

INTRODUCTION

Open your Bibles, please, to Romans chapter 12. I'm just going to pick up where I left off, because most of you who have been around awhile know I preach the Bible verse after verse after verse. Here we are at Romans 12:14-16. I'll remind you the book of Romans is divided into two parts. The first eleven chapters deal with doctrine, what we believe and who we are in Christ. But beginning in chapter 11 through the end of the book, it's very practical. Instead of doctrine, it's duty. Instead of what we believe, it's how we're to behave. Instead of who we are in Christ, it's what we do because we are in Christ.

Sometimes people say the Bible is not very practical. I beg to disagree, because all of these principles are so very practical. They hit us right where we are. Today I want to talk to you about five laws for healthy relationships. When I say laws, I'm not talking about the Ten Commandments. I'm talking about principles, like the law of gravity. If you do one thing, something's going to happen. In relating to other people, if you follow these principles, you will get along with people and you will have healthy relationships in your home, in the workplace and in the community.

What is it that makes you different, as a Christian, than somebody out there that's not a Christian? The fact that when you die, you're going to go to heaven? It ought to mean so much more than that. One of the main differences between a person who is a Christian and one who is not is how we relate to other people, especially to other people who don't like us, especially to people who mistreat us.

Many of you remember Nikita Khrushchev. In the 1960s, he was sort of a spokesman for world Communism. When he came to America, he made this statement: "The difference between Christianity and Communism is great. When someone hits you, you turn the other cheek." But, Khrushchev said, "If you hit me, I'll hit you so hard; your head will fall off."

Not only is that Communistic attitude, it's the attitude of natural man. You hit me and, brother, you're going to get it back. Look and see what the Bible says about how we ought to relate to people. Beginning in verse 14 of Romans 12. The Bible says, "Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice. Mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited." Now, let's look at these five laws of healthy relationships:

I. THE LAW OF ADVERSITY

I call the first one the "law of adversity." How do you relate to someone when you're in an adversarial relationship, when they are hostile toward you? I can summarize this law this way:

Be a blessing to those who hurt you

Yes, there are people out there who are going to hurt you. There are going to be people out there who treat you mean or who treat you with anger and hostility. The Bible says when they do that to you; you're to be a blessing to them.

I heard about a little girl who wrote the following letter to her pastor. She wrote:

Dear Pastor,

I heard you say to love
our enemies. I am only
6 years old and I do not
have any yet. I hope to
have some when I am 7.

Your friend,
Amy

Chances are, you have a few enemies. If you haven't, something's wrong, because there are always going to be people out there who don't care for the way you act or what you live or what you believe. In fact, this is sort of a preview for next Sunday's message, because beginning in verse 17 and through the rest of the chapter, where we'll be next Sunday, it really talks about how to kill your enemies with love. I'm calling it "How to Deal with Mean People." So if you ever have to deal with mean people, the Bible tells you how to relate to them.

Basically verse 14 is telling us that when people hurt you, you bless them. Now notice there is a negative command and a positive command. The negative command is "don't curse them." Isn't it human nature when somebody hurts you and somebody mistreats you, the first thing you want to do is just cuss them out, curse them? Sometimes people wonder what the Bible says about cursing. It says, "Do not curse people." You see God is the only one who has the right and the authority to damn anyone. You don't. I don't. God is the only one who has the right and the authority to send someone to hell. You and I have no business telling anybody that they should go to hell.

The Bible says you should not curse anybody. Instead, it says you should bless them. Now, let me tell you what that word bless means. It is the word "eu-logia," good word. That's what it literally means. It means you're to speak a good word even to those who hurt you. Our English word eulogy comes from that word "bless." It means more than just saying "God bless you" when they sneeze. It means you say something good about them, even when they've said something ugly about you. My mother used to say, "If you can't say something good about somebody, don't say anything at all."

I heard about a lady in a church, who was so kind and positive, that's the way she was. She was always saying good things about everybody. One of her friends said, "Betty, you say such good things about everybody, I bet you could even find something good to say about the old devil."

She thought for a minute and said, "Well, now that you mention it, at least he's always on the job."

