

MAY THE *FORCE* BE WITH YOU: VOLITION, DIRECTION, AND  
FORCE: A COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH  
TO THE IMPERATIVE MOOD

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**Abstract:** Compared to other grammatical phenomena, the Greek imperative mood has received minimal attention. This article will explore and evaluate the traditional approach to the meaning and usages of this mood. These having been found deficient, an alternate approach will be proposed. The imperative mood will indeed be found to mean “command”; however, a “command” can be understood as harsh and inappropriate in certain relational situations. It will be discovered that communicators use various strategies to nuance and in some cases weaken the force of the “command” depending on the intended purpose of the imperative and the relationships of the participants in a communication situation. Thus, degree of force is one way (among others) to classify an imperative. (Article)

**Keywords:** Imperative mood, command, neurocognitive stratificational linguistics, relevance theory.

### 1. *Introduction*

Historically, in comparison to other aspects of the Greek language, the Greek imperative mood has not received a lot of attention. For example, the influential grammar by Blass, Debrunner, and Funk dedicates about one column, or half a page, to the mood.<sup>1</sup> This is no surprise. In a world of interesting lexical

1. BDF § 383. The original work from which BDF was translated has not developed further since the English translation was published; it contains

phenomena, case usages, tenses, and more recently, the exotic worlds of verbal aspect and voice, a seemingly obvious grammatical category such as “imperative” is boring by comparison. The imperative mood means command. Enough said.

This article will revisit the traditional approach to the imperative mood and suggest an alternative. Evaluating the traditional approach involves two areas: first, the essential meaning of the imperative mood, and second, the usages (so-called classifications) of the mood. The former will only be briefly discussed here. My emphasis will be on classifying the usages. Although the discussion of the “meaning” will be brief, it will suffice to provide a working “meaning” that can serve as a basis for discussing the usages of the mood. Once described, I plan on revealing some weaknesses of the traditional approach and suggest a way forward to provide a more nuanced means of understanding the mood.

## *2. Preliminary Remarks*

The discussion of a semantic and grammatical phenomenon such as the imperative mood can be quite involved. It could discuss the general nature of “mood” and fix the imperative within this larger concept. It could focus on the main usage of the imperative, namely “command” and describe this communicative act. Other areas are also available to explore. My purpose here is intentionally narrow. Two preliminary remarks are necessary before proceeding.

### *2.1 Focus on Form*

I am concerned with the meaning of the imperative expressed in the morphology and its usages. As a result, I am making a distinction between the imperative as a morphological category and the more abstract concept of “command.” There are a number of ways to express a command in Greek. The imperative is only one such means. Consider the following in English:

about the same amount of detail as the English (BDR § 387).

1. Open the door
2. Can you open the door?
3. I'm hot

Here the essential meaning of all three of these statements is the command to 'open the door.' Only the first uses an imperative. The latter two demand some contextual information before a command can be understood. The second uses an interrogative with a modal indicative. Assuming a context where one's ability to open a door is not in question, this is a polite way of asking for the door to be opened. The third sentence needs even more contextual information before understanding the command. Assuming the room in which the communicative act is taking place is warmer than the outside, the statement *I'm hot* can be a subtle way of asking/commanding the door to be open. Of course, it is possible that the speaker is merely informing the hearer of the uncomfortable situation in which the speaker finds him- or herself. However, if the hearer is in a position to relieve some of the speaker's discomfort, the utterance can be so interpreted. It is also possible that both the information and the command are intended. In any case, what distinguishes these utterances from one another is not the command intention but rather the force with which this nuance is communicated. The first is most direct and puts the hearer in an explicit position to respond positively or negatively. It is strong. Failure to comply may have consequences (often dependent on the relationship of the communication participants). The final example leaves the hearer in a position to ignore (or misunderstand) the command and will likely not have any consequence. It is weak. The second falls somewhere between these two.

Greek has a number of ways of expressing a command as well. In addition to the imperative, explicit commands can be made using the future indicative:<sup>2</sup>

2. Although probably too simplistic for some discussions, under the label "command," I also include negated commands (prohibitions). There may be differences between commands and prohibitions; however, for the purpose of this discussion, it is preferred to emphasize the similarities and consider these together. For a comprehensive study of prohibitions in the New

Καὶ ὅταν προσεύχησθε, οὐκ ἔσεσθε ὡς οἱ ὑποκριταί (Matt 6:5)  
 And when you pray, **do not be** like the hypocrites.  
 (. . . **you will not be** like the hypocrites)

The future tense used as a command is common with Old Testament quotations:

κύριον τὸν θεόν σου προσκυνήσεις καὶ αὐτῷ μόνῳ λατρεύσεις (Matt 4:10  
 [2x])<sup>3</sup>  
 (**you will**) **worship** the Lord your God and him alone (**will you**) **serve**.

