

The Our Father and 3rd Person Imperatives

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The *Our Father*, or *Lord's Prayer*, is ubiquitous in Christian worship and devotional life. But it is not as common that those who pray or recite the Lord's Prayer understand or appreciate what Jesus' instructions to "pray like this" mean. Indeed it would seem that much of the prayer may be misconstrued, both by worshipers and scholars alike. There are numerous questions raised by a closer examination to the prayer: is it indeed eschatological or is it ethical, should it be communal or personal, how does one interpret the petition regarding temptation or testing?

My focus in this paper, though, is fairly narrow – that is, to understand more fully the first three petitions in the Our Father. The Our Father is made up of two great divisions. In the first part are found three petitions, set forth in rather sparse parallel form, which involve some relationship or attitude toward God. The second part shifts the focus to the more mundane, albeit important, issues of the life of the worshipers – for food, forgiveness, and avoidance of testing. These two divisions in the prayer are also noteworthy because of the significant difference in the forms of the verbs employed. In the first part of the prayer each of the petitions utilizes third person imperative forms, while in the second part of the prayer the verbs employed are a more direct second person imperative form. Thus each section has its own distinctive nature, and each is quite distinct from the other section.

Each of the variants of the Our Father also shows this same pattern of the division. While my focus here will be on Matthew's text, it should be noted that Luke's prayer in Lk 11:2–4, as well as the model prayer in Didache 8:2 which is very similar to Matthew's form, also shows this same distinction in the verb forms between the first and the second half of the prayer: third person imperative forms in the first half, and then 2nd person imperatives in the second half.

How should one understand the third person imperative forms within the context of the whole prayer? My initial interest was sparked by a pervasive misunderstanding of these three petitions in modern English translations. If I ask a student what these verses mean, the answer is invariably offered as an indicative statement. So,

Hallowed be thy name = your name is holy

Thy kingdom come = your kingdom is to come

Thy will be done = your will **will** be done (and this tongue twister resembles the mixed up understanding of the text)

The misinterpretation of the somewhat archaic form of the imperative in English translations (especially King James and RSV) applies especially to the first petition; something closer to imperatival understanding is occasionally ventured for the second two petitions, though rarely capturing much of the true sense. But to be fair, the third person imperative is simply a hard concept, and translating these petitions is difficult.

The situation is often little better in scholarly literature about the Our Father. Often the third person imperative form is overlooked, or the struggle for meaning is placed elsewhere. Consider this comment from E. F. Scott in a scholarly, but not technically oriented, book on the Lord's Prayer:

But we are also to pray "Let thy name be hallowed," Let thy kingdom come."

"Let thy will be done." Here we do not ask, but only state a sure conviction.

God is the holy one: He is working to bring in his Kingdom; he will establish his will on earth.¹

Scott has simply transformed the imperatives into indicative statements of fact or conviction.

But would the imperative form of a verb be used to simply affirm one's view of reality or faith?

The nature of the imperatives does not come off much better in significant critical commentaries. A good example of this might be Hans Dieter Betz's commentary on the Sermon on the Mount in the Hermeneia series. In the midst of extraordinary detail on the Lord's Prayer, its background, and meaning, Betz approaches the three first petitions and overlooks the third person quality of them. For Betz, the significant issues seem to be firstly, that the verbs appear in the passive voice, and so are perhaps a case of *passivum divinum*, and secondly how one should interpret the aorist tense that was used in these petitions.² Indeed, the issue of the passive voice is important (and I will touch on that briefly as well), but one must first struggle with the import of the third person in these imperatival sentences, and that is my central emphasis today.

Similarly Davies and Allison focus on the passive voice, and suggest that what is being requested is for God to act, "he will hallow his own name."³ Such a focus on the divine passive, which proposes that notwithstanding the passive God is actually being asked to actively intervene to bring his holiness and his kingdom and to banish those who act against his will, underscores and supports an eschatological interpretation of the Lord's Prayer. But it does so by overlooking the unique grammatical nature of the prayer.