That's the way we ought to be. We ought to find something good about somebody, even mean, ugly people. That's what that word "bless" means, to say something good about them.

Now, the Old Testament taught something called "equal retribution" or "equal retaliation." You remember what the Old Testament said? It said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Now, once you think about it, that's pretty merciful, and it was an advanced moral standard at the time. Because you know what human nature is? Human nature is not an eye for an eye. Human nature is, "Mike, if you poke out my eye, I'm going to poke out both your eyes. Mike, if you knock out one of my teeth, I'm not going to just knock out one, I going to knock out the whole mouthful of teeth." That's human nature.

The Old Testament comes along and says, "No, there's a higher standard, only an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Then the Lord Jesus came along and He set an even higher standard. And his teaching was revolutionary. Look at Luke 6, It's in there in your outline. He says, "I want to change all that. I tell you who hear me, [he's just said an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth] I change it. I tell you who hear me, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you." Now look at some of those verbs. Is there anybody who's your enemy? Love them. Is there anybody that hates you? Do good for them. Is there anybody that's been cursing you? You're to bless them. Has anybody mistreated you? You pray for them. Then Jesus made this summary statement. "If you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is it to you? Even the sinners or the pagans do that."

Human nature says, "I'm going to pay you back with interest. What you did to me, I'm going to do more to you." Jesus comes along and says, "No, it's not even equal retribution. It is no retaliation. It is blessing them instead of hurting them." And that's the law of adversity.

II. THE LAW OF EMPATHY

There are some other laws of relationships here. Number two is the law of empathy, where you empathize with other people. We see that in verse 15, because it says, "Rejoice with those who rejoice. Mourn or weep with those that weep."

Here's how I would summarize this law of empathy:

Be sensitive to the feelings of others

If you really follow this rule, you'll always be sensitive to the emotions and the feelings of the other person. Now, do you know the difference between sympathy and empathy? Sympathy is feeling sorry for somebody. Empathy is feeling sorrow with somebody.

Now, there are two extremes here. Rejoice with them that rejoice. Cry with those that cry. Now, you may think it's easier to just rejoice with people when they're rejoicing, because the motto of

the world is laugh and the whole world laughs with you, but you cry, and you cry alone. But think for a moment. Sometimes it's harder to rejoice with those that rejoice.

Here's a person who is rejoicing because something good has happened to them. Human nature says, "I'm not going to rejoice with you. I'm going to resent you. I'm going to be envious of you. I'm going to be jealous because you had something good happen to you and I didn't."

Sometimes it's harder to rejoice over somebody else's victories. The Bible says we're to do that. You find somebody that's got a reason to be happy. Maybe you're not feeling real good that day. Don't impose your poor feelings on them. Instead adjust your mood to them and say, "Man, I'm going to rejoice with *you*, I'm going to be happy with you because something good has happened."

Look at the other side of the coin. You weep with those that weep. What that means is that when you find somebody who's really hurting, and maybe you're feeling real great, you don't expect them to adjust their mood to you. True love says, "No, I'm going to adjust my mood to you. I'm going to be sensitive of your feelings."

I need to make an exclusion. You and I both know that there are some people, they're unhappy all the time. They are just chronic sad sacks, moaners and groaners, and they are unhappy about anything and everything. It doesn't mean that you become like that when you go with them. I'm talking about people, and the Bible's talking about people who have real reasons to mourn, who have real reasons to be hurt and be sorrowful. Those are the kind of people you need to relate to.

I learned this several years ago in my own ministry. When both our daughters were real little, we bought one of these answering machines like most people have, and we recorded one of those cute, funny little messages on the answering machine, you know. I love those. Both our girls said something and sang a little song, and there was laughter on there, leave a message, beep. Well, that message had been on our machine for several weeks, and a lady called late one night when we weren't there, and her husband had just died. She was a member of our church. She listened to that little recording, left her message, and then she made a statement, and she wasn't trying to be unkind or hurtful. She just said, made this statement about her husband having died. Then she said, "And you know, I really didn't need that funny message." And she was exactly right. That message of joy and happiness was the *last* thing she needed to hear. So I immediately took it off. You call my house now and get the answering machine you get our number and "leave a message." That's all it says. Because I wouldn't want to dare offend anybody else with a cutesy little message, when maybe they're going through a time of pain. Why? Because the Bible says we're to rejoice with those that rejoice, but we're to weep and mourn with those that weep and mourn. You really have to be a real friend with somebody to be able to cry with them.

