

The Burden of the Law (Judaism)

Phil EuBank · Let's Be Honest · Genesis 17:7; Romans 3:19-22

AT A GLANCE

The Law of Moses is a perfect diagnostic instrument — it reveals moral failure with precision — but diagnosis is not cure. Judaism gave the world the covenant, the scriptures, and the promise of a Messiah; Christianity claims that promise landed in Jesus. The thermometer was never meant to become the thermostat, and the moment we treat it as one, we are doing what every religion, including our own informal versions, tempts us to do.

- The Law was given as a gift to reveal God's character and human need, not as a ladder to earn God's favor.
- When man-made interpretations accumulate around God's law, the fence around the rules becomes indistinguishable from the rules themselves.
- Christianity is not the repudiation of Judaism but its fulfillment — without Judaism, there is no Christianity.

“The tool that was meant to find sin started being used to try and fix sin.”

EXPOSITION

Scripture engaged

[Genesis 17:7](#) — I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

[Romans 3:19-22](#) — Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it — the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

The argument

The Covenant Is the Foundation, Not the Law — God's unbreakable commitment to Abraham precedes and outlasts every legal code

The preacher grounds Judaism not in the Law but in covenant — the prior, unconditional commitment God made to Abraham. He reads Genesis 17:7 to establish that this agreement was designed to endure regardless of Israel's performance: an everlasting covenant to be God to Abraham and his offspring. The Law arrived inside that covenant as a gift, a marker of God's care and a roadmap for community life among people devoted to the one true God. The preacher is careful here: the Law was always downstream of grace, not the source of it. 'The law was always designed to be a blessing, a gift, not a burden.' This sequencing — covenant first, law second — is the exegetical load-bearing beam the rest of the sermon rests on.

Insight — Every rule God gives is downstream of a relationship God initiates; confusing the two inverts the entire structure of biblical faith.

The Three-Category Structure of Old Testament Law Prevents Misreading — Moral, ceremonial, and civil law serve distinct purposes that collapse when conflated

The preacher introduces a tripartite framework — moral, ceremonial, civil — not as an academic taxonomy but as a practical hermeneutical tool. Moral law, centered on the Ten Commandments, points to the fundamental character of God: 'You shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness.' Ceremonial law addressed purity and sacrifice — how unholy people got right with a holy God. Civil law governed a pre-institutional tribal society, enabling Israel to persevere inside hostile cultures. The preacher notes that ancient Israel did not experience these as separate categories; the distinction is offered to modern readers to prevent the anachronistic error of treating all Old Testament legislation as equally binding or equally obsolete. Keeping the categories clear lets the reader ask the right question about any given text.

Insight — Reading Old Testament law without distinguishing its three functions produces either legalism or dismissal — both of which miss what the text was doing.

The Mishnah Is the Thermometer Mistaken for a Thermostat — Good pastoral instinct, accumulated over centuries, became the mechanism of self-justification

The preacher traces a specific historical dynamic: interpretations of the Torah accumulated into oral tradition, eventually codified as the Mishnah, forming what was called 'the fence around the law.' The original instinct was sound — if these rules protect us, rules around the rules protect us further. But over time, 'people started treating the man-made rules just like they were God's rules, and in the process that thermometer of the law became the thermostat.' The Law, designed to diagnose spiritual sickness, was now being pressed into service as the cure. The preacher refuses to let his congregation feel superior: 'Before you offer harsh judgment to anyone else, I would just encourage you to think about the time that you thought

you know what, I didn't pray enough this morning and now I can't find a parking space.' The Mishnah is not exotic; it is the grammar of religious anxiety in any tradition.

Insight — Whenever a diagnostic tool is promoted to a remedial one, the result is not greater holiness but greater spiritual exhaustion.

