourself represented.

[https://www.buzzfeed.com/lyapalater/there-are-two-types-of-people-in-the-world-which-kind-are-yo?utm\\_term=.oj3z6r6z8#.blAdKoKdz](https://www.buzzfeed.com/lyapalater/there-are-two-types-of-people-in-the-world-which-kind-are-yo?utm_term=.oj3z6r6z8#.blAdKoKdz)

When it comes to these daily concerns, it makes sense to subdivide the world into this or that, two types of people. As you leave the house, go to work, listen to the news, consider world affairs, you realize those binaries don't last. That the world isn't that simple, and if that is true for daily life, then it is most definitely true for daily faith.

Last week, we started a series called *Double Bind*. We are exploring the conundrums and occasional paradoxes of faith. In the same way, logic isn't always logical, it's just as easy to say faith isn't logical. Not that it isn't sound and doesn't stand up to reason but that inherent in faith, inherent in the idea of trying to understand God, to understand faith, to understand what God wants you to do with your life, that sometimes faith isn't always logical. Sometimes it feels like a double bind or a catch 22. Sometimes it's messy and murky. Sometimes the answer isn't always clear.

One of the biggest double binds that Christians and people who are considering Christianity wrestle with is the dichotomy of grace and works. Faith and obedience. We are told regularly that God's salvation is that we are saved by grace through faith. We are also told that if you have faith, then you do good works. We are told that righteousness is as filthy rags, but also that we should pursue righteousness. Jesus often speaks of a gracious loving father, but he also stresses obedience and following him to do good works. Which is it?

*Luke 3:1-10*

This is a monumental moment for the people of God. There has been no word from the Lord and no prophet or prophecy in over 400 years. Four hundred years of radio silence

from God. In fact, the last prophet, Malachi, in his final words said that a prophet would come in the likeness of Elijah.

### *Malachi 4:5-6*

In years past, prophets would follow one another closely. There were often gaps in between prophets but not hundreds of years. You didn't need a new prophet to be announced. When a new prophet showed up, you would know them if you saw them. They looked, sounded and felt a lot like John the Baptist. In this passage, John has rejected the normal pattern for life and the normal pattern for religion. This made him stick out. He had retreated to the wilderness refusing to get locked into the pursuit of a career. He looks a bit wild and his clothes of camel hair and leather waistband are not merely affordable bits of durable clothes, they were a rejection of the flowing robes and beautiful soft garments of his counterparts in the city. In addition to his clothes, John lived off of the land eating locusts and honey. He looks the part and sounds the part. He is preaching with vigor against the disbelief and lack of action to accompany belief.

John is not messing around. He is bringing some old fashioned Old Testament fire and brimstone. He is staring down the crowd who look the part, but miss the point, and he tells them their faith is misplaced and their actions are hopelessly short of measuring up. He calls them vipers. He tells them to beware that the axe is at the root and ready to cut them down and cast them into the fire. He looks like a prophet and he sounds like one. He is standing up to authority and using strong language to encourage repentance and change.

This doesn't sound like grace. It sounds like works, and he is baptizing people. Anyone who comes to grips with their sinfulness and extreme disobedience should come to him and be baptized with an immersion baptism in the Jordan River. We have a pretty good frame of reference for baptism in the Christian world, but what did it mean here? The baptism wasn't mystical or magical. It was for John what it is for us. A spiritual washing. A symbol of your life being cleansed from the filth of sin. It was ceremonial and symbolic but be certain

that if you were dipped into those waters you were affirming that you were sullied and in need of God's cleansing.

This is the old administration. There hasn't been a prophet for 400 years, but this is the same message from the Old Testament. It had been spoken by men like Isaiah, Joel, Amos and Elijah before him. Repent. Turn around and return to God. People are showing up in the wilderness because they knew things weren't right in Israel. The Romans had taken over, and they were financially and emotionally stretched because of it. They were spiritually dry and had not heard a fresh word from God in 400 years. They were hungry for this moment. You realize how hungry they were because this is a wild man in camel hair with locust's remnants in his beard who is yelling for repentance and baptism, and they are still showing up. John isn't soft selling it or sugar-coating it. He is preaching fire and brimstone and they are lapping it up. They are ready to return to God and hear from God, and they will take it any way they can get it. Let's keep reading.

#### *Luke 3:10-20*

A couple of things happen here. John gives the people the antidote for their spiritual sickness, and the antidote is right living. Share what you have. Tax collectors, don't take more than is yours. Soldiers, don't extort money.

