

# Let's Be Honest: Judaism

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| <b>SERIES</b>        | <a href="#">Let's Be Honest — Worldview Series (Overview)</a> |
| <b>MESSAGE</b>       | Week 1 — Judaism                                              |
| <b>DATE</b>          | June 28, 2026                                                 |
| <b>PASSAGE</b>       | Matthew 7:12                                                  |
| <b>SPEAKER</b>       | Phil                                                          |
| <b>KEY PRINCIPLE</b> | The Law is a thermometer, not a thermostat.                   |

## I. Introduction: Why This Series, Why Now

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**A** Good morning and welcome to Menlo Church. I'm so glad that you are here as we begin our new series called "Let's Be Honest," where we are digging into the world's largest and most influential religious systems. Today, we will begin by looking at Judaism.

**B** Before we dive in, though, I want to say a few things about what we are trying to do in this series and why we are taking it on at all. First, we're committed to intellectual honesty. A lot of us understand other faiths through the worst version that is most easily dismissed.

**C** It doesn't serve them, God, or us to caricature the faith of other people, so we will attempt to bring our best thinking and posture to it. Second, we're committed to being respectful. Some of you may have brought someone with you today of a different faith; that's the point!

**D** Maybe even to the week where we are discussing their faith. I hope that friends and family of other faith traditions will hear a presentation that is worthy of their expression of faith and personal story of experiencing it for themselves.

**E** Third, at Menlo, we're committed to being thoughtful witnesses for God in the world, and we've got to make sure we are nailing the thoughtful part when it comes to exploring the faith traditions of our neighbors. We have to lead with curiosity, not accusation. Listening before we speak.

**F** *[Transition.]* And before we pray, I want to share three reasons why we are doing this series. One is to increase our knowledge and love for our neighbors. Understanding someone else's faith can deepen your understanding and appreciation for them as well as your own faith in the process.

**G** Two, to correct the misconception that all religions are basically the same. They're not, they don't claim to be, and as you'll see over the next few weeks, their claims are often incompatible with one another. Real respect isn't pretending there are no differences but taking those differences seriously.

**H** And three, to show the unique value and beauty of Jesus. The Gospel doesn't need you to diminish other religions or people who follow them to demonstrate its power; it can stand on its own in the free marketplace of ideas.

**I** And one last thing: don't assume that just because we've learned about some of the core beliefs of a religious system that you know the beliefs of someone who holds it. Every tradition has diversity of thought and adherence. Your coworker isn't a spokesperson for the religion.

**J** So, as we get ready to engage in this series across all of Menlo with the variety of faiths, even in the room right now, would you pray with me? *[Congregational prayer.]*

## II. Judaism: The Law as Thermometer, Not Thermostat

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**A** Now, let's talk about Judaism. *[Transition.]* There's a huge difference between a thermometer and a thermostat, and it might be the most important theological distinction that you've never thought about before. A thermometer tells you the truth; it accurately reveals what's happening — you're sick.

**B** Maybe you have a fever of 104 degrees, but the thermometer can't fix anything. It's great at diagnosis, but that's where it stops. You look, and you realize you need help; that something is wrong, and you need help beyond yourself to fix yourself.

**C** A thermostat is way different than that. A thermostat actually does something about the temperature. It reads the temperature and then goes to work, it adjusts the conditions and changes the environment it's in. This contrast describes the law in Judaism.

**D** To understand Judaism is to understand one of the most beautiful and tragic religions in human history, from which both Christianity and Islam, the world's two largest religions, find their origins. It also shows the consequences of asking a spiritual thermometer to be a thermostat.

**E** Judaism is built on something so beautiful, covenant. That God entered into a relationship with Abraham that was unique and would endure, even when Israel fell short, as a profound picture of God's unshakable love for His people.

**F** *[Transition.]* This is the way God described it to Abraham:

*"And 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."*

**G** As a part of this covenant, God gave His people the law, a portion of what we often call the Old Testament, Jewish people call the Torah, which comprises the first five books of the Bible. It wasn't supposed to be a burden to crush His people, but as a gift.

**H** Originally, the law was a marker of God's care for His people and a way of life for how they would live in community devoted to the one true God, which was a countercultural distinctive throughout their entire story of development in the Hebrew Scriptures.

**I** *[Transition.]* They were one people with a national identity that was wrapped up in their moral behavior, civil obedience, and ceremonial cleanliness. They didn't understand the law in these categories, but it can be really helpful for us to see them this way to make sense of why today feels different.

**J** For centuries, this is how the law was understood, and it allowed God's people to live in very hostile places with a distinct way of life. The Ten Commandments were like the centerpiece of the table of God's plan for the Jewish people.