We all go through times in life when there are tears that we shed. I want you to look at a beautiful scripture in Psalms 56:8. Maybe you didn't know this was here. This is a beautiful principle about tears. In Psalm 56:8 the psalmist is praying and he says, "Oh Lord, you number my wanderings." And listen to this. "Put my tears into your bottle; are they not all in your book?" In other words, "My tears are written down in your book." But it says if God has a little

receptacle in heaven, a little bottle for each one of us, and when we weep tears of pain, it's as if God takes those tears, puts them in his bottle and he treasures them and he cherishes those tears.

I've been told that as late as the Civil War, that wives and mothers who were back home would take these little bottles called "tear vials" and they would literally take and capture the tears that they wept for their sons and husbands who were fighting in battle. They would seal up these little tear vials and they would send them to the soldiers. Today, Civil War buffs collect these Civil War tear vials. The soldiers they would put them in their pockets, and they would bring them out and look at them and how much they would cherish and value the tears that this loved one had cried for them.

According to this passage of scripture, it's like God has a tear vial in heaven for all of us. And those of you who have wept literal rivers of tears because of pain and heartache in your life, I want you to know those tears have not been wasted. Those tears have not been lost. They are precious to God, because he understands they are the result of a broken heart.

This verse is saying that when you love somebody, you relate to somebody and they're hurting, they're crying, you ought to cry with them. You ought to share their load.

You know, in the temple in Jerusalem during the time of Jesus they had an unusual custom. The temple was crowded with people much of the time, so they were kind of like Green Acres Baptist Church. They made everybody walk in one door and out the other door. They really did. During the time of Jesus in Herod's temple, the worshipers would all enter the temple mount from the south, going up the steps of Solomon's portico. Then they would do their business up on the temple mount and they would all exit usually out of the northeastern corner.

That was one exception to that rule. Whenever there was a Jewish family in Jerusalem who had gone through a genuine time of heartache and sorrow, that family was allowed to walk totally against the flow of the people traffic. They would enter where everybody else was exiting and they would exit where everybody else was entering. You know why they did that? So that all the worshipers were forced to confront the faces of people who were hurting so they wouldn't miss their pain.

I wonder how many times you come to Green Acres Baptist Church on Sunday and you don't really look into the face or into the eyes of people around you in your Sunday School class, maybe on the same pew with you, maybe in the halls. You just sort of pass them by. You're not aware of the pain and agony that they may be suffering. The Bible says you're to weep with them. That's what a true friend does.

I heard about a lady in Charleston, South Carolina, true story. She went to console her grandmother because one of her contemporaries had just died. The granddaughter said to the grandmother, "I know you're going to miss your friend." And the grandmother said, "Well, yeah. I'll miss her, but she really wasn't my friend." The granddaughter said, "What? I knew you spent time together, you laughed together, and you talked together." Then the grandmother said something very wise about relationships. She said, "Well, yes. We talked together and we

laughed together, but we were only acquaintances, because we never cried together. And true friends always share tears."

You may have a lot of acquaintances, but you are blessed indeed if you have a friend with whom you can share tears. That's what the Bible says to do. To rejoice with those that rejoice, weep with those that weep. You're sensitive to the feelings of other people. That is the law of being sensitive to their needs, the law of empathy.

That's what the Lord Jesus did. He went to the wedding feast at Canaan. That was his first miracle where they were rejoicing and celebrating. He even turned water into wine. He rejoiced because they rejoiced. And the very last miracle Jesus performed was the raising of Lazarus. He's there at the tomb of Lazarus. He looks at Martha, and Martha is crying. And he looks at Mary, and Mary is crying. What did Jesus do? The Bible says Jesus wept. That's the kind of Savior we have, who rejoices with those that rejoice and weeps with those that weep.

