

In getting to know some of you better,  
 I’ve discovered one thing we have in common:  
 Like millions of their generation,  
 our adult children no longer participate  
 in the church that they were raised in.  
 For those of us who love and serve the church,  
 this is dismaying.  
 If we’re honest, the church offends some people,  
 not intentionally, but in practices and teaching.  
 We as church people have to acknowledge  
 our part in some peoples’ pain.  
 The problem even appears  
 in today’s gospel lesson.  
 Jesus is speaking to his disciples,  
 with some Pharisees listening in.  
 “All who exalt themselves will be humbled.”  
 We can forgive the Twelve  
 for feeling shell-shocked at this point,  
 having witnessed their Teacher  
 confront the entire Jerusalem establishment.  
 Events propel Jesus on a course to his death.  
 Still Jesus keeps up the intensity of his attacks,  
 especially on the Pharisees,  
 those skilled laypersons who are convinced  
 they have a lock on righteousness.  
 I imagine the disciples are wondering  
 what they’ve gotten into.  
 They have no protection.  
 Rather than getting reassurance from Jesus,  
 they get their expectations lowered.  
 “Don’t expect to be called rabbi,  
 for you are all students.”  
 “Don’t expect to be instructors,  
 for you are the ones being instructed.”  
 Clearly, these words are meant  
 not just for the Twelve who hear them,  
 but for all disciples ever after, including us.

Those hurt by the church don’t have to be told.  
 Take the author, Anne Rice,  
 known for her Gothic novels.  
 She declares that she is no longer a Christian.  
 “Today I quit being a Christian. I’m out.  
 “I remain committed to Christ as always  
 but not to being ‘Christian’  
 or to being part of Christianity.  
 “It’s simply impossible for me to “belong” to  
 this quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious,  
 and deservedly infamous group.  
 “I’m an outsider.  
 “My conscience will allow nothing else.”  
 Rice continually searched Scripture in vain  
 for some theological basis to the positions  
 that the Catholic Church had taken.  
 “I refuse to be anti-gay.  
 “I refuse to be anti-feminist.  
 “I refuse to be anti-artificial birth control.  
 “I refuse to be anti-secular-humanism.  
 “I refuse to be anti-science and anti-life.”  
 After 12 years, it finally created a pressure in her,  
 “a kind of confusion, a toxic anger at times,”  
 and she felt she had to step aside.  
 Cut to the gospel lesson:  
 The Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat.  
 Therefore, do whatever they teach you  
 and follow it.  
 But do not do as they do,  
 for they do not practice what they teach.  
 They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear,  
 and lay them on the shoulders of others.  
 But they themselves are unwilling  
 to lift a finger to move them.  
 When Jesus launches this polemic,  
 he does it with a measure of respect  
 for Pharisees’ knowledge of Jewish law.

As scholars of Torah, the Pharisees are tied to the very roots of Jewish life and customs. They get to their status in Jewish society the old-fashioned way: they earn it. Mental discipline, long apprenticeship, and family connections get them where they are. Jesus endorses their scholarship but disapproves their hypocrisy in placing ethical and moral burdens on the rank-and-file Jew which the Pharisees themselves do not uphold. Contrast the leadership patterns of Pharisees with discipleship as Jesus advocates. He says, “My yoke is easy and my burden light.” Our Old Testament reading talks about a burden: What could be a heavier than a large wooden box, containing (so it was believed) stone tablets? What could be harder than trying to cross a river bed carrying this sacred box? But in the reading from Joshua for today the priests wade into the swollen river Jordan, lifting high the place of God’s very presence. The flood-waters abate so that the Hebrew people cross easily into the Promised Land, at long last. The people remember: “We’ve come this far by faith.” They walk out into the water, buoyed by the easy yoke of Yahweh. In our gospel lesson, Jesus hints at the **willpower** that marks ideal discipleship. Researching this sermon, I picked up some thumbnail descriptions of positive discipleship. Here’s one about taking up another’s burden:

The disciple comforts a friend who has confided that she has been sexually abused by someone in church. The disciple assures her that God and the church care about her well-being. Then the disciple follows up with church and, if necessary, civil authorities.

Jesus points to other things about the Pharisees as examples of what disciples are not to show: Self-exaltation, showiness in worship, hollow religiosity, and bookish knowledge. These are some of the same criticisms people level at the church today, even from within. Self-exaltation is related to the tendency to value oneself over against others. Humility is a result of valuing oneself with others, in solidarity. Discipleship avoids either extreme: self-exaltation or self-abasement. I looked at a number of conservative-evangelical blogs. Here’s what one said: “The contemporary American church is flawed. Evangelicalism’s embrace of modern methodology has led to celebrity pastors, performance-oriented worship services, and Christian consumerism.” A female minister, Hillary Dawes, writes: “Religion gives toxic people an out to harm others without fear of divine retribution. “Toxic people tend to use religion as a cover for unrighteous acts, while appealing to religion as their justification. Dawes goes on to catalog spiritual abuse she has counseled parishioners about: Cultish indoctrination, pressure to contribute sacrificially, teachings that damage your health

and rob you of peace of mind,  
spiritual warfare, and emotional blackmail  
from other members.

“Scripture is used as a sword to cut others  
to pieces,” she concludes, “and sometimes  
they throw the whole Book at you!”

For the devout person stuck in toxic religion,  
the fruits of toxic church are apathy,  
cold-heartedness, lack of inner peace,  
and spitefulness toward others.

