

23.11

Paul's Persuasive Tactics in the Letter to Philemon

Paul employs a number of persuasive tactics in this brief letter to ensure that Philemon will do as he wishes.

To begin with, in the address of this letter Paul includes the entire church that meets in Philemon's house (v. 2), even though most of the content seems to be intended for Philemon personally (every occurrence in Greek of the word "you" in vv. 4–21 is singular). Thus there will be public knowledge of the request that Paul is making, and the whole congregation will know whether Philemon responds as Paul hopes.

Some of Paul's other tactics:

- Paul tells Philemon that he has a reputation for generosity (vv. 4–7). The implication is that if he now does as Paul suggests, that reputation will continue.
- Paul says that Philemon has refreshed "the hearts of the saints" (v. 7) and then appeals to him with the words "Refresh my heart in Christ" (v. 20). If Philemon were to refuse, he would be declining to do for Paul what he is renowned for doing for others.
- Paul indicates that he, as an apostle, has the authority to command Philemon to do what he wants done in this matter

(v. 8), but he refrains from giving such a command so that Philemon's good deed might be voluntary (v. 14). If Philemon were to refuse Paul's request, he would appear to be taking advantage of this gracious allowance.

- Paul reminds Philemon that the one making this request is an “old man” and a “prisoner for Christ Jesus” (v. 9). Philemon would have to be quite heartless to turn down such a supplicant.
- Paul emphasizes his personal affection for Onesimus: the man has become like a son to Paul (v. 10), and in sending him back to Philemon, Paul feels like he is giving up his own heart (v. 12). Thus if Philemon does not do Paul the favor of returning Onesimus to him, he will, in effect, be keeping something very dear to the apostle for himself.
- Paul also reminds Philemon of what he has done for him (v. 19): Philemon owes him his very “self” (i.e., his life as a new person in Christ and as an heir to eternal salvation). What favor could Paul possibly ask in return that would be too great?
- Paul asserts that he is absolutely confident that Philemon will comply, and do more besides (v. 21). Thus if Philemon were to fail to comply, he would be letting Paul down and disappointing someone who thinks highly of him.

- Paul concludes by telling Philemon that he plans to come for a visit as soon as he is released from prison (v. 22). Thus if Philemon fails to do as Paul suggests, he will have to deal with the disappointed apostle face-to-face, an awkward encounter to say the least.

In short, Paul manages in a few sentences to place Philemon in a position in which granting the request will be the only way to maintain honor with Paul, with his own family, and with his church. We do not know whether Paul did this because he suspected that Philemon would need this sort of pressure, or because the situation was particularly delicate, or simply because this was how one made requests of this sort in those days. It is possible that Philemon would have been delighted to grant Paul's request apart from any social pressure or rhetorical encouragement. In any case, Paul's letter would have made it difficult for him not to do as Paul wished.