Further, explicit negative commands (prohibitions) can be produced using the aorist subjunctive:

μὴ ἐγκακήσητε καλοποιούντες (2 Thess 3:13)  
**Do not become discouraged** in doing what is right.

These are well known means of expressing commands.<sup>4</sup> It is yet to be determined whether there is any significant difference between the imperative form and these non-imperative forms of commands.<sup>5</sup> Such work is beyond the scope of our study. It is also possible that commands are expressed by seemingly remote means (from a grammatical perspective). Here a conditional clause is used with the present subjunctive in the protasis and an indicative with complementary infinitive in the apodosis:<sup>6</sup>

Testament, see Huffman, *Verbal Aspect Theory*.

3. This is a quotation from LXX Deut 6:13 and 10:20. Matthew has προσκυνήσεις where the LXX has φοβηθήση (another future tense verb used as a command). This change is easily explained. Matthew's Jesus responds directly to the Devil who asks Jesus to worship (προσκυνήσης) him (see Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:373 and Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 69).

4. See the sections devoted to command (and prohibition) (or volitional) clauses in Porter, *Idioms*, 220–29 and Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 713–25. These discuss clauses and are distinct from these authors' earlier sections on the imperative mood. Contrast this with A.T. Robertson, who deals with the imperative mood and volitional clauses in the same section (*Grammar*, 941–50). Also, most of Huffman's study (*Verbal Aspect Theory*, 123–464) is devoted to the ways in which prohibitions are expressed in Greek.

5. See Fantin, *Greek Imperative Mood*, 156–93 for some synoptic parallels that may be of interest to this question.

6. Luke's conditional clause follows Mark's verbatim (1:40; see also Matt 8:2 which is also identical). Luke is used as an example here because the

ἰδοῦ ἀνὴρ πλήρης λέπρας ἰδὼν δὲ τὸν Ἰησοῦν, πεσὼν ἐπὶ πρόσωπον  
 ἐδεήθη αὐτοῦ λέγων· κύριε, ἐὰν θέλῃς δύνασαι με καθαρίσαι (Luke 5:12)  
 Behold, when a man full of leprosy saw Jesus, falling [or he fell] on his  
 face, begged him saying, Sir, if you desire, you are able **to cleanse** me.

In this passage, Luke presents a man with leprosy begging (ἐδεήθη) Jesus for attention. The man addresses Jesus with respect (κύριε), physically places himself in a subordinate and dependent position (πεσὼν ἐπὶ πρόσωπον), and uses a conditional clause with a clear intended purpose to ask/command/persuade Jesus to heal him. It is the complementary aorist infinitive that reflects the command nuance. Essentially, he is saying, “Heal me.”<sup>7</sup>

Further, although rare, a non-future indicative may also be used for this purpose:

διδάσκειν δὲ γυναίκι οὐκ ἐπιτρέπω οὐδὲ ἀθηνεῖν ἀνδρός (1 Tim 2:12)  
**I do not allow** a woman to teach or have authority over a man.

In this example, it may be the lexical meaning of the verb or the position or authority of the author relative to the recipient(s) that is communicating the command.<sup>8</sup> In any case, both Luke 5:12

action leading to the clause is more detailed than Mark’s. Also, Mark’s pre-conditional clause activity has a more complicated textual history than Luke (see the respective apparatuses).

7. Marshall (*Gospel of Luke*, 209) calls this a “polite request.” Bock (*Luke 1:1–9:50*, 473) goes further and provides a nice discussion of the dynamics at play between Jesus and the leper; he identifies this as an “urgent request.”