**K** You shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness — moral laws that speak to the fundamental character of right and wrong. These laws point to the very nature of God. The ceremonial laws are about sacrifice and purity — impacting what you could eat and how you could worship.

**L** These laws communicate the need for cleansing and the means by which your shortcomings could be addressed to regain access to God, or what the text would call holiness. And then the civil laws detail how to run a society justly, handle disputes, and care for the vulnerable.

**M** The law was a gift. A roadmap and annual calendar of reminders and celebrations, and course correction for people God was deeply committed to, but then something happened. Over centuries, what started as interpretations became additions.



**N** By the time Jesus arrived, there was the written Torah, but there was also the oral tradition, passed down in what is called the Mishnah. Thousands upon thousands of extra rules, interpretations of interpretations that were framed as "the fences around the law."

**O** The heart was amazing — "let's keep God's people from even getting close to choices that would hurt them, those around them, and the heart of God." But in the process, the thermometer of the law became the thermostat. The law was never meant to be the answer; it was supposed to point to the answer.

**P** The tool meant to find sin started being used to try to fix sin. It was great at finding it and powerless to fix it. People became convinced that if they could just keep the law carefully enough, follow all the rules, and add enough fences to protect themselves, they could make themselves right with God.

**Q** It was the kind of spiritual desperation we can all feel. It was people looking at a perfect thermometer and thinking, "if I just understand this fever perfectly, maybe I can understand how to fix it on my own."

### **III. A Personal Story: My Mother's Journey**

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**A** My mom understood this world very well. I don't enter this week's conversation strictly as an observer. I come into it as someone whose mother was born and raised Jewish. She was a first-generation American. A Russian Jew. Her parents immigrated to the United States in the early forties.

**B** They fought through the immigration process, and their family gave nearly everything to get them here. Her parents ran delis in Southern California and built a life here from almost nothing; they were the American dream. She grew up in a conservative Jewish home.

**C** That means they observed aspects of Jewish law and the calendar, but not with the strictness of orthodox Jews. They observed holy days, regularly practiced the Sabbath, and lived as a Jewish family, embedded in a Jewish community.

**D** Every relationship they had was, on some level, built around these religious traditions. What she learned was the subtle lesson lots of us learn in all kinds of religions — the better you are at following the rules, the better you are with the God who sets them.

**E** But she also grew up hearing about the Messiah, the rescuer of humanity that is spoken of hundreds of times in the Hebrew Scriptures. Every Jewish tradition has its own way of thinking about the Messiah, but for my mom, He was still coming and would bring hope beyond her obedience.

**F** When my mom heard a Christian pastor describe Jesus as the Messiah in her early twenties, it clicked in a way she had never heard before. She decided to become a follower of Jesus, and it changed everything for her, in beautiful and costly ways.

**G** Jesus didn't simply offer a solution to the problem of her moral performance; He brought an internal transformation to her life that she had never experienced before. She experienced salvation as a free gift in grace alone through faith alone.

**H** After a lifetime for her, in the line of countless generations, in which the system she lived in made it feel as though her access to God was connected to her ability to obey, she was free. Her worth was no longer achieved, but something she had received.

**I** But it came with a cost. When she told her family, her parents didn't understand. It felt like betrayal for many years, and her peers felt the same way. Everyone distanced themselves, and she felt like she had to start over. Many years later, God restored some of those key friendships.

## **IV. Paul's Testimony: Law,**

# Grace, and Romans 3

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The law had been a thermometer. It showed her that she was sick, but it couldn't fix her. And when Jesus came as the thermostat, when He offered her healing and grace and freedom, she couldn't go back to just reading the thermometer and pretending it was enough.

**A** The Apostle Paul had gone through a similar journey. He was incredibly devout, not just orthodox, but a first-century Jewish leader when he met Jesus, and it changed everything. When he describes this dynamic in his letter to the church at Rome, he puts it this way,

**B** *[Transition.]*

***"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." — Romans 3:19-20***

**C** Paul is making the distinction that my mom felt thousands of years later: the law can't make you righteous. It makes you conscious of how not righteous you are. It reveals and diagnoses, like a thermometer, but Paul doesn't stop there...

**D** *[Transition.]*

***"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." — Romans 3:21-22***

**E** Jesus is the thermostat. The only one who can actually do the work the law pointed out but was powerless to work out in us on its own or on our own. Now I want to be really clear; I'm not saying Judaism is evil, I'm saying that from a Christian

perspective, it's incomplete.

