

The Power of Forgiveness
Genesis 50:15-21

15 When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" **16** So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: **17** 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept.

18 His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said. **19** But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? **20** You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. **21** So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

"There's a mouse in my house. How he got in, I'd like to know. He's unpacked all his stuff just so. That rodent can't live here, oh no! I'll tell him that that he has to go." This is the opening page of a predictable titled children's book by Ross Collins, where a bear has a mouse who comes into his house and refuses to leave. He makes messes in the room, eats his food, and plays loud music. And the bear can't get him out of his house.

Have you ever been this stubborn mouse? Not in the literal sense of being in someone's house. Have you ever been in God's house? Again, Not a place of worship. Have you ever taken up a position that is really not your own but is God's? Taken something that really is God's job, his duty, and said well, right now, this one is mine. It's an easy thing to do and very dangerous. And to see what I mean, let's look at our text from Genesis 50.

First, we need to understand the background. Joseph has had a rough go of it, with a lot of hardship coming from the feelings and actions of his brothers. Joseph was the favorite child and had no trouble hiding it. And after revealing to his other brothers a dream about how all of them would be under him, even bowing down before him, they had had enough. They were going to get rid of him. They downgraded from murder and threw him into an empty well when they saw a caravan come by. So they took their brother and sold him into slavery to the merchants, took his fancy coat, and told Dad that Joseph was dead.

After a rocky beginning and a roundabout middle, Joseph, by the blessings and grace of God, Joseph becomes second in command in the land of Egypt. And irony strikes when his brothers come, due to a famine, to his doorstep for grain so they won't starve to death. Joseph has a little ruse and eventually makes the big reveal, and the family is together once again.

But then their father dies. And now the brothers are worried. Without Dad as a final layer of protection, is Joseph going to pay us back for everything we did? Joseph is in a position where he has power. He has the power to be vindictive. He has the power to take revenge. He has the power to make them suffer for kidnapping him, for mistreating him, for being willing to kill him, and for selling him as a slave. So they throw themselves before him and plead for his mercy.

If you were Joseph, what would you have done? Being wronged in such a way and now having all the power to do as you wanted? With your evil brothers bowing before your feet. Well, even though you might not be in Joseph's position, literally, you all have had this happen at some point. Whoever or wherever it may be, someone has sinned against you in a painful way. Someone has caused you some kind of pain and hardship. A wrong that has brought you into a severely difficult emotional state, loss of property or time. A sin that didn't just affect them, but you. But God, through the law in his Word or conscience, has driven them to understand their wrong. And then they have come back to you in repentance. They have come back with an apology, an "I'm sorry," perhaps even seeking to right the wrongs for something you did.

And now you've got the power, don't you? You're Joseph now. Oh, now you're sorry? After you did that to me, and you come back, and you want something from me? You want me to make you feel better? You want me to smooth things over? Have things go back to the way they were? Uh uh. No way! At least not yet. You've got to put in some more work than that. You've got to sweat it out a bit more. I'm just going to enjoy letting you stew in it for a bit. You pushed me down, and now I'm the one with the upper hand; I've got the power now.

This is what Joseph's brothers actually expected from their brother with all the power. That's why they try to beckon back to Dad and God as they come to him. Fall face first before him. But what Joseph says is so important. Joseph, in his great faith and with great power in his possession, says: "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God?" Joseph understands that acting in the way his brothers thought he would, is being a mouse that is a squatter in God's house. The one who judges is God; that's in God's house, not mine. The act of taking vengeance is God's job, not mine. The one who rights the wrongs is God, not me.

It becomes so easy when we have the power to try to take what has been given to God and to make it our own. Justice, or revenge, or getting even, or even sometimes what we think would be fair. But this is God's job. This is in God's house.

Why? It's because a merciful God who had all the power to not forgive us did. We did far worse, offended a perfect God far greater, pained, and caused suffering far more than anyone has ever done to us. And still, God showed his mercy in his Son. In the Gospel, it's compared to a servant who owed an insurmountable cost to his master, and his master said that he had been forgiven.

God had all the power against us sinners, but his power was shown in his forgiveness. His power is shown in his grace, given to those who are undeserving. Taking the insurmountable price of our sins against him, and through the payment of his son, forgiving them and reconciling us to himself.

Joseph was well aware of the grace of God and reconciled himself to his brothers for their sins against him. Joseph doesn't take vengeance where God has shown mercy. His faith and his experience of God's Grace led him to forgive the past. He promises to care for the brothers and their families. He sees, in his faith, that God's mercy and grace work even through the most evil of circumstances. He reassures them in love. Speaks kindly to them. Reassures them of forgiveness. Joseph quickly uses his power for forgiveness. Dispelling their fears, providing for them, and reassuring them of a relationship defined by forgiveness and love.

If God has stayed his hand of vengeance against us, so can we to others. If God has forgiven me of my sins against me, I am happy to forgive others as I have been forgiven. If God has not held a grudge against me, I am happy to offer forgiveness quickly to those around me. If God has done all of this to reconcile himself to me, I am happy to reconcile myself to others.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, there will be times when you are going to have the power. Someone has sinned against you, and you have all the opportunity to be a mouse in God's house. To try to take vengeance when it's really God's. In those times, look to your God and his grace for you. Remember the grace God showed to reconcile himself to you. When you have the power, see the power that is truly there in forgiveness. Amen.