John then continues with the fire and brimstone preaching. One is coming after me who will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. Thus far he has called them vipers and threatened them with being cut down like a tree and finally they will be burned with fire. Some people ate this up. It is thoroughly binary. It is thoroughly clear right and wrong. Sinner and righteous. Those who have been baptized and those who have not. There is something satisfying in this process. A path to a relationship with God becomes absolutely clear. If you want to have it, do these things, and if you don't, you are a viper who will be chopped down and burned up. It's harsh, but at least it's clear.

As often happens with prophets, this leads to a movement, but he does end up getting thrown in jail. Before that happens, one bizarre event happens at the end of this episode.

*Luke 3:21-22*

I have always been a bit confused about the baptism of Jesus but through the larger context, God showed me something new. The key piece of scripture to unlock this episode comes later.

*Luke 7:24-28*

Jesus affirms that John was the promised one in Malachi. The new Elijah. He affirms he was the messenger who was to come and prepare the way. He also affirms that John is the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. He says that after saying, "There has never been a greater man born of a woman. This is the greatest, most faithful, most fruitful man in human history." This is coming from the lips of Jesus, yet he is the least in the Kingdom of God. You would think that would put him at the top of the list. Why would Jesus say something like that?

This meeting was meant to muddy the waters quite literally as Jesus stepped into the river to be baptized. Jesus was reminding them that faith isn't always logical. We have good reason to be puzzled by the baptism of Jesus and this meeting because John the Baptist was confused too. He didn't know a new era was being ushered in. John had been offering baptism for repentance and the cleansing of sin. He knew Jesus was special. He had heard the story since he was little. Don't forget, John and Jesus were cousins and born only a few months apart. Mary and Elizabeth were sisters. You have to imagine that the stories of Jesus' birth were told and retold each year. You think you'd get sick of hearing stories from your cousin's life. Imagine John's dilemma. Jesus was supernaturally conceived. He was threatened with death by the king of Israel. His parents heard from angels numerous times about his birth. He was born in a stable and then magi from a foreign land came because they followed a divine star to him and then they gave him gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Of course, there were stories about Jesus being left in Jerusalem for three days and saying he had to be in his father's house.

Time and again, John knew from an early age that this was the Messiah. He knew Jesus was different. John also knew he had his own calling to prepare Israel for this coming king. Then the king came to him. He had been baptizing people who forgot Yahweh and no longer worshipped him. He was baptizing sinners and bringing a message of fire, brimstone and axes on trees and the king came to him.

Jean Buridan was a French priest, but he actually was a secular cleric. Secular not in the sense of being without belief, but a secular cleric was a part of the church without being ordained to a certain tradition or forced to go to a monastery or take vows of chastity. The problem was this wasn't the path most chose. The papacy was very popular and powerful at this time in history, and if you wanted to rise in fame, influence and power, you pursued theological degrees, got ordained and then ascended the ranks. That or you could be secular in the sense of a non-church related job and seek your fame or fortunes that way. Buridan did none of those things. He could have aligned himself with power. He could have risen through the ranks, but he was satisfied with this seemingly lower position. Most people believe the very reason he took this path was for the greatest impact. He was born into a world fractured by the crusades and political/theological striving for power, so he went a different path. He saw the fork in the road. Be a powerful cleric or live in the secular world. He chose neither, he took a completely different path as a secular cleric.

You have to imagine John's mentality for a moment. He sees Jesus as his successor. The one who will bring about the kingdom and then this moment happened. Jesus takes his role among the sinners. He submits himself to be at this event even though he did not need to be cleansed. He stood in the place of a sinner and took on the role of one in need of repentance. John might have started to wonder what this new administration was going to look like. I think John assumed Jesus would bring in more of the same. Just better and more. He would call the people to even higher standards of obedience and repentance. He would preach with even more fire and more brimstone.

Verses 15-17 illustrate John's mentality completely. He tells them there is a coming wrath. This is what every Old Testament prophet before John had done. They warned people of coming judgment often called the Day of the Lord. Every time the Day of the Lord was mentioned by the old prophets, it was wrath and destruction upon the people of God. If Jesus was the Lord and his day had arrived, then wrath and death couldn't be far behind.