8. This passage is well known for its interpretive and applicational difficulties. Here I am only interested in whether or not in its original context this indicative is functioning as some type of command. This seems to be the case. See Johnson, *First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 201 (Johnson avoids the label “command,” but acknowledges the translation, “I do not allow . . .” He discusses the strength of the verb and spends a significant amount of time discussing contextual issues related to women speaking and having authority in the assembly, see 201, 203–11); Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 140; Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 454–55 (“prohibition”); Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 121–23. Huizenga (*1–2 Timothy, Titus*, 26) suggests that in 1 Tim 2:11–12, the author is attempting to “establish a definitive and enduring rule that will remind women of their subordinate ranking in the church hierarchy and that will pressure them to remain in it.” For further discussion of issues related to this passage, see the

and 1 Tim 2:12 appear to use non-imperative forms as a means of communicating commands. This seems similar to my second and third English examples above.

There are other possible means of communicating commands in Greek reflected in the New Testament (e.g., independent infinitives and participles).<sup>9</sup> However, neither these nor the non-imperative forms listed above are of interest here. In this paper, I am concerned only with the imperative mood and hence with those forms that are identified by their morphology as imperative. *Command* is a more abstract concept that can be realized by various forms in Greek (e.g., imperative, aorist subjunctive, etc.). This strict distinction between various strata of language is an important concept for organizing and understanding linguistic phenomena. It provides us with a theoretical basis for isolating the imperative mood from the semantic and pragmatic command(s).<sup>10</sup> Thus, for purposes of clarity in this article, the terms *imperative* and *command* are not interchangeable. The

commentaries and the literature cited there.

9. See Moulton, *Prolegomena*, 180–83; Robertson, *Grammar*, 942–46. Both Moulton and Robertson also note one example of an optative used for a command (Mark 11:14) (Moulton, *Prolegomena*, 179; Robertson, *Grammar*, 943). Porter (*Idioms*, 222–24) also includes first-person hortatory subjunctives, *iva* clauses, and adds a further possible optative example, Phlm 20.

10. This principle may be most clearly articulated in stratificational (or more recently) neurocognitive stratificational linguistics. This branch of linguistics was introduced by Sydney Lamb and has been refined over the years. One major purpose of this theory is to understand the working of the brain. This has led its developers to explore how different strata of language interact with one another. Most simply put, there are phonological, morphological, lexotactic, and semantic strata that interact with one another to help bring an abstract concept into a tangible expression of writing and/or speech. See (preferably in order), Lamb, *Outline*; Lockwood, *Introduction*; Lamb, *Pathways to the Brain*. I do not think that this theory is sufficient to meet the needs of a scholar intent on understanding the language of the New Testament. However, it provides a clear view of language that can serve as a starting point for understanding language and provides the helpful observation that language is a system of relationships (Lamb, *Outline*, 3; Lockwood, *Introduction*, 3). For a description of the stratified nature of language geared towards the New Testament student, see Fantin, *Greek Imperative Mood*, 34–42.

focus here is on structure. The study of the imperative mood can contribute to the larger, more abstract, study of commands.

## 2.2 *Variety of Approaches*

I must emphasize that with the multitude of grammatical approaches, linguistic theories, and even philosophical thoughts about language, there are many ways to describe a linguistic phenomenon such as the imperative mood. I do not believe there is a single way of doing this. The issue is not one of which approach is right or wrong, but rather which one describes the phenomenon most convincingly, that is, which one has the least problems and/or inconsistencies. What I am labeling the traditional approach has been applied almost exclusively to the imperative mood for centuries and with some variation it is still used in every recent Greek grammar that I have examined.<sup>11</sup> It has served us well. However, there are a few weaknesses that make it vulnerable and make it worthwhile to reconsider. My suggested approach attempts to satisfy problems and hopefully increase our understanding of the mood. I am under no delusion that this is “the” answer. In resolving some problems, I may be introducing others (although I am not aware of anything significant at this point). This is the nature of scholarship. Our goal as a community is to better understand Greek and as a result better understand the New Testament.

Although many approaches may explain the mood, it is desirable to utilize the one(s) that do it most effectively. With this in mind, two areas must be considered as we embrace any theory. First, does it explain the most details with fewest anomalies? Second, and this may be debated, is it rather simple? Language is constantly evolving towards simplicity in expression. I am suspicious of approaches that demand elaborate constructions to explain something that other approaches seem to handle much more simply.

11. For examples from 2016, see Köstenberger et al., *Going Deeper*; Mathewson and Emig, *Grammar*.

### 3. *Traditional Approach*

Blass, Debrunner, and Funk provide us with a simple statement defining the traditional approach: “The imperative in the NT keeps for the most part within the same limits as in classical usage. As in the latter it is by no means confined to commands, but also expresses a request or a concession.”<sup>12</sup> Commands are common and translate as expected:

ἐγερθεὶς παράλαβε τὸ παιδίον καὶ τὴν μητέρα αὐτοῦ . . . (Matt 2:20)  
Get up and **take** the child and his mother . . .

