

“Righteousness with Dirt Under Its Fingernails”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney ~ February 8, 2026

Isaiah 58:1-12 and Matthew 5:13-20

I once decided to help a friend move. This was before I learned the important adult truth that helping someone move is a synonym for spending a Saturday discovering muscles you didn't know could ache. I showed up in clean jeans and a decent shirt, assuming my role would be mostly supervisory—pointing, nodding wisely, holding a lamp.

Ten minutes later I was wedged halfway up a staircase, hugging a couch that had clearly been built inside the house and had no intention of leaving. Dust from three decades coated my sleeves. And I remember thinking; this is not worth the pizza and beer later on.

But it was necessary work. Loving work. The kind of work you don't do to look good, but because someone needs help and you said yes.

That, friends, is righteousness with dirt under its fingernails.

Isaiah 58 feel like a splash of ice-cold water. God tells Isaiah NOT to speak gently, NOT to offer nuance, but to shout. Because the people are doing all the right religious things. They are fasting. They are praying. They are checking every spiritual box on the clipboard.

And God says, “Yes... but.”

Yes, you worship—but you ignore the hungry.

Yes, you humble yourselves—but you exploit others.

Yes, you seek me—but you walk right past the suffering at your feet.

Then Isaiah gives us one of the clearest—and most inconvenient—definitions of righteousness in all of scripture:

Loosing the bonds of injustice.

Sharing bread with the hungry.

Bringing the homeless poor into your house.

Covering the naked.

Not hiding from your own kin.

Notice what's missing. No mention of correct posture. No discussion of proper phrasing. No points awarded for sincerity of feeling.

Righteousness, according to Isaiah, is not an idea—it's a practice. It requires hands, homes, tables, food, and real people. It requires proximity.

And proximity, as we all know, is messy.

If righteousness were a résumé, Isaiah would toss it aside and ask instead, "Who needed you this week, and did you show up?"

Then Jesus comes along in Matthew 5 and makes the whole thing even more uncomfortable. He says our righteousness has to **exceed** that of the scribes and Pharisees—the people who were masters of the rulebook, experts in minimum requirements.

Jesus doesn't criticize them for knowing the law. He warns that the law alone is not enough. Because rules **CAN** keep you from doing harm, but they **CANNOT** make you loving. They **CAN** define boundaries, but they **CANNOT** teach generosity.

Jesus says, "You are salt. You are light."

Salt is not decorative. It disappears into the food. Light does not stay politely in the lamp; it spills out and exposes things. Both salt and light change whatever they touch—and neither stays pristine in the process.

Then Jesus raises the bar so high that you eventually realize it was never a bar at all. It was a doorway. A doorway into a life where love—not legality—sets the standard. Where the question is no longer, "What's the least I have to do?" but "What does love require here?"

And this is where righteousness stops being theoretical and starts becoming wonderfully inconvenient.

The bare minimum asks, “What is required of us?”

Real righteousness asks, “What is needed right now?”

The bare minimum keeps us respectable.

Going beyond—makes us useful.

A church doing the bare minimum says, “We have a food pantry.”

A church exceeding the minimum asks, “Who can’t get here on pantry day, and how do we get food to them?”

The bare minimum says, “Everyone is welcome.”

Exceeding righteousness notices who hasn’t come back—and changes something.

The bare minimum says, “We’ll pray for you.”

Exceeding righteousness says, “What does Tuesday look like, and can I help?”

Going beyond the minimum means trading efficiency for presence. It means fewer polished programs and more patient relationships. It means being interruptible. It means plans get rearranged because a real human need showed up without checking the church calendar first.

Isaiah doesn’t say, “Create a task force.” He says, “Bring the homeless poor into your house.” That’s not a program. That’s a disruption.

Robert Fulghum once reminded us that most of what we need to know, we learned early on: share, play fair, help people when they’re hurt. Isaiah and Jesus seem to agree. Righteousness, it turns out, looks suspiciously like kindergarten ethics practiced by adults with budgets and committees.

And yes, it involves risk. When churches exceed the minimum, they risk discomfort. They risk mess. They risk being misunderstood. They risk wearing out the “good tables” in the fellowship hall.

Once, a church argued for nearly an hour about whether a community meal should be allowed to use those tables—the sacred ones, bought decades ago, rarely touched, gently revered. Finally, an older woman stood up and said, “If Jesus can feed people with borrowed bread and fish, I think our tables can survive spaghetti sauce.”

Meeting adjourned.

That’s righteousness exceeding the minimum. Not because the rules demanded it, but because love did.

Isaiah promises something astonishing when we live this way:

“Then your light shall break forth like the dawn.”

“then you shall call, and the Lord will answer.”

“you shall be like a watered garden.”

Not because we earned it—but because this is how God designed faith to function. Love in motion changes the world, and it changes us right along with it. Faith that stays clean, dries out. Faith that gets its hands dirty comes alive.

In a small town, there was a narrow footbridge over a muddy creek. Every spring it flooded. The town council discussed it endlessly. Plans were drawn. Budgets debated. Nothing ever seemed to happen.

One afternoon after a heavy rain, a group of kids tried to cross and got stuck, shoes sinking deep in the mud. A man walking home saw them. He didn’t call a meeting. He didn’t wait for permission. He took off his jacket, stepped into the mud, and helped them across—one by one. By the time he was done, he was filthy.

The next day, a few neighbors joined him. Then a few more. Eventually the bridge was fixed—not perfectly, not permanently, but enough.

Someone later asked the man why he got involved.

He said, “Because the kids were standing there.”

That’s it. That’s righteousness with dirt under its fingernails.

Not spotless. Not heroic. Just love that noticed, stepped in, and didn’t worry about staying clean.

May we be that kind of righteous people—salt that dissolves, light that spills, tables that get stained, hands that get dirty, and faith that looks an awful lot like love in action. Amen.