

Christian Virtue Series: Persistence I Sam 1; Luke 18:1-13; Gal. 6:9,10

Over a period of hundreds of years, the Chinese built a series of walls to protect their northern borders from invading forces- the Great Wall of China. Some sections were 30 feet high and 18 feet thick! You would think such a wall would be an effective deterrent to invasion, but you would be wrong! During the first hundred years of the wall's existence, China was successfully invaded three times! It wasn't the wall's fault. During all three invasions the invading forces never climbed over the wall or broke it down. They simply bribed a gatekeeper and marched through the open gates!

No society can be stronger than the character of its people. Nor can institutions like schools, the military, businesses, governments, or churches. As a free society, we rely on the good character of those around us. But it appears that we don't value character the way we once did. And that's why it's important for us to talk about character here in church. It is a central theme of the Bible, which is filled with the many ways in which God desires to build good character into us. And developing character ought to be a central concern of parents and grandparents for our children. Character doesn't just happen; it requires careful attention throughout childhood and adolescence. Church programs can also help, which is one of the reasons why I think families should make church participation a priority.

Today we come to the last character trait or virtue in our sermon series- persistence or perseverance. As usual, the Bible gives us lots of examples of this virtue in action. We begin with Hannah, the wife of Elkanah, who lived 11 centuries before Jesus. She discovered what many of us know- that we often don't get what we want when we want it, and that requires perseverance. We start in I Sam. 1, verse 2.

²(Elkanah) had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children.³Now this man used to go up year by year from his town to worship and to sacrifice to the LORD of hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the LORD. ⁴On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; ⁵but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb. ⁶Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. ⁷So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. ⁸Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?" (I Sam. 1:2-8)

In a time in which a wife's value was tied to her ability to produce children, Hannah felt not only sorrow, but also great shame and anxiety over her inability to produce any children. And Elkanah's second wife, Peninnah, took special glee in tormenting her, probably because Elkanah loved Hannah more than her. For some reason, this came to a head every year when the family journeyed to the temple at Shiloh to give offerings to the Lord. And it went on year after year. Here's what happened next.

⁹After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the LORD. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the LORD. ¹⁰She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD, and wept bitterly. ¹¹She made this vow: "O LORD of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head." ¹²As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. ¹³Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. ¹⁴So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." ¹⁵But Hannah answered, "No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD. ¹⁶Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have

been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time.”¹⁷ Then Eli answered, “Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.”¹⁸ And she said, “Let your servant find favor in your sight.” Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer. (I Sam. 1:9-18)

In spite of years of disappointment and torment from Penninah, Hannah has not given up! I don't know how often she had come into the temple to pray, but she certainly did this time, bargaining with God by promising that if God would just give her a son, she would dedicate him to God's service. Eli, the priest, overheard her, and after some initial confusion, asked God to grant her request. Hannah left, no longer depressed, because she believed that God would answer her plea.

And God does answer her prayer! She has a son, Samuel. And she keeps her part of the bargain by dedicating him to God's service. Samuel eventually takes over the priesthood from Eli, and he is the one through whom God chose the first two kings of Israel, Saul and David. You can read about it for yourself in I Sam. 1 & 2.

Like Hannah, we often don't get what we want when we want it. But, Hannah reminds us of the importance of persistence. She persisted in seeking after her dream of having children. And God provided her with Samuel, and four other children, too!

Persistence is important both on a natural level and on a spiritual level. Did you know that Dr. Seuss received 23 rejections of his children's books before a publisher agreed to publish them? What if he had stopped at number 23? Did you know that WD-40 is so named because it was the 40th water displacement formula that its makers tried? And, if you've ever tried to split a large rock or a brick, you know that you can strike it dozens of times with seemingly no effect, and then finally, one blow breaks it apart. The problem is that you never know when that blow will come! John D. Rockefeller said, "I do not think that there is any other quality so essential to success of any kind as the quality of perseverance. It overcomes almost everything, even nature." Persistence is important to success in the natural world.

And Jesus taught us about the spiritual implications of persistence. Listen to this strange parable that we find in Luke 18. *Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ²He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' ⁴For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'"* ⁶And the

Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:1-7)

Here, Jesus teaches the importance of being persistent in our prayers. In contrast to the unjust judge, God is gracious and wants to grant our requests when the time is right. So, keep asking, Jesus says! Ask God for justice, for comfort, for healing, and for your heart's desires.

We often don't get what we want when we want it. Our response should be one of perseverance and persistence. And, we should take our concerns to God. Often! Finally, don't get weary of doing the right thing. Keep going! Listen to Paul's words in Gal. 6. *⁹So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up. ¹⁰So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith. (Gal. 6:9,10)*

Some of you can identify with "growing weary in doing what is right." For years you've taught Sunday School, sung in the choir, served on committees, been involved in local outreach ministries, cared for sick family members, and carried heavy loads at work. You're weary! I think in particular of our older members, who have been carrying the load around

here for a long time! Some of you feel like you'd like to retire from church!
And some of you have!

But I'm reminded of John Akhwari of Tanzania who finished last in the Olympic marathon in 1968. By the time he made it to the stadium in Mexico City, it was dark, and the crowds were gone. He had apparently sustained some kind of injury, because his right leg was bandaged. He painfully limped around the track to complete the run. A sportscaster went over to him and said, "You're beat up and clearly in a lot of pain. Why did you do this?" Akhwari responded, "My country didn't send me here to start the race. My country sent me here to finish it."

I certainly count myself among those here this morning who have far more years in the rear-view mirror than we've got in front of us. How will we finish? Perseverance gives us the strength to finish strong, and to not grow weary in doing right. And it gives that same strength to people of any age who are tempted to quit a good cause or dream.