**Are you the prodigal son or the older brother?**

This was a loaded question. In the teaching of logic it’s called a false dilemma.

Because you really don’t have to be either one.

The prodigal son and the older brother are characters in a parable Jesus told in Luke 15. The prodigal son got his inheritance early, left home, spent it all in profligacy, and ended up in a pig sty. He came to his senses and made his way home into the arms of a loving father who welcomed him with a feast.

The older brother was the faithful one who stayed home and did all the things he was supposed to do. He became angry that he didn’t get a feast when he had been such a good rule-follower.

Of course it’s clear that these two brothers are both in their own way self-centered and missing relationship. (Except that the prodigal returns to relationship, and the older brother doesn’t.) So, often when this parable is preached, the audience is challenged that each one of us is . . .

*either the rebellious one, running away from the loving Father, who is waiting for us . . .*

or . . .

*the self-justified, self-righteous one who feels above sin and points the finger at others.*

So, we may well be told, if you’re not like the younger brother and wandering away, you’re like the older brother and serving out of hope of reward rather than out of relationship. The message you receive may strongly imply that your whole life you’ll be doomed to slog through either “rebellious sin” or “religious sin” and that you must be very thankful for the forgiveness the cross of Christ offers you for your constant violations of God’s holiness.

Oh Christian, hear me on this one.

You do not need to be stuck in the ghastly mire of either-ever-wandering-prodigal-or-self-righteous-older-brother.

There is a Living God of love and power.

There is a Loving Savior who has power over sin.

There is a Holy Spirit full of power to live in victory.

***There is great power available to you to live in joyful pursuit of the things of eternal importance.***

This parable Jesus told wasn’t about the power (or not) to live the Christian life. It was about which group of people would come into lasting relationship with the Father: the profligate Gentiles or the rule-following Jews.

The point of the story was that the invitation of the Father was wide open to both—come into lasting relationship!

And thus, the first churches consisted of both those who had lived in utter profligacy having never known of the prophecies of Messiah, and those who had followed the rules all their lives, having heard about Messiah for generations beyond counting.

“Come into lasting relationship with the Father!” Jesus invited the Jews who were listening to His parable. “He is calling rule followers as well as profligate prodigals. Come!”

How we shall live after entering that lasting relationship?

*The parable doesn’t talk about that. It isn’t what it was about.*

*Jesus wasn’t talking to Christians.*

How sad that some are left with the feeling that once they come to Jesus like a returning prodigal, they are then doomed to be the judgmental older brother, and they have to keep repenting and repenting and repenting of the same sins over and over . . . .

There is a better way, friends.

Picture the younger brother being filled with love for his father, wanting always to honor him in everything simply because he loves him. Picture the older brother turning from his selfishness to rejoice in his younger sibling’s return, and living in perpetual relationship with his father. Picture the Father having the power to infuse his two sons, as they make request of Him, with the power to turn their hearts toward truth and right, toward goodness and love and mercy.

***This is the power that is available to us.***

I’m not talking about [living a life that is completely sinless and flawless](http://www.heresthejoy.com/2014/03/free-from-sin/). I’m talking about how we don’t have to live in [the half-life of Romans 7](http://www.heresthejoy.com/2012/05/the-trump-card-of-romans-7/), struggle-fail-repent-struggle-fail-repent. We can live in the fullness of life in Romans 8, setting our minds on the Spirit, in life and peace.

When you’re living this life, does it make you self-righteous, so that you look down on others? ***No, it gives you the heart of Jesus, the heart of the Father for others***. ***You will have far greater capacity and desire to reach out to others.***

The way Jesus told His story, the punch line was left hanging. We were left not knowing if the older brother would come into relationship with the Father or not. As it turned out, the majority of the Jews (the rule-followers that the older brother represented) turned on Jesus and slaughtered Him, even in the name of the rules they purported to follow.

But for anyone who does truly come into lasting relationship, there is great hope. That’s what it means to live life in the Spirit. It is available to all of us to be the Prodigal Son and the Older Brother, ***transformed*** ***by the power of Jesus Christ.***

That, after all, is what Christianity is all about.