ἄρον τὸν κράβαττόν σου καὶ περιπάτει (John 5:11)  
**Take up** your stretcher and **walk**.

A negative command or prohibition is also common:

μὴ μεθύσκεσθε οἶνον (Eph 5:18)  
**Do not get drunk** with wine.

Two examples of request (also labeled “entreaty”<sup>13</sup>) are:

κύριε, δίδαξον ἡμᾶς προσεύχεσθαι (Luke 11:1)<sup>14</sup>  
Lord, **teach** us to pray.

εἰ τι δύνη, βοήθησον ἡμῖν (Mark 9:22)<sup>15</sup>  
If you are able to do anything, **help** us.

BDF’s “concession” can also be labeled “conditional,” especially given their example of John 2:19.<sup>16</sup> This will be discussed below. Another use often found in grammars is “permission.”<sup>17</sup>

12. BDF § 383. For a focused treatment of the traditional approach with a description of usages, see Boyer, “Classification.”

13. Brooks and Winbery, *Syntax*, 116; Dana and Mantey, *Manual Grammar*, 176; Mathewson and Emig, *Grammar*, 185; Young, *Greek*, 144. Boyer (“Classification,” 36) calls this category “requests and prayers.”

14. Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 488.

15. Burton, *Syntax*, 80; Köstenberger et al., *Going Deeper*, 211, 216; Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 488.

16. BDF § 383. See also Robertson, *Grammar*, 498 (who discusses conditional and concession together); Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 490.

17. Köstenberger et al., *Going Deeper*, 211, 216; Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 488–89. Robertson (*Grammar*, 948) states that “it is an easy step



Although not exclusively so, this usage often occurs with third person imperatives. For example:

εἰ ὁ ἄπιστος χωρίζεται, χωρίζεσθω (1 Cor 7:15)<sup>18</sup>  
 If the one who does not believe leaves, **let him leave**

In addition to commands, requests, and permission, some add usages such as conditional and greeting.<sup>19</sup>

A survey of New Testament Greek grammars reveals that most are basically structured this way and include these usages.<sup>20</sup> I acknowledge that the traditional approach explains the language. However, this approach to understanding the mood is flawed.

First, and this may be due to the present state of understanding terms such as “request” and “permission,” but the traditional approach seems to obscure and minimize the command nuance of the imperative mood. There is a reason one chooses the imperative and not some other form. This needs to be made evident.

from permission to concession.”

18. Boyer, “Classification,” 37; Dana and Mantey, *Manual Grammar*, 176; Köstenberger et al., *Going Deeper*, 211, 216; Mathewson and Emig, *Grammar*, 188; Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 489.

19. Köstenberger et al., *Going Deeper*, 211–12, 216; Robertson (*Grammar*, 948–49) has a category for permission and one for condition and concession; Mathewson and Emig (*Grammar*, 189) include a section labeled, “greeting and interjection”; Wallace (*Greek Grammar*, 488–93) includes still more options: potential and pronouncement. In addition to conditional and greeting, Young (*Greek*, 145) includes warning and Boyer (“Classification,” 37–39) includes exclamations and a category called “challenge to understanding.”

20. In addition to those cited above, see Winer and Moulton, *Treatise*, 390–91. It must be acknowledged that treatments differ in respect to format and emphasis. For example, Wallace (*Greek Grammar*, 485–93) spends a lot of time describing different usages and Porter (*Idioms*, 53–56) emphasizes the meaning of the mood with reference to tense, aspect, etc., with minimal space devoted to usages. Porter (*Idioms*, 53 n. 1) refers the reader to Boyer for information on classifications. Porter’s approach (*Idioms*, 52–59) is somewhat unique in that he seems to be emphasizing the imperative from within the mood system more than most. Nevertheless, the underlying treatments of the imperative in all these grammars are generally compatible with one another.

