

□ Reading time: 4 min.

*For us as educators and evangelists, the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Lk 18:9-14) is not simply a moral tale about pride and humility, but a profound revelation of how God meets us and how we are called to pass on this transformative experience.*

### **Faith as a call to a relationship of mercy**

When the Pharisee goes up to the temple, he brings with him an image of God made in his own likeness; a God who records merits and demerits, who rewards the righteous and condemns sinners. His prayer is a comparison with others: *“I thank you that I am not like other men”*. There is no authentic relationship. There is only self-satisfaction.

The tax collector, by contrast, enters the temple aware of his own unworthiness. His *“O God, have mercy on me, a sinner”* is not despair, but a courageous opening to a relationship that is possible precisely because it is founded on mercy. He senses what the Pharisee has lost. God is not a judge but a Father who awaits the return of His distant children.

For us as educators, this distinction is fundamental. How often, without realising it, do we convey an image of God more like that of the Pharisee? A God who observes, evaluates, rewards or punishes based on our spiritual performance? Education in the faith should foster an encounter with mercy, an experience where we discover we are loved because we are beloved children, even in our fragility.

To evangelise means to introduce people to this merciful relationship, because God does not wait for our perfection to love us, but it is precisely in our poverty that He reveals the richness of His love. This is the good news we must proclaim, a relationship that transforms from within.

### **A relationship that begins with humility of heart**

The tax collector's humility is the condition that makes the encounter with God possible. By standing *“at a distance”* and *“not even daring to look up to heaven”*, he acknowledges the infinite disproportion between God's holiness and his own wretchedness, but also his trust that this same holy God stoops down to those who recognise their need.

The Pharisee's prayer, on the other hand, is full of *“I”*: *“I fast”, “I give a tenth”*. He has built his religious identity on self-affirmation, on comparison with others, on demonstrating his own works. He already feels full, already arrived, already righteous.

In the field of education and evangelisation, humility of heart is the ability to constantly recognise our need for salvation, to never take our relationship with God for granted, and to remain open to the gift of His grace. It is the attitude of one who knows that the Christian life is not a possession acquired once and for all, but a daily journey in which we allow ourselves to be shaped by divine mercy. As educators, we are called to be the first to bear witness to this humility, acknowledging our limits, our frailties, our constant need for conversion. Only in this way do we become credible and create spaces where others too can remove their masks and present themselves to God as they are.

### **Being loved and forgiven sinners**

The conclusion of the parable is startling: *“This man, unlike the other, went home justified.”* The tax collector, who had nothing to present but his own misery, receives everything. The Pharisee, who had so much to show off, remains in his sterile illusion.

God does not justify those who believe themselves to be righteous, but those who recognise themselves as sinners. He does not fill those who are full, but those who are empty. He does not meet those who feel no need, but those who plead for healing. This is the paradox of the Gospel, we are saved because, despite our being sinners, God’s mercy is greater.

In contemporary religious education, the parable shows us that when we acknowledge sin, we open ourselves to the grace that transforms. Sin does not crush us.

Being loved and forgiven sinners is not a status of inferiority, but the very condition of a Christian. It is the identity that allows us to live in freedom, without pretending to be perfect, without hiding our failings, without building facades of respectability. It is the awareness that the foundation of our life lies not in what we have done, but in what God has done and continues to do for us.

### **Witnesses to God’s mercy, personally experienced**

The tax collector who returns home justified inevitably becomes a witness. He cannot remain silent about the experience of being welcomed, forgiven, and lifted up. His life will speak of the mercy that has transformed him.

And this is where true evangelisation comes into play. We do not proclaim abstract theories about God’s mercy, but we bear witness to a personal experience. We speak of a forgiveness we have received, of a love that has sought and found us, of a relationship that has given meaning to our existence.

For those working in education and evangelisation, this means, above all,

cultivating one's own spiritual life as a living experience of this mercy. Before we are teachers, we must be disciples; before we teach, we must learn; before we give, we must receive. The credibility of our proclamation is measured by the truth of our experience.

Furthermore, it means creating educational contexts in which people can have this same experience. Not environments of judgement, but of welcome; not places where merits must be proven, but spaces where one can admit to being fragile; not structures where religious skills are acquired, but communities where God's tenderness is experienced.

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector reminds us that education in the faith is essentially an introduction to a relationship, one with a God who loves us with a merciful love, who always awaits us, who always forgives us, and who makes our poverty the place of His encounter with us.