

The Art of Tact

I want to talk to you about something that you could see as a secondary lesson from the book of Philemon. This lesson does not so much jump out at us as the primary theme of the book, but rather it keeps suggesting itself. It comes out, not in the subject matter of what Paul says; it comes out in **how** he says it.

What I'm talking about is the art of tactful speech. The way Paul words his request; the way he speaks to Philemon; the words he uses; the things he brings up give us insight into the heart of a very godly man, who is dealing with a very sensitive matter.

As you know by now, this was a potentially explosive situation. Onesimus had committed a crime. Onesimus had financially harmed Philemon. Onesimus had probably put the thought of running away into the minds of some of Philemon's other slaves. Onesimus had no doubt caused some whispering tongues in Colosse when speaking about Philemon. You can imagine that Philemon would be justifiably injured.

Onesimus is now a repentant fellow Christian. He has finally become a useful servant. And Paul tells Philemon he will pay all the damages.

In spite of the fact that Philemon would have known how to vertically, unconditionally forgive; in spite of the fact that Onesimus was doing the biblical thing in repenting and returning to seek reconciliation and restitution; in spite of the fact that the damages were going to be paid, you probably couldn't find a more persuasive, gracious and elegantly worded letter in all the New Testament. Paul knew that even when everything is in place for two Christians to forgive each other, you still need to say it in a particular way.

Imagine if the book of Philemon had read like this:

Paul, the apostle to Philemon. Attached please find runaway slave Onesimus, now a believer. As an apostle, I do hereby command you to give him his job back, and make sure you treat him well. I'll pay the damages when I get there. Grace be with you.

The fact that it doesn't read that way should teach us a crucial lesson- wise Christians learn not only what to say, but how to say it. That applies to preaching the Gospel, it applies to teaching others, it applies to counselling. And very importantly, and relevant to the book's theme – it applies to the acts of rebuking and seeking repentance, or repenting and seeking forgiveness. Paul's letter is not only a model on what forgiveness is, but it is a model on the tone we should have when asking for it, or helping another find it.

If you think this is a small matter, consider that Proverbs keeps telling us to learn how to say things:

Proverbs 16:23 *The heart of the wise teaches his mouth, And adds learning to his lips.*

Proverbs 15:28 *The heart of the righteous studies how to answer, But the mouth of the wicked pours forth evil.*

Proverbs 25:11 *A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.*

Why? Because without it, you will be a chainsaw when you need to be a scalpel; you will be a bulldozer when you need to be a push starter; you will be a missile when you need to be a spring. And it won't help you to keep insisting that because you were on the right side of the issue, it made no difference regarding your use of your tongue. God has given us enough knowledge in His Word to understand not only what to say, but how to say it. Philemon teaches us this by example.

To say the right things in the wrong way is as good as having the right ingredients for a dish, but to completely mix up the proportions or even the preparation. If people are choking on the end

product, it does no good to insist - “the recipe said eggs, butter, flour, yeast, sugar and cocoa”. To say the right thing in the wrong way is like a surgeon who operates without anaesthetic; it is like a watch-repair man who insists on using only a hammer and a chisel.

It won't do to go charging through the china shop, breaking dishes everywhere, and then turn around and say, “I know I'm clumsy, but at least, I'm bold!” In this case, the china that you may be breaking is God's children.

Teaching our lips is to be one of the goals of our Christian life. It is a sign of maturity, when we can say the right things, at the right time, in the right way.

James 3:2 *for we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a mature man who is also able to control his whole body.*

Now this book of Philemon then is a rare privilege. Though Paul reveals parts of his heart in his epistles, none of his epistles is as personal as this letter. It is as if we are overhearing a one-on-one conversation of perhaps the most successful Christian of all time, with a fellow brother. God is allowing us the opportunity to learn by example – this is how a godly man makes a plea with another Christian. This is how a godly man persuades another believer to do the difficult thing. This is how a godly believer confronts another believer with his or her responsibility in the Lord.

Did he succeed? Yes. How do we know? Well, would Philemon have released a personal letter for public reading, if he had chosen not to forgive Onesimus? Philemon would only have released this letter to be read and copied as part of the celebration of God's grace to both him and Onesimus.

Now let me also caution you against the wrong idea of what Paul is doing. Paul is not, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, flattering, guilt-tripping and otherwise manipulating Philemon. Those things are sins, and since we believe in a God-breathed Scripture, we must reject the idea that Paul is writing God breathed Scripture and sinning at the same time. His tactics might surprise us, but they are still all in the province of biblical, godly speech. Many years ago, Dale Carnegie wrote “How to Win Friends and Influence People. I believe Tozer said of that book “Its underlying philosophy is deception and whose recommended technique is a skillful use of flattery to gain desired ends.” That is not what we are talking about. We are talking about learning how to say hard things so that the hearers may receive them.