The Greek imperative, like imperatives in general, can be seen as the mood most dependent on the volition of the person or persons who are invited to act. This is described well by Dana and Mantey:

The imperative is the mood of command or entreaty – the mood of volition. It is the genius of the imperative to express the appeal of will to will. In ordinary linguistic communication the primary appeal is from intellect to intellect, but in

the imperative one will address another. It expresses neither probability nor possibility, but only intention, and is, therefore the furthest removed from reality.⁴

Imperatives have been a somewhat overlooked area of Greek grammatical discussion, but recently some significant attention has been paid to the imperative. Joseph Fantin, in a 2003 dissertation, notes for instance that the imperative in the New Testament can offer some variety in the level of force (command, request, to permission), but still there is a core concept such that “the difference between imperatives is not one of essence but rather force...”⁵ He goes on to note that even when used with the least amount of force (e.g., permission or toleration) “that the directive force and volitional element are still apparent.”⁶ Such an understanding has been underscored in a broader linguistic study of imperatives by Chung-hye Han, in a University of Pennsylvania dissertation.⁷ He notes that the imperative form, which in very many languages is specifically marked morphologically, points to a specific emphasis: that of directive illocutionary force.⁸ This directive force can vary from command to request, but it nonetheless remains a central feature of imperatives. And while the focus on the directive quality can be seen clearly from such a comparative study, Han’s primary focus on English imperatives tended to overlook how the question of who the agent of the expected response is might influence the issue. Simply put, imperatives in their directive focus anticipate a response – as Han noted, “imperatives are in principle agentive ...the directive force sets forth a plan which is expected to be realized by an agent.”⁹ But since English has no third person imperatives, Han did not explore the possible variation in the agents, and instead primarily focused on a two-person communication model. These two studies offer two important results that should be considered as we approach the imperatives of the Our Father: First, that imperatives are “imperatival” – that is that there is a strong directive force to them in almost every instance; and second, that the directive force also

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implies a response by an agent.

How do we make sense of a concept like the third person imperative? In an indicative sentence, the concept of grammatical persons is not difficult at all. The first person refers to the self – either I or we– from which point of view a narrative or discourse takes place. A person or group of people that we directly address would be second person (you, or you all), and anyone or anything else referred to would be the third person – he, she, it, or they. An indicative sentence can portray the subject of the verb in either the first, second, or third person and we would see that person doing the action of the verb: “the man watched the sunset;” “you went to school;” “I am coming.”

But in an imperative situation, this becomes a bit more complicated because of the very nature of the imperative mood. The imperative, as many grammarians have noted, is a mood of contingent reality – its reality awaits the action of the person receiving the message.¹⁰ It is thus a direct communication between a person issuing a command or request, and someone listening, and involves someone who must act on that command and request. Even if embedded in a narrative structure, the point of view of speaker is always that of the first person, the immediate “I”, and addresses a second person. So for instance in the example of Mt 6:6, Jesus is the speaker and he says, when you pray, enter into your closet and close the door.... Note that although the narrative is about Jesus, the imperative is in the form of a speech act coming from Jesus directly to a listener (here a plural you, perhaps the disciples). This second person imperative implies that actions “enter... close” are to be undertaken by the recipients of the message, the hearers of the command. To use Han’s model, the directive force creates the situation of contingent reality. The imperative is directed to “someone,” who must then either act or fail to act.

We can see this on the handout. In the first example of a simple two person imperative situation, the first person, the speaker, sends forth a command or request to the second person, the listener in a speech act situation. In such a typical imperative discourse situation, one expects the listener/receiver to then either act or fail to act on the directive. The listener is the agent of the response, whether successful or not.

But the third person imperative form suggests something quite different. A third person in this communication model would be someone other than the speaker or the one directly addressed who is to do the action. And this third person, while not necessarily part of the original directive speech act is to be the agent of the completed action. This is shown on the handout as the second situation. In this third-person imperative scheme, though, we are faced with some ambiguities, which I have tried to highlight on the handout with some questions. First, who exactly is the third person? And what if the identity of the third person is obscured, especially as in the case of a passive verb which by its nature hides the agent? Moreover, even having identified the third person, one must inquire how this third person, or the third person's ostensible action, is related to the second person? Is the third person to do this action on his or her own volition or independently? Is there a power relationship that suggests either a secondary command, or permission, that allows the third person to act? As one can see, there is plenty here to consider – more than we can cover in a mere 30 minutes.