The effects linger, long after the believer  
has moved on to other churches.

Expecting a person to transition  
from a toxic church to another church easily  
is like expecting a rescue dog  
to behave like a happy puppy  
just because you’ve adopted it.

Before we dismiss these realities out of hand  
simply because we may not experience them,  
we need to ask ourselves honestly,  
are we toxic, like the Pharisees?

How close to the Ideal Disciple are we?

The ideal disciple foregoes attitudes  
that put the self above the community,  
repents of status-seeking,  
and readily admits that she or he  
is not the center of the universe.

The disciple does not replace Jesus  
as the core focus of the community.

Here’s another thumbnail description:

The ideal disciple picks out  
the neediest person in the room  
and silently sits down next to them.

What else describes the ideal disciple?

In our lesson, Jesus applauds **humility**.

The Pharisees, by contrast, do all their deeds  
in order to be seen by others.

They love to have the place of honor at banquets,  
and the best seats in the synagogues,  
and to be greeted with respect in the markets.

Pride is inconsistent with Christian discipleship.

I have known Christians who were proud  
of their Bible knowledge.

I have known Christians who were proud  
of their charitable giving.

I have known Christians who were proud  
of the quality of the music in worship services.

The human ego expects credit,  
even for what it does not earn.

The ego’s need for privilege, power,  
and control undermines discipleship.

Admittedly, the human ego is useful.

It is a first level defense against threats.

It holds together the formative personality.

It’s part of what makes a person interesting.

Insufficient ego is a personality defect  
often accompanied by assumption

of a one-down relationship with others.

Chronic subservience is not spiritually healthy;  
it is spiritually unsustainable.

Religion, unfortunately,

can be pressed into service

maintaining one-down relationships.

Some people are proud of their self-abasement.

There’s a joke Yiddish people tell on themselves:

A rabbi rushes to the temple, falls to his knees,  
and starts wailing, “I’m nobody! I’m nobody!”

The cantor of the synagogue,  
impressed by this example of humility,  
joins the rabbi on his knees, saying,

“I’m nobody. I’m nobody!”

The custodian, watching from the corner,  
can’t restrain himself.

He joins the other two on his knees,  
calling out, “I’m nobody! I’m nobody!”  
At which point the rabbi nudges the cantor,  
points to the custodian, and says,  
“Look who thinks he’s nobody!”

Pharisees parade their learning, treating others  
as their moral and religious inferiors.

Jesus is not anti-intellectual.

We forget that Jesus is himself a biblical scholar.

What irks him is scholarship as a mark of rank.

Jesus never assumes a one-up posture  
with his disciples.

He doesn’t expect them to passively submit  
to his rule or authority.

Nor does he tolerate raging egos.

Jesus calls for a change of heart – metanoia –  
regarding the ego’s place in God’s kingdom.

Metanoia means seeing yourself  
and the world differently, like this thumbnail:

A disciple can shift his or her perspective  
based on truth as it becomes known,  
whether learning from first-hand experience  
or being taught.

I was once taught that nothing is faster  
than the speed of light.

Now, physicists tell me that  
certain unusually distorted regions of space-time  
might permit matter to reach distant locations  
in less time than light can.

That shift in perspective requires metanoia.

The right posture of a disciple  
is a willingness to admit error.

Humility is not humiliation;  
humiliation places control outside the self.

Humility is an act of self-control:  
keeping the self in perspective.

The humble person knows confidently  
what she or he contributes to the overall good,  
while acknowledging the contributions  
of others to her or his own welfare.

Serving is not the same as being servile.

Disciples cannot forget their own interests,  
but rather see their own interests  
relative to others in the community.

Servanthood is meeting the needs of others,  
as you would want your needs to be met.

**Gratitude** is a posture that results in humility.  
The habit of gratitude is learned over a  
lifetime.

Egalitarian is not an adjective  
that describes the Twelve very often.

One of Jesus’ most idealistic hopes is that  
his disciples would accept mutual equality.

“You have but one teacher,” he reminds them.

“You all are students.” Lifelong learners.

Disciples can teach one another.

Disciples can teach the world at large.

But disciples teach without the title Teacher.

The word Disciple, in fact, means “learner.”

There is one Master Teacher, Jesus.

All of us, including clergy, are learners.

## CONCLUSION

Our lesson has portrayed discipleship  
as an extraordinary level of inner discipline:

1. Discipleship involves repentance  
for the sins of the ego.
2. Discipleship involves humility  
for the mutual benefit of the community.
3. Discipleship adopts an egalitarian attitude  
for mutual benefits and blessings.

I would sum up these principles  
as a commitment to Lifelong Learning.

One of the scandals of discipleship, actually,  
is that no disciple, no matter how dedicated,  
ever learns all there is to know.

Serious study seeks truth.

Christ is the ultimate source of truth.

So biblical study and reflection can lead  
to an encounter with the living Christ.

Nothing is quite so humbling  
as the discovery of new truths.

It turns out certain particles can travel  
faster than the speed of light.

As disciples, let us treat knowledge as a gift  
and use it unselfishly to enhance the community.

We can learn from one another  
and from those we serve.

We can accept the task of learning a Jesus-life  
and applying that learning in humble service.

Let us develop sensitivity to the weaknesses  
of the strong and the failures of the achievers.

Bold, generous, loyal, compassionate,  
repentant, humble, willing to learn:

Such a level of discipleship is possible,  
with God’s help.

May it be so. Amen.