III. THE LAW OF HARMONY

Let's look at law number three. Law number three is what I call the law of harmony, the relational law of harmony. And there it is, right there in verse 16, it says, "Live in harmony with one another." Here's how you can describe the law of harmony.

Be willing to sacrifice your need to always be right

Let me ask you a question. I want you to nod or shake your head. Do you know anyone who just has to be right all the time? They never can be wrong, they're right all the time? You know anybody like that? My next question is: Do you think anybody thought about you when I just asked that question? I almost guarantee you that no one in this room thought of himself, "That's the way I am, that's right; I've always got to be right."

The Bible says a good relational principle is if you try to live in harmony with all different kinds of people. I want to use the piano to illustrate this simply. Don't worry. I don't play the piano. But I know a little bit about music and a little bit about harmony, and I've sort of used this illustration before, but I want to expand it. On a piano, you have middle C. If you have middle C identified, you can find all the other notes. And to live in harmony doesn't mean that you have to play the exact same note. [plays piano] Those are octaves. It doesn't mean you have to totally agree with that person, but it does mean that your attitude and your belief in your mind is in harmony with that person just like this, and that's a chord. You see, they're not saying the same note, but it's a beautiful chord. That's what it means to live in harmony with others. There may be minor disagreements. But that's okay. That's no major problem. But here's the problem. Here's middle C. And there are some people that are never wrong, and they say, this is the way I'm going to act and this is what I'm going to believe and there's nothing you're going to do about it. And you hear that disharmony? That's not very pretty music.

When God says we're to live in harmony with each other, when we do that, there are all kinds of beautiful music. [plays piano] And you say, okay, I hear what you're saying. So pastor, are you saying that I'm middle C? Everybody else ought to harmonize with me? No, you're not middle

C. You're saying, is the other person middle C, and I have to harmonize with them? No. Of course, it's obvious that Jesus is the middle C. When I'm in harmony with Jesus, and you're in harmony with Jesus, we're in harmony with each other.

That's what it means to live in harmony with each other. It doesn't mean that you're a clone of them. It means that your desire is to make beautiful music with them. Now, listen. Harmony in marriage, harmony in a family, harmony in a church is so precious and so valuable. That's why I want to say again, it is the role of our adversary, the devil, to try to divide and disrupt every marriage, every parent and child relationship and every church.

If you're not on guard, the devil will drive a wedge between you and your mate, between you and your children, and you and your brothers and sisters in Christ. That's why the Bible says we have to be proactive; we have to sometimes sacrifice our desire to *always* be right so we can live in harmony with those around us.

Author Jack London writes about an event that took place up in the far north when there was a herd of reindeer. The herd was suddenly attacked by a pack of wolves. To begin with, the reindeer were very disorganized and they began to kick and lash out at these wolves but because they were so unorganized, they were kicking each other and sometimes kicking some of the younger reindeer. Finally, almost by instinctive nature, they got together, and the reindeer put their heads together in a circle and put the younger, weaker animals in the center, with their rear legs toward the outside. They were kicking out and defending themselves from the wolves, and the wolves soon left. The lesson we can learn is when we get our heads together and we get our hearts together in marriages, in families, in churches, and we live in harmony with one another, we can repel any attack Adversary throws at us.

IV. THE LAW OF COURTESY

Let's look at law number four. Are you following these so far? The law of adversity, law of empathy, law of harmony, number four, the law of courtesy. It is in verse 16, right in the middle of verse 16. It says, "Be willing to associate with people of low position." Here's how you would describe the law of courtesy:

Be kind to all kinds of people

Did you know that in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, there is no room for spiritual aristocracy? There's no room for spiritual snobbery. There's no way you can ever be a part of the body of Christ and say, "I am better than somebody else, and there's a certain kind of people that I don't want coming to my church." That is totally wrong and sinful against a holy God.

