

“Living By The Rules”
The Rev. S. Shane Nanney ~ February 1, 2026
Micah 6:18 and Matthew 5:1-12

When I was about eight years old, I decided I wanted to be the world’s best rule-follower. My parents gave me a notebook, and I wrote down all the rules I **could** think of: Don’t fight. Don’t lie. Don’t talk back. Don’t run in the house. And my personal favorite: Don’t take apart things that still work.

That last one got me in trouble.

One afternoon, I decided to help my neighbor by fixing his old push lawn mower. I had no idea how a lawn mower worked, but I had tools — and that seemed like enough. I took it apart with great confidence and very little understanding. Springs flew. Bolts rolled away. When I tried to put it back together, I had three extra parts and a machine that no longer resembled anything approved by the manufacturer.

I followed all the rules — I was polite, I was trying to help, I didn’t swear out loud — but I completely missed the point. Helping isn’t about enthusiasm or obedience alone. Helping means knowing when to act, when to stop, and when to admit you don’t have all the answers. Standing there with greasy hands and a broken mower, I learned something important: rules don’t cover everything that matters. Judgment, humility, and care for the other person aren’t on most lists, but they’re essential.

You hear it in the prophets. Micah, in his plainspoken way, stood up and said, “Listen up, you moral stewards, you keepers of the holy list: what does the Lord require of you?” And then Micah, like a tender coach, took a breath and told them — and us: “TO ACT JUSTLY, TO LOVE KINDNESS, AND TO WALK HUMBLY WITH YOUR GOD.” Micah didn’t hug us with a thousand do’s and don’ts. He gave us an attitude, a posture of life. Not a list, but a way of life: the world tilts toward justice, mercy, and humility. It’s not about what you do on Sunday; it’s about how you live every Monday through Sunday.

Then Jesus, sitting on a hillside with the morning light on his face, gave us the Beatitudes. BLESSED ARE THE MEEK. BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL. BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS. He didn’t say, “Blessed are the perfect, the untarnished, the law-abiding in every letter.” No — He said the attitude that

makes a heart soft toward others is the rule that matters. Jesus turned the world right side up and told us how that new world starts: with mercy, gentleness, hunger for righteousness, and **hearts** open to God.

You see, God's rule book is not a list to check off — it's the shape of a life that turns outward toward neighbor, stranger, and even the enemy. The rules we choose to follow, and the way we follow them, say more about our hearts than about God's.

And here— even among our lawmakers and enforcers — we see what happens when rules become a coat of paint on the outside while the heart underneath goes untouched.

In just the last few weeks in Minneapolis, we watched federal agents, Ice agents, sent into the city as part of an enforcement surge. Two U.S. citizens were fatally shot — first Renée Good, a 37-year-old woman killed during an immigration operation in her neighborhood, then another man, Alex Pretti, a nurse, shot multiple times after being tackled by federal officers while trying to help someone else. Officials claim the agents acted in self-defense; the mayor and many neighbors call that account into serious question, even saying video footage contradicts the official narrative. Lawmakers from both parties are demanding transparent investigations, and there are deep concerns about excessive force and accountability. These deaths have sparked community in our streets.

In situation after situation, we see that just because there are rules, it does not mean they are followed with a tender heart, with justice, or with mercy. Rules without mercy harden souls. Procedures without humility bruise bodies. And in the midst of our grief and protest, Jesus sits on that hillside again and whispers to our spirits: BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL... BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS.

I recently watched a man shovel snow for an elderly neighbor. It wasn't required. He didn't get credit. But he did it. That's the kind of "rule" that matters — invisible, unspoken, heart-driven, leaving the world a little better.

Friends, God has given us a rule book. But it's not a list to pin on a wall like laundry instructions. It's a way of life, that shows up, in how we treat neighbors, how we listen before we judge, how we spill mercy into the cracks of daily life. A rule book that says: DO JUSTICE — not just enforce rules. LOVE MERCY — not

just exert power. WALK HUMBLY WITH YOUR GOD — not strut around like you hold all the answers.

Following God’s rules ought to leave a mark on the world — on our neighbors, on the systems that govern us, on the daily choices we make at the coffee shop, at the ballot box, and on the streets where sorrow and hope meet.

Some folks ask, “What does it mean to be a follower of Christ in such a hurting world?” I think Micah and Matthew give us the same answer:

Love more than you fear.

Show mercy more than you judge.

Walk with God humbly, ready to see God in the face of the person next to you — especially the neighbor you’d rather ignore.

A wise woman once said, “Rules aren’t what matters; love is what matters.” And when that love overflows into the cracked places of our world — that is where resurrection begins.

Closing Story

I remember a small town in Minnesota. There was a teacher named Mrs. Larson who had a simple rule in her classroom: “Take care of each other.” That was it. No long lists. No punishments. And yet, every year, children left her class knowing what justice looked like, how mercy feels, and what it means to live humbly.

One day a boy knocked over a flower pot in the hallway. He froze, expecting a lecture. Mrs. Larson walked over, helped him pick up the pieces, and said, “Accidents happen. What matters is that you help, not that you blame.”

The boy grew up. He became a city planner, someone who designed parks and playgrounds for neighborhoods that didn’t have them. He never forgot the lesson: rules matter less than heart. God’s rule book — love your neighbor, act justly, walk humbly — had shaped him in ways no printed law ever could.

Friends, the same God is calling us today to live by the rules that leave a mark — on our neighborhoods, our cities, our families, and our own hearts. Let us follow the rules, yes, but more importantly, let us follow the attitude that God has written into creation itself: love, mercy, humility. Let the world see it.

And let us pray for justice that heals rather than harms, for mercy that meets fear with compassion, and for the courage to live not by rule lists but by love poured out.