There have been some relatively recent efforts to explore the unique status of the third person imperative in Greek. James Boyer, in a frequently cited article from *Grace Theological Journal* attempted to develop a number of classification schemes relative to the imperative, and does devote some focused attention to who the third person is in the third person imperative.¹¹ Fantin's dissertation on the imperative in the Greek New Testament devotes part of a chapter to Mark Matson, "The Our Father and 3rd Person Imperatives"

the third person imperative. And there have been two theses directed by Carroll Osborn focused on this issue: one is a study of the third person imperative in the Septuagint by Judy Glaze, and the other is a study of the third person imperative in the New Testament by Schuyler Signor.¹²

Boyer distinguished four basic uses of the third person imperative, adding even a bit more nuance and distinction in the first classification. Thus Boyer notes the following ways the third person imperative is used in the New Testament:

1. Indirect command to “you,” including:
 - a) some part of you
 - b) general command including you
 - c) your responsibility with regard to a third party
 - d) your permission that someone else do something.
2. Indirect command to a third party
3. What is required of a third party
4. Promise or warning of what will be; a general prediction.

Boyer argues that a major percentage of the third person imperatives actually are actually a form of the second person imperatives “Most of the third person imperatives are aimed indirectly at the one addressed and are therefore basically not much different from the second person imperatives.” An example of this, under the sub-category of an indirect command to “some part of you” can be seen in John 14:1 (see first example on handout). The use of the third person imperative form Μὴ ταρασσέσθω υἱῶν ἡ καρδία really is a way of Jesus saying to the crowd, “do not be troubled.” The metaphorical use of “heart” as a synecdoche for the thinking/feeling aspect of the addressed audience necessitated the third person imperative instead

of the second person. But since the metaphor is really a replacement for the concept of “you,” the sense meaning of the sentence is essentially that of a second person imperative, and Boyer suggests that this is partitive – that Jesus is allowing for some, if not all, of the audience to respond.

A very common use of the third person imperative, used when addressing some or all of a group, is the general command involving “the one who...” Here Boyer points to Matthew 11:15 (see handout) as an example of such a general command: ὁ ἔχων ὦτα ἀκούετω, “The one who has ears to hear, let him hear.” Here the generalizing participle, “the one hearing” is gnomic in quality and can refer to anyone, including part of the audience for which it might have been directed obliquely in the original speech act. A variant is found in Mark 8:34 (see handout) εἴ τις θέλει ὀπίσω μου ἀκολουθεῖν ἀπαρνησάσθω ἑαυτὸν καὶ ἀράτω τὸν σταυρὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀκολουθεῖτω μοι. “If anyone wishes to follow after me, he should deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” The use of the generalizing τις in the protasis of this conditional sentence almost demands the third person form in the apodosis that follows.

Boyer thinks that few of the third person imperatives are really addressed to a third party, often in the form of threats or warnings, as in Luke 16:29: “They have Moses ... let them hear them.” The “they” addressed here is clearly not part of the audience, and the action (or non action) falls on them to perform, but does not include the audience addressed.

Certainly Boyer’s classification system is a helpful one, in part to force us to confront the actual speech act situation which might be quite different than the actual grammatical construction. But it is sometimes unclear how and why Boyer made his determination of some classifications.

Schuyler Signore's thesis adds a helpful way to think about the issue of who really is addressed, and how that might be analyzed. Signor posits a three part classification schema for the third person imperatives. The first category involves those that demonstrate emphatic subject transfers. By this term, Signor is referring to cases where "the subject of the imperative is the result of a "transfer" of a subject generally from an implied or actual second person imperative or other imperativ from in the same context."¹³ An example of this would be most of Boyer's classification of "indirect command of you" discussed previously. But Signor's explanation of what is happening is helpful: "the third person allows the writer/speaker to shift the focus to certain individuals in the audience, or extend it beyond the audience." This shift of focus is done for rhetorical force, and often increases the "force" of the imperative to those listening than a simple 2nd person imperative.