**F** It was built to point to the fulfillment in Jesus. If you're Jewish, I'm not trying to minimize your experience of the law or traditions or covenant; I'm simply trying to point to the Christian understanding of the law.

**G** *[Transition.]* For many Jewish people today, they describe their connection to Judaism in uniquely personal ways. There is somewhat of a spectrum of Judaism, from more orthodox to more cultural. *[Expound.]*

**H** So if you have someone in your life who says they are Jewish, I'd highly recommend you ask them how they express their Judaism with a question like, "What does your Judaism mean to you?" We're going to see this kind of variety a lot in looking at other faiths.

**I** There is something a little more distinctive about Judaism, though; it's not just how people relate to religious practices; it's that Jewish identity as a whole can mean a number of different things. *[Transition.]* Maybe you understand religious systems a little better, but that's not the only one.

**J** There is an aspect of Judaism rooted in faith, practicing the law, understanding the covenant, and keeping the holy days, and some Jewish people only practice this if they have converted to Judaism from something else.

**K** For others, they would connect to the people in their heritage, that's me to a certain extent. If your mom is 100% Jewish, you are also considered Jewish, and then there are people who are modern-day Israelis who may be completely secular in their faith practices.

**L** This graphic shows a little bit of this idea, but in real life, it's much more dynamic. Not every Jewish person supports the modern state of Israel, and not every person in Israel today even identifies as Jewish. Understanding this allows us to have much better conversations with people in our lives.

# V. Are They Saved? A Framework and a Closing Word

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**A** Now, throughout this series, we're going to regularly address a question that I know some of you are thinking right now. Is this group, in today's case, Jewish people, saved? Are they going to Heaven? Here's my response, and you're going to hear this same framework from me every single week.

**B** We don't actually know the eternal standing of any individual person. That's between them and God. I can't look at someone and tell you whether they're going to spend eternity with Jesus or not. That's not my job or yours, it's God's. And honestly, that should make us humble and careful about how we speak.

**C** *[Transition.]* But here's what we do know. As followers of Jesus, we believe that salvation is offered by grace. Undeserved favor. It's not earned. It's given. We believe it comes through faith, which means trusting in what we believe even when we can't always see it.

**D** And we believe it comes through Christ, the person and work of the Messiah, who died and rose again to make a way for us to be reconciled to God. That's the truth claim that Christians have believed for thousands of years. And we're not ashamed of it.

**E** But don't miss this: historic Christianity is deeply indebted to Judaism. Think about that. Nearly every book in the New Testament was written by Jewish people who understood Scripture through their Jewish faith. Jesus was Jewish. The Messiah we follow came through the people of Israel.

**F** The God we worship was revealed through generations of Jewish people who journeyed with Him, wrestled with Him, and waited for Him. Without Judaism, there is no Christianity. So when we say the law is incomplete, when we say Jesus is the fulfillment of what the law pointed to, we're not saying Judaism is worthless.

**G** We're saying Judaism gave us the foundation we stand on. We're saying thank you to a tradition that carried the promise of the Messiah until He came. So how can you best approach a Jewish friend to continue this conversation?

**H** *[Transition.]* Lead with gratitude, not criticism. Thank them for the faith that brought Jesus into the world. Ask genuine questions about what their Judaism means to them. What traditions matter most? What does the law mean in their life? Are they religiously observant, culturally connected, or both? Don't assume. Don't caricature. Don't try to win an argument.

**I** And if the conversation ever turns toward faith and salvation, amazing! But I want to be honest about something, too, especially for Jewish friends in the room or watching online. Christians have done real damage to Jewish people throughout history. We've mischaracterized your faith.

**J** We've tied Judaism to Israeli politics in ways that aren't fair, true, or helpful. We haven't always treated you or your traditions with the respect you deserve. And if that's been your experience, I'm sorry. That's not what I'm trying to do here.

**K** I'm not trying to convince you that your faith is worthless or that your traditions are empty. The law is a gift from God. It's beautiful. I just believe it wasn't designed to function in isolation or in combination with more man-made rules.

**L** And here's what I genuinely believe: if you're Jewish and you're listening to this, Jesus is the fulfillment of what your own prophets and teachers have been pointing toward for thousands of years. He's the one your tradition says is coming. And He offers you what the law can't give you: grace. Freedom. Healing.

**M** My heart isn't to talk down to you or to assume this is new information for you. I hope that by the good news of Jesus being shared in the context of your faith, you might discover what my mom did, that the faith she was raised with would become the foundation of the faith she was saved with.

**N** Can I pray for you? *[Closing prayer.]*

# Resources for Further Study

## LET'S BE HONEST: JUDAISM

### Works Consulted

#### [Kingdom of the Cults](#) — Walter Martin

The definitive comparative religion reference. Martin's section on Judaism offers historical context and theological clarity without caricature. Essential for understanding how different traditions make competing truth claims.

#### [So What's the Difference?](#) — Fritz Ridenour

A more accessible entry point for understanding world religions side by side. Ridenour breaks down core beliefs in conversational language that works for both new believers and seasoned Christians.

#### [The Case for Christ](#) — Lee Strobel

Though focused on Christianity, Strobel's interview methodology and willingness to engage serious objections models intellectual honesty. His approach to evidence-based faith strengthens how you talk about Jesus without dismissing other traditions.

#### [The Chosen](#) — Chaim Potok

Fiction, but essential reading. This novel gives you the lived experience of Orthodox Jewish faith and family in mid-century America. You'll understand the cost and the beauty of what Phil's mother left behind.

#### [For the Love of God's Word: An Introduction to the Bible](#) — Tremper Longman III

Helps Christians understand the Hebrew Scriptures on their own terms before imposing Christian interpretation. This matters when talking to Jewish friends who know their own text deeply.

#### [The Hebrew-Christian Messiah](#) — Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum

A Jewish Christian scholar's deep dive into messianic prophecy and how Judaism and Christianity read the same texts differently. Respectful, scholarly, and unflinching about the actual disagreement.

# Additional Resources

## Podcasts and Conversations

The Veritas Forum at universities often features Jewish and Christian scholars in respectful dialogue. Search "Veritas Forum Judaism Christianity" for recorded conversations that model the tone you're aiming for.

## Books for Deeper Dive

- [The History of Judaism](#) — Nicholas de Lange. Academic but accessible. Gives you the actual historical development so you're not relying on generalizations.
- [Why Judaism?](#) — David Wolpe. Written by a rabbi for people questioning their faith. Understanding how modern Jews defend and think about their own tradition gives you insight into real conversations.
- [Messianic Judaism](#) — David Stern. For understanding how some Jewish people navigate faith in Jesus while maintaining Jewish identity. This bridges both worlds.

## Documentaries

"The Ten Commandments" (various versions) — not for theology, but to see how the law has captured cultural imagination. Also search for documentaries on the history of the Jewish diaspora — understanding the actual story of Jewish survival and immigration (like Phil's mother's family) builds empathy.



## Discussion Questions

### Opening Questions

1. Before today, what did you think you knew about Judaism? Where did that come from?
2. Phil said Christians often understand other faiths through "the worst version that is most easily dismissed." Have you noticed that in yourself or others? What does that look like?
3. If you have a Jewish friend or colleague, what's one thing you've wondered about their faith but never asked?

### On the Thermometer/Thermostat Principle

4. The sermon says the law reveals sin but can't fix it. Have you experienced this in your own life with any "rule" or standard you tried to meet? What happened?
5. How is trying to earn God's favor through rule-keeping different from trying to earn a friend's love by following all their preferences? What's the same about it?
6. Phil's mom grew up learning that "the better you are at following the rules, the better you are with the God who sets them." How is that different from what Jesus teaches about grace?

### On Judaism and Christianity

7. Phil said Judaism is "incomplete" rather than "evil." What's the difference between those two claims? Why does that distinction matter?
8. The sermon highlighted three categories of law: moral, ceremonial, and civil. Which of these do you think Christians should still follow? Why?
9. Romans 3:20 says the law makes us "conscious of sin." When you read God's law in Scripture, does it draw you closer to God or farther away? Why?

### On Diversity and Respect

10. Phil explained that Judaism exists on a spectrum from cultural to Orthodox. Why is it important to know this before you have a conversation with a Jewish friend?
11. What's the difference between respecting someone's faith and believing their faith is true?
12. If a Jewish friend asked you, "So do you think I'm going to hell?", how would you answer after listening to this sermon?

### **On Approach and Posture**

13. Phil said to "lead with gratitude, not criticism." What are you grateful for about Judaism's contribution to Christianity?
14. Why do you think Phil started his apology by naming specific wrongs (mischaracterization, tying Judaism to Israeli politics) rather than speaking generally?
15. What would change in how you talk to a Jewish friend if you genuinely believed their faith "gave us the foundation we stand on"?

### **Closing/Personal Reflection**

16. Phil's mother discovered that "the faith she was raised with would become the foundation of the faith she was saved with." What does that mean? How might that apply to someone else's spiritual journey?
17. What's one thing you're taking away from this sermon that changes how you think about Judaism or how you'd approach a Jewish friend?