John was right in a sense but completely wrong in another. This was not a passing of the torch from one Old Testament prophet to another. This was not more of the same. This was a change of administration. This is the moment. The change from the administration of the law to the administration of grace. Jesus was bringing in a new kingdom. A kingdom of grace, and he would be its king. Jesus took his place among the sinners to set forth an entirely new paradigm. It was no longer about what you could do for God. It was about what God could do for you.

This baptism is a foreshadowing of the coming cross. That is the third major event where the king stooped low and took the place of a sinner. Baptism, the foot washing and finally the cross. At each event, people questioned this king and this administration of grace. No Jew, including John, could've understood this baptism until they saw the cross. Even then, it took a while to sink in. This was a transition of power where Jesus relinquished his own position and power and rights for ours. He laid himself down, so we could be raised up.

Later in the ministry of Jesus, John still didn't fully get this. In the passage in chapter 7 that we read earlier, John was in prison and asking Jesus whether he was the long-awaited messiah or not. He saw Jesus healing, teaching and loving people. He didn't see fire and brimstone. He didn't see the Romans being kicked out. He didn't see the Pharisees being kicked out of the temple. All John saw was a carpenter talking about the Kingdom of God, and stooping low among sinners and pariahs.

This is our first real introduction to the Kingdom of God. John the Baptist tells people to repent for the Kingdom of God is near. He just isn't quite sure what that means. He doesn't

understand that it is a king who stands among us. One who would be laid in the water and be laid in a tomb on our behalf. The answer wasn't more of the same bigger and better application of the law. Jesus fulfilled the law through a perfect life and still took the penalty of death.

We asked in the beginning, "Is it works or is it grace? Is it law or gospel?" In one sense, the answer is yes. Jesus says he didn't come to do away with the law but to fulfill it. Jesus often preaches about righteous living, yet he also stresses the grace of Abba Father. The problem is when we get the order out of whack. You can grace your way into works, but you can't work your way into grace. You can grace your way into works means that once you have understood the depth of God's gracious love, you can be set free to righteous living. Free in the sense that you aren't perpetually afraid of messing up because you will. Free to mess up and keep pursuing God's agenda for your life because of grace. You cannot work your way into grace. The harder you strive to keep the law, the less you will understand grace and the less gracious you will be.

The real daily conundrum comes for us when we consider ourselves and others in daily Christianity. How we think and deal with ourselves and others in reference to God. Law or grace. It is in our nature to lean one way or the other. Some of you here are law keepers and some of you are grace givers. It's how you are wired based on your family of origin, based on where you grew up, based on the faith of your youth. All of us are essential for the family of God. Sometimes gracious people are actually people that just want everyone to be happy, and they don't speak up for the truth and righteous living. Sometimes law keepers are actually just angry people that want to make sure everyone is as miserable as they are. But on their best days, gracious people are those who honor the law but champion grace. They constantly remind us about the prodigal son and the woman at the well. On their best days, keepers of the law remind us that God calls us to righteousness. That this isn't a laissez faire world that we should just coast through, but that God has a calling for us to higher standards.

This is the essence of faith. It's both. It's bivalence and trivalence because sometimes the answer isn't clear. What should you do with a horrible coworker, offer them grace or law?

Should you tell them that God loves them no matter what or should you tell them that God has high standards and lead them to repentance? It depends. What do you do with a wayward child that is addicted and far from home. Sometimes the most gracious thing you can do is remind them of the law and be firm. Sometimes the most lawful thing you can do is remind them of grace even if you don't want to. It depends.

I told you in the beginning that I don't really like those there-are-two-types-of-people-in-the-world concepts, but I do like one version of it. There are two types of people in the world, those who believe there are two types of people in the world and those that do not. There is a third way here that I hope we can all find.

Another logical conundrum based on Buridan's work in science and philosophy is called Buridan's Donkey. Imagine a donkey who always goes to the need/desire that is closest. He is an economic donkey in that regard. Imagine a donkey who is both hungry and thirsty in equal parts. This thirsty and hungry donkey finds himself equidistance from water and food. Imagine him stuck perpetually because he is closer to neither, and he refuses to choose. If you find yourself vacillating between grace and law, that is okay. Sometimes God is stern with us and other times tender. We need both. If the law or works is rooted in shame or guilt for you, then you need a big gulp of grace. If grace for you is rooted in a cheap grace or a libertine lifestyle, then you might need a healthy dose of law. You know what you need today. When it comes to salvation, grace alone is what you need, but when it comes to sanctification and daily Christian living, you might need some of each. That's not as clean. That's not neat and tidy. It isn't logical, but then again, faith isn't always logical.