A second class of third person imperative according to Signor consists of emphatic object transfers. Here the subject of the third person imperative is the result of the transfer of an object (direct or indirect), generally from an implied or actual second person imperativ context. Thus the focus shifts to the object of the verb's actions. Examples Signor offers are "your light must shine" (Matt 5:16), which empasizes the light more than a restated "shine your light."¹⁴ Signor also notes that a special sub-category of object transfers are those in prayers.¹⁵ In some instances, the agent would be the addressee, God, while the grammatical shift allows the focus to shift to the matter under concern. So we might imagine Matt. 26:39 (see handout). The grammatical subject of the verb, παρελθάτω, is the cup. But really, God is understood to be the active agent in the speech act. Still, the object transfer allows the focus to shift emphasis to the metaphor of the cup as a substitute for suffering.

In other cases, though, the object transfer makes the actual responsible party less obvious and often the agent is not the person addressed. In some cases it appears to involve the speaker (the first person) by reflexive action. A possible, and well known, use of such a third person imperative is be the creative speech acts in Genesis 1, where God speaks imperatively, γενηθήτω φῶς, and we understand God, the speaker, is implicated as the agent of that light's creation (though is this because of the use of prayer type constructions, or of the passive verb use?). I will return to this idea a bit more below.

Finally, Signor suggests that a third classification should encompass the conditional constructs.¹⁶ This is a large class, and includes cases where a third person imperative is in the apodosis of either a first class or third class conditional sentence. As Signor points out, these are very similar to the subject transfers, and the implied agent of the final clauses is either the immediate audience or the implied audience.

Before turning to the specific issue of the language in the Our Father, one final grammatical issue should be addressed: what a passive voice accomplishes in an imperatival construction. Boyer addresses the issue of passive imperatives, though I think he has missed a major issue – the role of the agent¹⁷. As Boyer notes, many passive verbs used in the imperative are deponent, and these remain active in force. In other cases, those of causative verbs, the passive shifts the focus to the condition or state resulting in the action. But a central issue, and one which Boyer overlooks, is the use of the passive to hide the agent – a common use of the passive in English. He discusses, for instance, the Matthew form of the cry to crucify Jesus. In Matthew, rather than σταύρωσον (Mk 15:13), or σταύρου (Lk 23:21), we find σταυρωθήτω. What Matthew has done is remove Pilate as the obvious agent for crucifying Jesus, shifting

responsibility to some nameless “others.”

So how should we understand the third person imperatives in the Our Father? The following are a series of proposals that, I believe, more accurately account for both the grammar of Matt. 6 and Luke 11 and the thrust of the speech act implied in the gospels:

1. The third person imperatives, should be understood as having imperatival force. While this imperatival force can at times be so attenuated as to simply approach the idea of permission, it usually retains the force of a directive. If so, we might translate the Our Father petitions along the following lines: your name is to be made holy, your kingdom shall come, your will shall be done. Circumlocutions like “let your name be made holy,” understate the force of the imperative.

2. The third person should be taken seriously as a deliberate attempt to shift the focus of the directive from a simple request. This is especially true given that the second half of the prayer is stated in very direct 2nd person imperative forms: “give us our bread”, “forgive us our debts,” etc. There is clearly no hesitancy on the part of Jesus or the author of Matthew in phrasing imperatives of request in the form of direct address. Given the fact, then, that the Our Father contains both second and third person imperatives, why are their third person imperatives in the first section of the prayer?

Based on Signor’s analysis, I believe that the use of the third person form shifts the focus to the subjects of the sentences, even though they are not the “responsible parties” in bringing about the action. Thus the third person imperative form focuses on concept of God’s name as the locus for demonstrating God’s holiness, on God’s kingdom as a trope for the realm of absolute devotion and service, and on God’s will as the ideal of human activity in light of God’s power and mercy.

But the use of the third person as opposed to the second person is also, I believe, an indication that God was not thought of as the primary agent for bringing these situations to completion. While God, addressed directly in the vocative of the prayer, might understandably be seen as enabling the situation by allowing it to happen (let your will be done), or empowering such action, nonetheless the responsible party for completing the action of the imperative must be found somewhere else. And in this instance Boyer's category of the indirect command to you does not work well. There is no plural "you," so partitive concepts must be rejected. And the subcategory of a second person responsibility toward a third party also does not work, since the third parties here are abstractions or concepts.