The Bible is full of examples. Think of Abigail confronting David, Nathan confronting David, Mordecai speaking to Queen Esther. Think of how gracious and tactful God Himself was in speaking to people like Jonah, Cain, the Samaritan woman, doubting Thomas, or defeated Peter.

This is an aspect of godliness.

This is important because we have to ask people to do the hard things fairly regularly. In other words, this applies to parents in dealing with children. It applies when Christians have to rebuke one another. It happens when you call anyone to the standard of Scripture.

As we examine Paul's example, we can find six things that make for a tactful appeal for someone to do the hard thing. We'll just touch on each one.

I) Take the position of humility

Paul, throughout this letter, takes the position of humility. He speaks to Philemon not as one lording it over his faith, but as a fellow Christian. Paul, when calling for change in another's life, makes sure the person understand he is also a weak, frail person needing change.

Notice in verse 1, he opens with the words:

Philemon 1:1 *Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer,*

Paul the prisoner of Jesus Christ. Not Paul the apostle, Paul the pastor – Paul, an inmate – not of Rome, but of Jesus.

Again, look at his words in verse 9

Philemon 1:9 *yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you -- being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ --*

I am Paul – the aged. I am Paul the old man. I am Paul the prisoner. Is Paul pulling on heartstrings here? More likely, he is disarming the pride of man by emphasising his own lowly position.

When someone first admits their own failures, weakness or smallness, it has the effect of disarming any pride which thinks this is a competition. The pride which stiffens the neck and asks, “Well, who are you to tell me my wrongs? Are you so perfect?” This pride is made useless against one who adopts a place of humility.

There is a temptation to try to bolster your words with your position or with your experience. “As a manager of 15 years, I think I have some right to say the following.”

“As someone with a clear track-record in this area, I'm qualified to say something on this.”

Now it is not always wrong to mention that. When Paul was dealing with stubborn, rebellious people, he knew when to make it known that he was an apostle with the authority to punish them.

1 Corinthians 4:21 *What do you want? Shall I come to you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness?*
2 Corinthians 13:10 *Therefore I write these things being absent, lest being present I should use sharpness, according to the authority which the Lord has given me for edification and not for destruction.*

But Paul only brought that out when his humble appeals had fallen on deaf ears. Mostly, Paul was as he described in...

1 Thessalonians 2:7 *But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children.*

Scripture tells us that when we seek to restore someone else from their sin, we should do so in a *spirit of meekness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted (Gal 6:1).*

II) Accentuate the gracious work of God in that person's life up till now.

Paul takes time to tell Philemon what he has heard, or known, or experienced of God's grace in Philemon's life up till now.

Philemon 1:5-7 *hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, ⁶ that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. ⁷ For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.*

Why does he do this? Paul knows a fundamental principle of rebuke – strengthen what is good before you have to deliver something difficult. He doesn't come out of the blue, like so many Christians do in their rebukes, pull the person aside, “Hey, brother, you have sin in your life.” There is firstly the place to say, “I have seen grace up to now, on that basis, I call you to trust God for more grace in this act of obedience”.

The Lord Jesus Himself does this when speaking to the seven churches in Revelation. The first

thing he does with each church is commend them for what they are doing right, before telling them what they are doing wrong.

Now sometimes, there might not be any evidence of God's grace. Jesus had nothing good to say to the Laodicean church. You don't have to make something up just to be nice. But where there have even been sparks – glimmers of grace, you need to blow on those, fan them into flame before delivering what is hard.

This is not a trick, it is just human nature. Give some honey with the castor oil. Add some sugar to the medicine. Don't lie, don't flatter, be honest where you can and smooth the path for something that will be harder to take. It might simply be, "I appreciate your faithfulness to the church, I am thankful for your cheerful spirit around the believers, and I have seen real growth in you recently."

III) Emphasise your commonality in Christ, before introducing what differs.

When you think of confronting someone with something difficult, how do you imagine it? Do you imagine it like two opponents facing each other, toe-to-toe, nose-to-nose? Or do you see it as coming to the person's side and trying to steer them, urge them, and point them in the right direction? That's how Paul saw it. Notice how he keeps referring to Philemon.

Philemon 1:1 *Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer,*

Philemon 1:17 *If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me.*

He calls himself Philemon's fellow-labourer, partner, and brother.

There is an immediate change of tone from this is what God expects of us, to this is what God expects of you. Certainly, it is something that God expects of the person you are speaking to, but by emphasising your position as a fellow pilgrim, a fellow-labourer, a fellow-runner, you say, "I am with you and for you. This is something to give attention to, but I know how hard it is, because I am in the same race." This is part of what Paul means when he says in Galatians – considering thy self, lest you also be tempted. Put yourself in their shoes. Identify yourself with them. Hear your own words as someone who must receive them.