James, who was the half-brother of the Lord Jesus Christ, if you've ever studied his epistle, he just cuts through all the fluff and just says it like it is. Look at James 2:1-4, he gives an example of how this principle, this law is applied. He said, "My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in." By the way, this is the only time the New Testament talks about wearing a certain kind of clothes to church.] If you show

special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and you say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but you say to the poor man, 'You stand over there, sit on the floor by my feet.'" James says, "Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" James says that is a sin against the very character and nature of God, who loves all kinds of people.

Can I say it again? At the cross, the ground is level. I could say there is no such thing as VIP's in the church of the Lord Jesus, but that's really wrong, because all of us are VIP's in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, because in the mind and the heart of God, we are very important people.

There's no way you can look down your nose at somebody else and say, you're not my kind of person. Now let me just ask you. Think about your traffic pattern during the week, where you go, the people that you encounter. Is there anybody out there that you would think, "Well, you know, I don't really want that kind of person in our church." If you ever think that for one moment, you've just committed a terrible sin against God.

Did you know historians tell us that one of the reasons that the Roman Empire crumbled was because of the advent of Christianity, because it was such a class-conscious society? You had your plebeians and your publicans and your slaves. But in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, it was the only place that the masters and the slaves sat together and were on the same level. And the same is true here today.

I want to say this and say it clearly: There's only one kind of person that we allow to come to Green Acres Baptist Church. Are you ready? Only one kind of person can come to this church: sinners. Okay? Some are saved sinners, some are going to be saved sinners, but only one kind of person can come. We all need the grace and mercy and forgiveness of Jesus Christ. If you think somebody else is not good enough to come and you're too good to associate with them; you've just violated this wonderful law of courtesy.

V. THE LAW OF HUMILITY

Here's law number five. It is the law of humility, the relational law of humility. We see it in verse 16, where it says, "Do not be proud." That means self-centered. Then it says in the last part of verse 16, "Do not be conceited." That means high-minded. Don't think more highly of yourself.

Now I want to express this law in a way that's a little bit "tongue in cheek." Here it is:

Take a good hard look in the mirror and then laugh

Now, for some of you, that's going to be a lot easier to do than for others, right? True humility occurs when, honestly, you don't take yourself too seriously. A sign of good mental health is when you can laugh at yourself. And a true characteristic of humility is that you really don't take yourself too seriously. You know that you are a sinner and you know that you make mistakes and you know that you failed and you're not perfect. You're willing to understand that about yourself and even laugh sometimes about who you are and what you do.

Several years ago when Barbara Bush was the First Lady, she came to Moore Middle School to speak to the students because they were drug-free. Al Harris was the principal of Moore at that time. He invited me to come and give the invocation. I was so honored. I dressed up in a dark suit. It was a sunny day, and we were outdoors. I had my sunglasses on. There were some Green Acres musicians on the platform while we were waiting for the First Lady to arrive. One of them said to me, "Brother David, you look like one of those Secret Service agents." Sure enough, I looked around and there were other guys in suits, sunglasses, and they were kind of standing around in a stance. Every now and then, they'd talk into their watches. I didn't have anything else to do so I just stepped down in front of the platform with the other Secret Service agents. I was just standing there, sunglasses on. Every now and then, I would kind of act like I was talking into my watch. And I really think I had some of them fooled. Then a little kid walked up to me and with real respect said, "Do you know when the First Lady is going to arrive?" And I thought, "Hey, it works. This kid thinks I'm Secret Service." So I looked at my watch and said, "ETA for the first lady is 1320 hours." The little kid said, "Thanks, Brother David!"

God has a way of teaching us, you know, that we can only be who we are. We can't be anybody else. That's why it says here, "Don't be conceited, don't be too proud." Just understand that God made you a certain way. Now some people look in the mirror, as I've said before, and sing, "How Great Thou Art." That is absolutely the opposite of humility.

Now, you want to get along with people? You want to have healthy relationships in your marriage, in your family, in your community, in your church? Follow these five laws of healthy relationships that the Bible gives. This book is an instruction book on how to live life. It's so practical if you'll just follow these directions. You know, the Lord Jesus lived out all of these principles.