3. The use of passives in these verses is also telling, I think. Two of the three petitions are formed in grammatical passives (your name is to be made holy; your will is to be done). The third is a functional passive – kingdom being an abstraction for God's rule; so instead of "let god rule as king," the desire for God's kingdom to come is passive in its force– who will bring the kingdom into being? Contrary to Betz's or Davies' and Allison's conclusions, however, I do not find the *passivum divinum* argument compelling, in great part because in the balance of the prayer, and in many other prayers in the gospels there is little shyness in direct and bold imperative demands on God.¹⁸ If the passive here is not used to avoid speaking to God directly, then why is it used? I suspect it is to in some way make the agent less obvious.

4. The combination of the third person imperative form, which tends to generalize and individualize the responsibility for the action, and the passive form of the verb, which tends to obscure the agent, suggest that the force of the imperatives here is reflexive. Signor suggests that this may be a factor in third person imperatives in prayer, "In the preceding eight cases an imperatival transfer takes place from responsibility upon the addressee to others, which includes

the speakers themselves. The third person allows the obligatory sense to be maintained without it appearing as if god were obliged. This class could be called reflexive object transfer; it implies the responsibility for fulfillment falls back on the speaker, and perhaps others among whom he is included.”¹⁹

5. If this is true, then the thrust of the prayer is not eschatological (contra Davies and Alison), but instead should be seen as presently obligatory on the prayer.²⁰ That is, the actual act of praying the Our Father should bind the community of believers presenting their petitions to God to be actively involved in doing God’s will, in making God’s name holy, in bringing the kingdom into being – in other words, to be bridging the divide between heavenly reality and earthly reality. And this brings us back to the understanding of some of the earliest church fathers, who read the third person imperatives in just this way, as involving the prayer in the fulfillment of the request (handout).²¹

Certainly there is much more work to be done in understanding how the imperative, and in particular the third person imperative, worked in Hellenistic Greek. But perhaps this start might attract interest in the value of just such explorations.

NOTES

1. E. F. Scott. *The Lord’s Prayer*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951. p. 77.

2. Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, Hermeneia series, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) p. 389

3. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, ICC, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), Volume I, p. 602.
4. H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927), p. 174.
5. Joseph D. Fantin, “The Greek Imperative Mood in the New Testament: A cognitive and Communicative Approach,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 2003), p. 195.
6. Fantin, p. 187.
7. Chung-hye Han, *The Structure and Interpretation of the Imperatives: Mood and Force in Universal Grammar.*” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1998).
8. Han, p. 152.
9. Han, p. 168.
10. Note a few here, but Dana and Mantey, Robertson, Wallance should suffice
11. James Boyer, “A Classification of Imperatives: A Statistical Study,” *Grace Theological Journal* 8,1 (1987): 35-54.
12. Judy Glaze, “The Septuagintal Use of the Third Person Imperative,” (M.A. thesis, Harding Graduate School of Religion, 1979); Schuyler Signor, “The Third Person Imperative in the Greek New Testament,” (M.A. thesis, Abilene Christian University, 1999)
13. Signor, p. 46
14. Note that Matt. 5:16 is an example offered in Boyer of a command to “some part of you,” which is not incorrect, but perhaps is less helpful than Signor’s perspective offers. So also for John 14:1, cited above as an example of the “some part of you.”
15. Signor, p. 76.
16. Signor, p. 82.
17. Boyer, p. 49
18. On the divine passive see BDF §330(1), 313, and 342 (1). But contra, see Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Zondervan, 1996) p. 437.
19. Signor, p. 81.
20. Davies and Alison 601–606; Betz, p.. But see Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7* (Fortress Press, 1989), p 380 who concludes against the eschatological interpretation.

21. Augustine, Sermon the Mount, 5,19 and 6, 20-21 (in xxx, p. 127–130); Cyril of Jerusalem, Mystagogical Lecture 5, “The Lord’s Prayer” 12-13 (in xxx, p. 198-199); Gregory of Nyssa, “The Lord’s Prayer,” 3 (in St. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Lord’s Prayer and The Beatitudes*, ACW 18, translated by Hilda C. Graef, New York: Newman Press, 1954, p. 50)