

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from our Lord and savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. You may be seated. All right, so we have the Book of James, which we don't often read or talk about, partially because it's gotten a bad rep, at least in Lutheran circles, because it seems to talk a lot about works. It ends with, "Show me your faith without works and I'll show you my faith by my works." And if you read it without a critical eye, you can tend to think that James is telling us that we are saved by grace and by our works because it says, "Faith without works is dead," but he's not. If you look at the other places and other sections, you notice he says, "For if you sin and are convicted of the law in one place, if you fall short in one area, you're guilty of it all."

And he also says, "If you love your neighbor as yourself, good on you." But let's think about that. How many of you us have really done a great job of loving our neighbor as ourselves? Let's face it. We're not talking about the really nice person that lives next door, who watches our house when we're gone on vacation and takes care of the cats. We're not talking about the guy that mows your lawn when they decide to mow their own because they're just a nice guy. That's not the neighbor that we're talking about here. The neighbor we're talking about is the obnoxious one that writes you up every single time you violate one of the HOA rules.

That's the neighbor that we're talking about. We're talking about the neighbor who raises a fuss every time they're in line right in front of you in the grocery store and they take 10 minutes, which should have been a five-minute thing. We're talking about the person that irritates your very last nerve. That's the neighbor that we're talking about. We're talking about the neighbor that wrongs you, the neighbor that has done you wrong, the neighbor that is actively being an irritant. We're talking about the neighbor that you don't really like very much, the neighbor that cuts you off in traffic. The neighbor that has a foul mouth all the time. The neighbor that does not treat you well.

That's the neighbor that James is saying, "If you can love your neighbor as yourself, you're doing well. However, if you can't do that, you're guilty of all of the law." Now, wherein then lies your hope of good works. If you can't even do that one simple thing, what about the rest of them? What about, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind and all your soul?" How well have we filled up that one up? We've fallen short of God's glory and James makes it clear that yes, we are called to do good works, but we are not called to rely upon those good works as the hope and the confidence that we are saved, but rather... Now, when you get to that, if you read James by itself without thinking of the Gospel, and just read this, if you're guilty at one point, you're guilty of it at all, there's not a lot of hope for us, not a lot of joy.

And then you get Jesus' message with the Syrophenician woman. Okay, she's not a Jew. She wasn't raised in the Jewish faith, and yet she goes and asks Jesus to heal her daughters filled with a demon, and he says, "What? I'm supposed to feed the children first. Should I give the food of the children to the dogs?" And what does she say? "Yes Lord," like, "Yeah, you're right. I'm a dog. However, even the dogs get the crumbs." And Jesus says, "Your faith has made your daughter well. Go, be at peace," in essence. Now, Mark doesn't go into a whole lot of detail because Mark is relaying Peter's view and vision of what happened and his understanding, and Peter's all about the immediacy. "Let's do this and this and this and this."

And so we go right onto the next miracle that Jesus does, immediately following, immediately. And that's just Mark and Peter. They're just drilling through the whole story as fast as they possibly can. So then they get to this blind and deaf man and Jesus actively comes and heals them and therein lies our hope. We need to understand and remember that in essence, we're like the Syrophenician woman. In the eyes of God or in the merits before God, we're like dogs. We have absolutely no right to ask God for anything. We don't. We need to understand the position that we are in before God, and that's part of what Jesus was gleaning from this woman and part of what he wanted us to understand. Did the woman think that he was insulting her, or did she think that he was being honest and she thought that he was being honest? Because she understood, as are we all supposed to understand, that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

That's what she understood, and so she went to Jesus with nothing. She had absolutely nothing to offer Jesus, and yet she went in faith, trusting that the word of God could and would do gracious and loving things. That's why she went to her Lord. That's why she trusted, even though she was not a Jew and had no right to come to him. It's also why we can go before our Lord, is because we know the nature of our God. We know his nature is to be generous. And so we put our trust in that. We don't trust in our goodness to go before God. We trust in his goodness and his nature so that we know he will listen to us. That is also why Isaiah says, "Don't be anxious." James and Isaiah are basically saying the same thing, "Trust in God and therefore you don't need to be anxious about your life."