There is a real difference between hearing "Go and obey" and hearing "Come and obey". There is a difference between hearing, "Go from me and obey" and hearing, "Join me and obey".

IV) Appeal to their freedom to do right, before appealing to threatenings of punishment.

Paul makes it very clear that he is urging, persuading, calling on Philemon to act, not commanding, demanding or insisting - at least, not yet. As we have seen, he can command – God has given him that authority. But what does he say?

Philemon 1:8-10 *Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, ⁹ yet for love's sake I rather **appeal** to you -- being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ -- ¹⁰ I **appeal** to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains,*

The word *appeal* in the original means to implore, to ask, to call on.

Why do you think Paul does this? Because there is a principle in human nature that God often takes advantage of: mature people respond positively to an expectation of responsibility. You see it in children. You say to a child, "You cannot be trusted. I am going to make sure my eyes are on you all the time. Very often, the response to that is to say, "OK then, I'll be naughty. That's what you're expecting".

On the other hand, sometimes you will say to a child, "I am trusting you with this money while I go

out. But I want you to look after her while I'm gone." Now it's not that everyone responds positively to that. But very often, the mature soul reasons – I have the freedom to do wrong. I have the freedom to do right. Here, someone who loves me very much is leaving the door wide open for either one. I am not being forced. I want to prove my integrity. I can obey when no one is forcing me.

The lord does this with us doesn't He? *"Choose you this day, whom you will serve"*
"Will you also go away?"
"I stand at the door and knock"

Sometimes, the presence of compulsion has the opposite effect on our souls, as Paul makes clear in Romans 7. And once again, there is a time for compulsion. Certainly not everyone, and especially not infants are at a place where you can expect them to rise to the challenge of moral freedom. But when dealing with believers, particularly mature believers, appealing to their freedom to do right is a motive for obedience.

V) Motivate the reasonableness and reward of obedience

Paul doesn't simply tell Philemon to obey, he tells him why.
Look at some of them. In verse 11

Philemon 1:11 *who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.
Philemon, Onesimus is now useful. It will be in your own interest to receive him back.*

Philemon 1:12 *I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart,*

Philemon, I love this Onesimus. The way you treat him will be the way you treat me.

Philemon 1:19 *I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay -- not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides.*

Philemon, it's not like I'm coming out of the blue and asking you for something. We have a history. I was the one who preached the Gospel to you and you were saved from an eternal hell. Can I not impose upon you one favour.

Philemon 1:20 *Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord.*

Philemon, like you have in the past, bring me joy, refresh me. This act of obedience on your part will be such a blessing to me.

Now Paul is simply surrounding a difficult act with many reasons to do it.
Doesn't the Lord do that with us? Doesn't He keep promising blessings and rewards for obedience?
Doesn't He keep explaining why sin hurts and why obedience will make things 'well with us'?

So many parents make the mistake of never explaining the reasons behind the practice they are calling their children to make. So many pastors make the mistake of calling for a particular standard without explaining the reason, the blessing, or the reward of obedience.
We are rational creatures. We look for reasons. We are joy-seeking creatures. We look for reward - nothing wrong with that. God often gives reasons and rewards for His commands.
It might be very simple – to just please the Lord. It might be more extended.

VI) Suggest confidence in that person's obedience

What if Paul had ended his plea with a threat – if you choose to take my words and disregard them and live in your stubborn wilfulness, know that church discipline awaits you? It goes back to

appealing to some sense of moral freedom. Even common sense tells us that if you treat people as stupid and incompetent, it is quite likely they will meet your expectations.

When dealing with a believer who has demonstrated a desire to follow Christ in the past, it is quite right to leave them with a sense that you expect them to do right. In fact, when Paul says in I Corinthians 13 that love '*believes all things*', certainly one application of that is that love expects the best out of people, not suspects the worst.

Now, once again, there is eventually a place for a stern warning: In all these things, there is a place for the opposite thing. There is a place for asserting authority. There is a place for bringing up threats and warnings. There is a place to be realistic about their stubbornness. But you do so only when humble, meek, gracious appeals, filled with pointers to God's grace, have failed. It is when the Lamb is ignored, that Jesus returns as a Lion. If you will not receive Him riding on a donkey, He will come back in the clouds with a sword.

That's our model. If a tactful approach will do, then it is our first approach. If tact is abused, then things get more direct, pointed, and firm. But some Christians think there is virtue in skipping tact to get to firmness.

Paul's intimate letter to Philemon tells us something different. A godly believer will do his or her best to make sure the message goes down as well as possible. Take the humble position. Accentuate the good that God has in them. Emphasise your fellowship in the Gospel. Appeal to their moral freedom to do what is right. Motivate their obedience. Show confidence in their obedience.

Paul's approach was, I would say, just about irresistible. How could you turn him down? Let's learn from this inspired Scripture in our dealings with our children, one another, and others.