Second, what distinguishes an imperative command usage from a request usage? Some suggest that the request is spoken by an inferior to a superior but acknowledge the reverse may occur.<sup>21</sup> Such explanations are insufficient for a number of reasons. (1) The rarity of the use of an imperative in the New Testament by inferiors towards superiors demands further consideration.<sup>22</sup> In a world in which inferior social class individuals need their superiors to survive, one would expect this “request” usage more. (2) There must be more than social class involved. The social relationships in the first century were complex. The patronage system made commanding, asking, giving, and receiving a rather complex interactive experience that took skillful maneuvering to navigate. Certainly in a general manner, inferiors would not *command* superiors but they also could not simply *request* things from just anyone. Nor could higher class individuals simply order the lower classes around. People had loyalties that made such interaction complex. One patron could not necessarily demand something of a lower class individual who was connected to a different patron. Obligations and other factors contributed to a complex reciprocity system that restricted certain levels of social interaction.<sup>23</sup> (3) Again, the rarity of this phenomenon suggests importance when it happens. Our tendency to label an imperative a request does the opposite. It minimizes the imperative. (4) Finally, our desire to label certain imperatives “requests” may simply be due to our (the reader’s) lack of comfort with a command being used in such cases. We do not like the idea that one “commands” God in prayer, etc. Thus, this label and its usage may be an

21. Köstenberger et al., *Going Deeper*, 210; Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 487–88.

22. Although Boyer (“Classification,” 36) notes that the category of “requests and prayers” is the second most common usage of commands (11%), when one removes prayers and focuses on social interaction in the New Testament, the percentage is likely much less. Prayer is a special act that involves the human approach to superior deity. This is invited by God.

23. For an introduction to the patronage system in New Testament times, see deSilva, *Honor*, 95–156 and the literature cited there. This is an important area for understanding the New Testament.

accommodation to our English (and some other) language(s) and our specific cultural sensibilities. Remember English has means of weakening commands and making requests, one of which is to avoid the imperative altogether. Such things happen in Greek as well. However, when we simply label something “request” with little more than our modern intuition as a guide, we may actually be losing an important aspect of the meaning.

Third, consider the so-called conditional imperative in a statement such as:

Αἰτεῖτε καὶ δοθήσεται ὑμῖν (Matt 7:7)<sup>24</sup>

**If you ask**, it will be given to you (**ask** and it will be given to you).

Is the grammatical imperative really conditional? If the imperative clause was isolated, no one would consider it conditional. Rather, the conditional meaning comes from the relationship between the clauses. This is an entirely different level of linguistic analysis (clause level vs. phrase or lexical level). Would it not be preferable to classify the imperative as “command” and the relationship between the clauses as “conditional”?<sup>25</sup>

Fourth, and I say this with all due respect, I think that our entire “usage” system is inconsistent and problematic. Some usages are based on context (command vs. request), others on lexical or idiomatic usages (greeting), and as described above, some on the relationship between the imperative clause and another clause. The problem with this system is most vividly illustrated with our presentation of the oblique cases. For example, treatments of the genitive case can have anywhere from around ten to more than thirty listed classifications.<sup>26</sup> Some are listed purely based on structure (after certain words, objects of

24. Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 490. See also John 2:19 noted above.

25. Porter (*Idioms*, 226) shares my suspicion of the conditional imperative. He states, “This [both conditional and concessive usages] may be a legitimate understanding in some contexts, but such examples are perhaps better understood as normal variations within the commanding use of the imperative.”

26. For example, Young (*Greek*, 23–40) and Wallace (*Greek Grammar*, 72–136) have 24 and 33 classifications respectively.

prepositions, etc.).<sup>27</sup> Some are classified based on the type of head noun (objective, subjective).<sup>28</sup> Further, some are classified based on specific lexical words (time).<sup>29</sup> This is an extreme example, but it illustrates that the traditional classification of usages is based on different criteria. Maybe I am being too specific. Nevertheless, if a specific word or type of word such as  $\nu\acute{\upsilon}\xi$ , ‘night’ is demanded for a genitive to be classified as time, is “time” really the use of the genitive here? Or is this classification based on the lexeme? If so, it is possible we are overlooking what the grammatical genitive is bringing to the passage. To return to our imperative noted above, is an imperative in a protasis which is dependent upon its relationship to another clause really conditional? Once the imperative is so classified, in practical terms, it often ceases to be an imperative. Is it not preferable to classify the *imperative* as “command” and then classify the *imperative clause* as the protasis of a conditional sentence?