Now, I know it's a normal thing to be anxious. The world, if you look around and all the chaos that's going on, there's some anxiety-causing things out there. If you listen to the news, that can create some anxiety. If you look at your own life and some of the problems and struggles that you are personally facing, that can cause some anxiety. But what are we called to do with that? Try and work it out ourselves? Try and wrestle with it ourselves and just stay anxious? That's a dangerous place to be. I think about the only thing you're going to get if you stay anxious is ulcers and a bad night's sleep. Nothing else you're going to gain, and

that anxiety may turn into fear or maybe anger, an irritation. Nothing good comes out of you being anxious and being anxious is a lack of understanding of who our God is.

Same thing with a lack of doing good works. Same thing with a desire to think more highly of ourselves than we ought. All of this comes from a lack of understanding of who our God is. Why does God say in Isaiah, "Don't be anxious?" Why? Because he has promised to be with us. He has promised to give everything that we need to support this body in life. He has promised that no matter what comes, we have the assurance and the hope and the confidence of our salvation because he has adopted us in our baptism and made us his children. And as God's children, our heavenly father takes care of his children. And so what is there to be anxious about?

Even in this world, let's face it, there are struggles and hardships in this world, and it's not easy getting through life, but we know. We know that this is temporary. We know that this is short-lived. We know that this is not our home. We know that there's a better place waiting for us. And so we can deal with these temporary struggles and anxious thoughts by giving them to God and trusting that he will take care of us. Even if that means we're going to continue to suffer from the rest of our earthly lives with this particular ailment or this particular frustration or this particular issue, we still know that God is taking care of us because we know it's going to end and we know we're going to be free.

And so therefore, why worry and why be anxious? God's got it in his hands. And same thing about doing good works and loving our neighbor. We don't do it perfectly, but we still have received such a wonderful blessing from God. He didn't literally stick his fingers in our ears, pop our ears and cause us to hear, but he did bring us out of deafness to being able to hear. Through the water and the Word, he unstopped our spiritual ears and we can now hear his word and we can hear his grace. And maybe he didn't spit on his hands and touch our tongue to make us be able to speak, but because we have heard the word and he has given that to us, we can speak his word of joy and peace, and we can rejoice in that and we can serve one another.

You see, good works just naturally follow after the gospel. If you truly understood the nature of our God, you would not be anxious. If you truly understood the nature of our God, you would be generous with your time and your energy and your wealth because you know he's taking care of you and you know what a great gift he has given to you. What a marvelous, beyond compare, measured gift you have. Life, everlasting. What is the value of that? What would you pay for that? And he paid it all for us.

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So what do we do with that? We then share the joy and share the love with our neighbors. We don't necessarily have to our neighbors or what they're doing or approve of what they're doing, but we are still called to love them. We still may be hurt by them on a regular basis, but we're still called to love them because God has loved us and because we know if he loved us, he also loves them. And there's a possibility that God's word might do to them what it has done to us, taken us from this veil of tears and brought us into the peace of our salvation.

And so James is encouraging us, "Do good works," because that is the way in which we praise God and thank him for the gift of our salvation. Don't be anxious because that is the way we demonstrate how much we trust what he has done for us. Come to God with all of your cares and all of your concerns, trusting that even a crumb is sufficient. Even a tiny morsel of God's grace and blessing is more grand than you could possibly imagine. That is what we are being encouraged to think and to do in today's message. Trust the Lord your God with all your strength and all your heart and all your mind, and lean not on your own understanding, but lean on the promises of God. And love your neighbor because God has loved you. May his grace and his mercy and his peace be and abide with you always, now and forevermore, unto life everlasting. Amen. Let us pray for the...