A number of years ago, I read a short story. And I can't recall the author. I think it may be Taylor Caldwell, who likes to write a lot of stories about religious characters. It was a short story, fictional, of course, about Simon Peter. And Jesus had been crucified, resurrected and ascended back into heaven. And in this short story, Peter has a dream. And in this dream, he has a vision of Jesus hanging on the cross. And Jesus is talking to Peter and in this short story, and in this dream, this is what Jesus says to Peter. Jesus says, "Peter, go to the man who pierced my side with the spear and tell him that you have a better way to my heart. Go to the man who put the crown of thorns on my head and tell him that I have a crown of life for him. Go to the man who lashed my back and tell him that I said that by those stripes, they are healed. Go to the man who hammered the nails into my hands and feet and tell him that my love is a hammer that can break the hardest heart."

You see Jesus not only taught this, he lived this way. He loved his enemies. He showed kindness to all kinds of people. You know, Jesus, the Bible says, spent time with prostitutes, publicans, wine bibbers, drunkards. He spent time with the common people. The only kind of people he had trouble with were the religious people, the religious aristocracy that thought they were better than everybody else. But the common people loved him. And when Jesus lives in you, you'll have a desire to relate to people the same way. You don't do these things to become a Christian, you do these things because you are a Christian.

Not long after the close of the Civil War, in a fashionable downtown Richmond, Virginia Episcopal Church, the congregation was in for a shock. Because after the Sunday morning service had begun, a black man entered and sat down on the bottom level, something that never happened before. There was a buzz of discussion that went through the congregation. When it came time in the service for the worshipers to come to the altar and kneel and receive communion, that black man was the first one to walk forward and kneel at the altar to receive communion. Once again there was a buzz of discussion, and shocked silence spread throughout the congregation. The rector didn't even know what to do. Very soon, an esteemed and respected layman in that Richmond, Virginia church who got up, walked to the front and knelt down beside the black man to receive communion beside him. And when he did that, the rest of the congregation came to receive communion along with their black brother. Do you know who that esteemed layman was who came and sat beside his black brother? None other than General Robert E. Lee, a committed Christian who not only loved Jesus, but loved all of God's creatures. Let's pray.

Now, Lord, I pray that in this room today, if there are those who are having trouble with some relationships, that they just begin to practice these laws of healthy relationships. And then through the power of Jesus Christ, released in the Holy Spirit, I pray they would begin to relate to people exactly the way that you related to people. I pray this in Jesus name, amen.

OUTLINE

I. THE LAW OF ADVERSITY (14)

"Be a blessing to those who hurt you"

"But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you . . . And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that." *Luke 6:27-28, 33*

II. THE LAW OF EMPATHY (15)

"Be sensitive to the feelings of others"

You number my wanderings. Put my tears into Your bottle; Are they not in Your book? *Psalms 56:8 NKJV*

III. THE LAW OF HARMONY (16)

"Be willing to sacrifice you need to always be right."

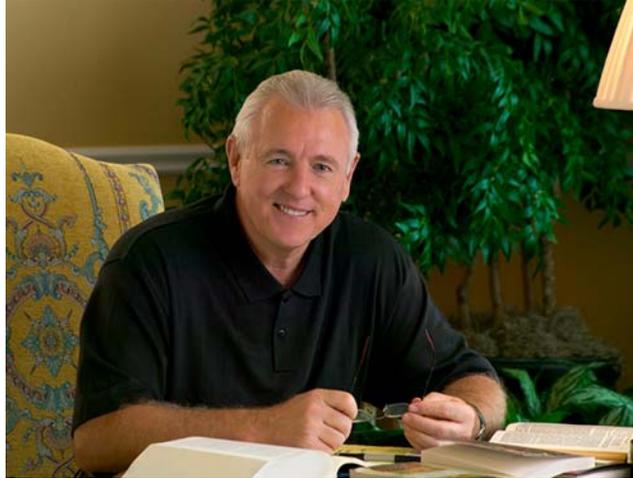
IV. THE LAW OF COURTESY (16)

"Be kind to all kinds of people."

My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? *James 2:1-4*

V. THE LAW OF HUMILITY (16)

"Take a good hard look in the mirror—and then laugh."



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes