I believe it’s a good idea, as we venture back into the book of Romans, to take a brief glimpse into some of Israel’s history. In Romans chapter 9, Paul is distraught over Israel’s unbelief—they didn’t just not believe Jesus, they killed Him for their narrowmindedness. Israel was THE chosen nation—chosen by God Himself to be His nation of followers, with all the benefits that God could and would bestow upon them. And sadly, they turned their back on God by rejecting Jesus. So God said, “OK, if that’s what you want, you got it. Now I’ll offer my free gift to the gentiles.”

Paul explains that a few Israelites will be saved, the ones who believe Jesus was/is who He said He was. Then beginning in verse 30 Paul continues to explain that God is creating a NEW Israel, and eternal Israel, comprised of Jews AND gentiles. This “Israel” is established when Jesus comes back to earth to set all of creation right with God. Here’s what Paul says:

30 What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; 31 but the people of Israel, who pursued the law as the way of righteousness, have not attained their goal. 32 Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone. 33 As it is written: “See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who believes in him will never be put to shame. 10:1 Brothers and sisters, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. 2 For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. 3 Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness. 4 Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

It might seem harsh to say, but God has rejected Israel—but ONLY because they have rejected Jesus. They wanted to rely only on their heritage and their legalistic obedience to the Law. Their belief had nothing to do with faith in God and especially nothing to do with faith in Jesus. We could look at this sad truth as “righteousness and faith versus law and works.” Or, “faith versus ‘we’ve always done it that way before.’”

More history: late in the 5th century BC, during the time of Ezra in the Old Testament, Israel, who had been living in exile scattered across the region, once again came together and restored Israel. In doing so they separated themselves from the “pagan” world. They felt it important to live by the “Law” (the Torah) and to remain loyal to their ethnicity. They basically believed, the Jews were “in” with God and the rest of the world was “out.”
Skip forward about 600 years to the time of Paul. The Pharisees, the ruling religious authorities, were professing that that the law and clinging to the fact that THEY were Israel was the ONLY way to live and to receive God’s blessing. Faith had nothing to do with it. The Sadducees, Israel’s priests, were actually motivated politically – again, having nothing to do with faith in God. As you study Israel’s history, you see that by the time of Jesus, the vast majority of Israel was not even following the Law correctly – they were misinterpreting the Law to meet their own desires.

Consequently, when Jesus did arrive, they didn’t recognized Him because they didn’t understand their own Law, their own prophecies given to them by GOD declaring what the Messiah would truly do and be. So they rejected Him. Paul, here in chapter 9, describes Jesus as the cornerstone. Israel stumbled over this Cornerstone, the building block of GOD’S church – they fell flat on their face and didn’t recognize Jesus.

Paul, in his writings, often uses imagery of a race to depict the Christian life. Here he states the gentiles didn’t “pursue” righteousness (literally run after as to win the prize), BUT they obtained it nonetheless by “faith.” Israel on the other hand, pursued the “Law” as the way of righteousness (being completely right with God and with others), and they missed out. They missed the mark, they prize was taken away from them. They had always pursued the Law this way, and they were always going to pursue the Law this way. That was their mistake. The Law was given to show them how far short of God’s grace and glory they actually fall – NOT to give them a means of reaching God on THEIR merits. Paul says in Ephesians 2:8-9 it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.

Because of the Jews misinterpretation of the Law, they expected the Messiah to be a triumphant military ruler – the leader who would once and for all throw out the Roman rule. They expected the Messiah to “fix” their country – what they didn’t realize was that Jesus came to fix their hearts. He came to be a sacrifice so God’s “gift” could be offered to all. Paul says in Romans 3:25-26 God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness. This is the righteousness that is required for us all at the final judgement. That is when God, once and for all, looks at us and says, “welcome home my child.” Israel’s eternal problem was/is, that as a nation they don’t have the righteousness of God. And Paul says in 9:32 Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works.

Interestingly, Paul never says that obeying the Law is wrong or bad. In fact he believes they should. The problem Israel faces is believing in being made right with God just by obeying the law instead of placing all their faith in the “law-Giver.”
They pursued righteousness not by faith but as if it were by works. The word Paul uses for “pursued” gives the idea of violent pursuit, even to the point of persecution. In John chapter 5, Jesus is busy healing people. That to me seems like a noble thing to be doing, a way of showing love to others. But look what John records in verse 16: because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders began to persecute him. To “persecute” means: to subject someone to hostility and ill-treatment, especially because of their race, political or religious beliefs. That’s how Israel “pursued” righteousness.

Jesus was fulfilling the entire law by loving obedience to God and by actively, intentionally loving others – what greater example of love is there than healing others, meeting the needs of others. So because Jesus was healing on the Sabbath, the Jews rejected Him because they believed He was intentionally breaking the Sabbath. The rejected Him because He was a friend of “tax collectors.” They rejected Him because he was a friend of sinners. They rejected Him because He seemed unconcerned with maintaining the distinction between Jews and the gentile dogs.

I have said many times and will continue to say: if you don’t have unsaved friends, preferably several of them, you need some new friends. How are we ever going to share Christ with others if we don’t develop relationships with people who truly NEED Christ?

Israel stumbled over the Rock of Love because, to accept Him meant they would have to confess their need of redemption. To accept Jesus meant they would have to agree they were no better than the gentiles. Their pride, their arrogance, their “we’ve never done it that way before” attitude got in the way. Paul says in Romans 3:9-10 we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. As it is written: “There is no one righteous, not even one.

Do we ever look down on others the way Israel thought of the gentiles? Be careful how you think of your answer. What do you think of “those Muslims” or “those people who are covered with tattoos and piercings all over their bodies” or “those gays” or (and you fill in the blank.) We must remember, we MUST remember, Jesus died for them as much as He died for you and me. Israel wouldn’t accept that, so they killed Jesus.

I believe we must ask ourselves, how are we, how am “I”, pursuing a closer relationship with Jesus? By studying His word? That’s important. By prayer? That’s important. By practicing being patient, kind, compassionate, etc? That’s important. But – my obedience to God must be motivated by “faith.” All this good stuff is meaningless UNLESS I am only pursuing Jesus by faith in Him and His love for me. My motive is the key. I must be loving God more, by faith, and serving others better, by faith.
Paul says this about putting my faith in action in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 *If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn’t love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.* 2 *If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God’s secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn’t love others, I would be nothing.* 3 *If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it,*[^2] *but if I didn’t love others, I would have gained nothing.*

Israel was just going to follow their rules, hide behind their closed doors and never allow anyone else in. In practical terms, I find I must ask myself, what would living by faith in the God of mercy look like in my life? Is it more important for me to DO things MY way, or to step out in faith and live life God’s way?

A couple weeks ago I told you about Marlene’s and my Christmas day. At about 3:00 PM our brand new neighbors pulled up in a U-Haul truck the size of a semi. I wanted to stay in and play games. Instead I went out in the cold and helped them for the next three hours unload their truck. I then asked them if they had anything to eat for Christmas. At this point they hadn’t eaten anything since breakfast in Portland. We invited them over for dinner and they didn’t leave until 10:00. Just loving others, “strangers”. It was the best Christmas ever. They then left about a week later to go back to Portland for a couple weeks to wrap up their house down there. I got a call several days later and “Dan” called me and asked me I would pick up their mail and roll their garbage can out to the street. In one day we became family, all because of choosing to step out in faith and invite “others” in.

I find I must remind myself, nothing is ours. We have life ONLY because of God’s mercy and faithfulness to us! Our time, our resources, our strengths, talents, possessions – we’re only stewards, care-takers of what He wants us to use for HIS glory and the benefit of “others.” By faith, I must be willing to give away MY agenda, my time, my strength, all for the sake of others – Jesus did. Paul said, the entire Law is summed up in this one idea, we must love others. I must be willing to ask open-ended questions, questions that solicit a response other than yes or no, and then be willing to be quiet and listen with the intent of understanding, NOT fixing. I must understand them so I can more intelligently show compassion and kindness to them. I MUST be willing to put other’s needs ahead of my own. This is living my life by faith in Christ.

Paul said, I have “learned” to be content in any and every situation. A take home thought I had was this: By faith, have I “learned” to be content with putting other’s needs ahead of my own?