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PERSISTENCE: AN UNEXPECTED FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT
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Love, joy, and generosity are just a few of the fruits of the Spirit the Bible teaches us about. This list seems fairly comprehensive. However, today's lessons add a new fruit of the Spirit to the mix—and that fruit is persistence. Now persistence—plowing ahead despite all obstacles—seems to be completely at odds with the harmony-producing fruits of the Spirit described in other places in the Bible. We know very well that persistence can lead to some very unchristian behavior, like confrontation and arguing and anger. Nevertheless, persistence plays a major role in each lesson today,

In Hosea, we meet an angry Lord God who is persistent in making God's people, the House of Israel, understand, in no uncertain terms, that they have done wrong. Rather than striking these sinners dead on the spot or sending a flood to sweep them away forever, God devises a much more painful and lasting punishment. God commands Hosea and Gomer, his wife, to give their children special names: Jezreel, No Pity and Not My People. For as long as these unfortunate children live, being called by these dreadful names will remind them and the people of Israel of God's lasting punishment. The one ray of hope in this passage is God's saying the House of Judah will be saved—eventually.

On the other hand. Luke's Gospel tells us Jesus sees persistence as a good thing. Jesus teaches his disciples that every prayer should respect God, ask for basic needs, honestly acknowledge sins, and forgive others. He gives them some examples of just how to pray.

His first example is a memorable one. We see one friend loudly badgering another for help in the middle of the night. This persistence does seem to be a perfect way to end a friendship. Can't you just imagine what the householder had to say to his friend the next morning? Still, the friend's persistence did bring about the desired results.

Jesus' second example is even more startling. He knows when we receive no answer to our first knock on any door, we usually increase the volume and the speed of our knocking. In other words, we persistently pound on the door. Jesus tells us this is exactly what our prayer should be like. Evidently, prayer should not only be modest and reverent but loud and persistent enough to engage God's attention, as well. Is Jesus serious about these instructions? Yes, he is because he promises the door will be opened. More about doors in moment.

Now, let's take a look at Paul's letter to the Colossians, where he is his typically persistent self in making his case about God's persistence on our behalf.

Describing God's saving action through Christ's death and resurrection, Paul shows us a new, far more encouraging view of God than the furious God we met back in Hosea. Faced with our sinful condition, our loving God, instead of giving innocent children horrifying names, does quite the opposite.

Paul declares to the Colossians, *"And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross."*

God could have been so terribly disgusted and despairing of our sinfulness, but God persisted. This is the incredible depth of our loving God's persistence on our behalf. This passage also teaches us that our being persistent in calling on and being in God is an acceptable thing, a good thing.

Still, how can persistence that, if we are not cautious, lead to confrontation and anger and hurt feelings with other person be a good thing in this case? And there's the answer. We are dealing with God and not simply another person. We are not dealing superficially with God, either. As the people of God, we are in a mutual relationship with God, one that is an intimate friendship and an experience of God's "otherness." God gives us freedom within this relationship, allowing us to be persistent in our prayers and open in our hearts.

Back to doors--Jesus assures us that our persistent prayer will get results. Our searching, asking and knocking will open the door. We will find and receive. But, just what will we find behind that opened door? Naturally, we expect we will find our heart's desire, exactly what we have been praying for. This kind of expectation sounds a lot like the TV game show approach—open the right door and win a fabulous prize.

This is not what Jesus is saying. Our loving God longs to give us what we need, rather than our heart's desire. We may be expecting total rescue from a hard situation and discover just one or two meager clues about how to continue. We may receive only the strength to sustain us for one more day at a time, which is just enough.

In truth, there is an even more dire possibility. We may discover there is yet another closed door behind the open door. This new closed door is one God invites us to risk opening on our own—or not. The choice is ours. Persistence often requires courage as well as determination. Whatever we encounter behind that newly open second door, we need to remember it is of God, although it may not seem to so at the first.

Paul's writing about God's persistence in saving the people of God and Jesus' teaching us to persist in prayer continue to remind us that we are truly in relationship with God. When we lose sight of this in the turmoil of daily life, Jesus' words to the disciples bring us back to what is real for us as the children of God. To paraphrase:

"If you know as parents how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him."

Through the Holy Spirit, God gives us each the gift of persistence, holy persistence. We each need to ask ourselves: How does God use this gift in my prayers, in my life and in the world around me?

AMEN