## Five-Day Devotional: The Law and Grace

### Day 1 — The Law Reveals

Passage: Romans 3:19–20

*"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."*

**Reflection:** The law is a thermometer, not a thermostat. It tells you the truth about your condition. When you look at God's standard in the Ten Commandments, what do you see? Not perfection. You see how far you fall short.

This isn't bad news initially. It's honest news. A thermometer that works is a gift because it tells you that you're sick. You need help.

Think about a time when you realized you couldn't fix something on your own. What did that moment feel like? The law creates that moment spiritually. It says, "You can't do this. You need someone else."

*Prayer: "God, thank you for a law that tells me the truth about myself. Help me stop pretending I can earn my way to you. Show me today where I'm trying to be righteous on my own and help me see my need for your grace."*

## Day 2 — The Burden of Trying

Passage: Matthew 23:4 (Jesus speaking about the Pharisees)

*"They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them."*

**Reflection:** By Jesus's time, the law had become a burden. Thousands of rules. Interpretations of interpretations. "Fences around the law" that were supposed to protect people but instead crushed them.

This happens in every religion and in every human heart. We take something good (the law) and turn it into something that exhausts us. We add more rules, more expectations, more ways to prove we're good enough.

What "fences" have you built in your own spiritual life? Rules that aren't in Scripture but feel necessary? Standards you've imposed on yourself or others?

Jesus's point wasn't that the law is bad. His point was that using it to earn righteousness is a burden no one can carry.

*Prayer: "Jesus, help me see where I'm trying to carry a burden you never meant me to carry. Where am I adding rules to your grace? Help me lay that down and receive what you offer instead."*

## Day 3 — The Thermostat Arrives

Passage: Romans 3:21-22

*"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."*

**Reflection:** This is the pivot. The law pointed to the answer. Now the answer has come.

Jesus doesn't condemn the law. He fulfills it. He does what the law was always meant to do: He shows you what righteousness looks like (perfectly), and then He gives it to you as a gift.

The thermometer said, "You have a fever." The thermostat comes in and heals it.

What does it mean to you that Jesus offers righteousness "through faith"? Not through your effort, but through trust in what He's done?

*Prayer: "Jesus, thank you for being what the law pointed to but couldn't be. Thank you for not condemning me for my inability to keep the law but for giving me your righteousness instead. Help me receive that gift today."*

## Day 4 — Freedom and Cost

Passage: Galatians 5:1

*"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."*

**Reflection:** Phil's mother was free. After a lifetime of believing her worth was tied to her obedience, she discovered it was a gift. That freedom cost her everything: her family, her community, her identity as she knew it.

Freedom in Christ is real, but it's not cheap. It costs you the false security of trying to earn God's favor. It costs you control. It asks you to trust instead of perform.

What would freedom from trying to earn God's approval look like in your life? What would you stop doing? What would you start trusting instead?

*Prayer: "God, thank you for the freedom you offer through Jesus. Help me stop performing and start trusting. Where I'm still trying to earn your favor, help me let that go. Give me the courage to live in the freedom you've already purchased."*

## Day 5 — A Different Kind of Witness

Passage: 1 Peter 3:15-16

*"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander."*

**Reflection:** This week's sermon modeled something specific: You can be completely convinced that Jesus is the answer and still treat people of other faiths with genuine respect and gratitude.

This isn't compromise. It's clarity combined with humility. You're clear about what you believe (Jesus is Lord). You're humble about how you've sometimes communicated it (with harm).

If you have a Jewish friend, a Muslim colleague, a Buddhist neighbor, how would your witness change if you started with gratitude instead of critique? With genuine questions instead of assumptions?

The most powerful witness isn't winning an argument. It's modeling a different kind of love.

*Prayer: "God, give me the courage to be clear about Jesus and the wisdom to be kind about how I talk about Him. Help me listen before I speak. Help me see where I've caused harm and where I can build bridges instead. Let my life witness to your grace."*

## **Recommended Next Steps**

### **For Individual Reflection**

Read through one of the "Works Consulted" this month. Take notes on what surprises you or challenges your assumptions.

### **For Small Groups**

Use the discussion questions over two or three weeks. Don't rush. Let people actually think and share.

### **For Deeper Engagement**

If you have a Jewish friend or colleague, consider asking them one of the discussion questions listed above. Not as a "gotcha," but as a genuine question about their faith. Listen more than you speak.

### **For the Whole Series**

As Phil preaches through other world religions, notice the pattern. Every religion tries to answer real human questions. Understanding what questions people are asking helps you understand why they believe what they believe.