Paul's Argument in Romans 3 Names the Diagnosis-Cure Confusion Precisely — The law produces knowledge of sin, not freedom from it — and the next verse is the hinge

The preacher reads Romans 3:19-22 as the theological articulation of what his mother experienced personally. Paul's argument moves in two steps that mirror the thermometer-thermostat distinction. First: 'By works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin' — the law is revelatory, not remedial. Second, and the preacher underscores the conjunction: 'But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law... the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.' The 'but now' is the hinge. Jesus does not abolish the law's diagnostic function; he fulfills the requirement the law exposed but could not satisfy. The preacher notes the law and the prophets 'bear witness' to this righteousness — a phrase that ties the Hebrew scriptures into the argument as anticipation rather than failure.

Insight — The gospel does not compete with the Law's diagnosis; it answers the verdict the Law rightly delivers.

Christianity's Debt to Judaism Is Structural, Not Sentimental — The foundation is not merely historical but theological — the promise carried forward became the faith received

The preacher closes his theological argument by insisting that dismissing or diminishing Judaism is self-defeating for the Christian: 'Nearly every book in the New Testament was written by Jewish people who understood scripture through their Jewish faith. Jesus was Jewish. The Messiah that we follow came through the people of Israel.' He frames Judaism not as a failed religion but as the carrier of a promise: 'Judaism gave us the foundation that we stand on.' His mother's story crystallizes this: 'The faith she was raised with would become the foundation of the faith she was saved with.' The Law was not a mistake; it was preparation. Christianity does not replace Judaism; it claims to be Judaism's own hope arriving. This is not a diplomatic hedge but the preacher's exegetical position — the Hebrew messianic prophecies are the connective tissue between the two traditions.

Insight — A Christian who dismisses Judaism has sawed off the branch on which the gospel announcement stands.

Cross-references

- **Galatians (general)** — Cited alongside Romans as Paul's argument that grace and law-keeping cannot be combined as co-bases for salvation — you can have one or the other, not both.

DEVOTIONAL

There is a particular cruelty in a tool that shows you exactly what is wrong but cannot do a single thing to fix it. The thermometer reads the fever down to the decimal, and there it stops. You hold it and you know the truth about yourself, and the knowing itself cannot heal you. This is what the Law does. It is perfect at its work. 'You shall not murder' — and you have not, not with your hands. But the Law also speaks to how you think, what you want, the quick contempt that flares before you catch it. The Law stands there, steady and accurate, and it tells you what you are. It does not offer what comes next. For generations, people who loved God and loved the Law tried to close that gap themselves. They built careful fences, interpretations upon interpretations, not out of cynicism but out of longing — the very human longing to be good enough, to finally be right with the God who sees everything. You may recognize that longing. It surfaces when you wonder whether your morning prayers were sufficient, whether your failure this week has cost you something with God, whether you are behind on some invisible ledger. That is not Judaism; that is the grammar of every heart trying to make a thermometer do thermostat work. The gospel does not arrive to mock that effort. It arrives because the effort, at its most strenuous, was always going to fall short. Grace does not congratulate you on how close you got; it steps in where you cannot. Jesus satisfies what the Law diagnosed. He does not lower the standard — he meets it, entirely, and then extends the result to those who trust him. The Law was a gift. It carried a promise. And the promise, the tradition insists, has a name.

Reflection

- Where in your own spiritual life have you been pressing a diagnostic tool — a discipline, a rule, a habit of self-assessment — into service as the cure for what it only reveals?
- How has your understanding of what you owe God shaped the way you feel about yourself on a good day versus a bad one, and what does that pattern tell you about what you actually believe the gospel is?
- If you were to approach a Jewish friend, neighbor, or colleague with genuine curiosity about their experience of their faith rather than a prepared argument, what question would you most want to ask them — and what would it cost you to listen fully before you spoke?

Closing prayer

God, for Jewish friends and neighbors, coworkers and classmates — where it is easy in polite society to simply not have this conversation, or to pretend that all paths are the same — would you help us to lead with relationship, with conversation, with an openness and a kindness that maybe is new, that they have not heard in a while. Help us to be people of kindness, people of love, in a culture of judgment. Help us to hold the truth claims about what it is to know you because of your Son, and at the same time to love those who believe differently. We pray that your powerful, Messiah-saving work would reach into the lives of even more people today, even more this week. For those who know you, take us one step deeper into who you are. For those who do not, draw them one step closer. In the name of your Son Jesus we pray. Amen.