I understand why we use this system. It is very helpful. I use it and teach it. Also, in their defense, many of these grammars are intermediate and serve to address a stage in the learning process that is not yet mature. More advanced reference grammars are often simply describing the use of a linguistic element. Although I fundamentally find fault with this means of viewing the imperative (all descriptions need to be organized), reference grammars are not necessarily providing a paradigm to simply classify occurrences. Nevertheless, for most New

27. BDF §§ 169–78, 181–84; Mathewson and Emig, *Grammar*, 21; Robertson, *Grammar*, 505–12; Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 131–36. These grammars are not properly labeling these “usages”; rather, they are describing the contexts in which they occur. Nevertheless, when listed with usages, this seems to be the implication. See Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 72. This illustrates the inconsistent nature of the classification system.

28. BDF § 163; Dana and Mantey, *Manual Grammar*, 78–79; Köstenberger et al., *Going Deeper*, 96–98; Mathewson and Emig, *Grammar*, 14–17; Robertson, *Grammar*, 499–501; Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 112–21; Young, *Greek*, 30–33.

29. Although this genitive answers the question, “when,” Wallace (*Greek Grammar*, 122–23) acknowledges the lexical connection.

Testament Greek learners, the traditional approach includes a classification system that requires one to classify occurrences by choosing the best fit from a list of options. Also, the descriptive grammars, including reference grammars, propagate the inconsistent classification practice in part by failing to acknowledge the complexities of the system. Full description should permit one to classify a specific linguistic element with more than one classification. Thus, an imperative could be both “command” and “conditional.”

The traditional classification system serves the intermediate Greek user well who needs to communicate the meaning of scripture to others. In fact, from these students’ perspective, the more specific and artificial, the more helpful the paradigm may be. It essentially puts the Greek language into English (or another modern language) categories that are understandable to others. Or, maybe a little more favorably, the system tries to make explicit what the original communication participants understand through their communicative experience.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, it is helpful to recognize that this approach has shortcomings and to work on improvement or replacement.

Therefore, in order to maintain the emphasis on the meaning of the mood and focus more on the Greek context itself, I will propose a way forward.

#### 4. *The Meaning of the Imperative*

When a communicator chooses to use an imperative, what does he or she intend to communicate? Why does he choose it? What does the imperative bring to the discourse? Because our focus is on the use of this mood, my discussion here will be brief.<sup>31</sup> The

30. An English example may help to illustrate this. Consider the preposition *with* in the following two sentences: (1) *I opened the door with my key* and (2) *I opened the door with my wife*. Without conscious thought we understand the first *with* as “means” and the second as “associative.” No one who heard the second sentence would think that I lifted up my wife and tried to push her head into the door lock.

31. For a more thorough defense, see Fantin, *Greek Imperative Mood*, 121–98.

purpose of this section is simply to set the groundwork for the more focused section. In relation to other moods, Wallace describes the imperative as “mood of *intention* . . . the mood furthest removed from certainty . . . [the mood which] moves in the realm of *volition* . . . and *possibility*.”<sup>32</sup> A number of elements are introduced here. The mood involves intention and is furthest from reality in the sense that actuality is “to be realized by another.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, fulfillment of the expressed intention is dependent upon the actions of the one towards whom the imperative is directed. This is why, compared with the other moods, it is furthest from certainty. Since this aspect of the imperative mood basically involves relationship to other moods, it will not be pursued further here.

The aspect of this description that is fundamental to the imperative is the notion of *volition*. Essentially, the imperative is a volitional-directive.<sup>34</sup> Thus, when a communicator uses the imperative, he is presenting an intention or desire to get the recipient to “do” something:

ἀγαπᾶτε τοὺς ἐχθροὺς ὑμῶν καὶ προσεύχεσθε ὑπὲρ τῶν διωκόντων ὑμᾶς  
(Matt 5:44)

**Love** your enemies and **pray** for those who persecute you.

Here Matthew presents Jesus instructing (commanding) his listeners to “love” and “pray for” their persecutors. Few would question whether this is Jesus’s desire for his hearers. He is directing them towards a specific attitude and action. Although not the case here, some may question whether the communicator in a situation like this is sincere; nevertheless, the imperative is presenting the situation as a directed desire. We cannot know the heart of the communicator on this. In addition to this example, all the above passages could be revisited. Each reveals this willful, directive presentation of purpose. These are examples of the many uses of the imperative and all express volition and desire.

32. Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 485 (italics original).

33. Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, 100.

34. Fantin, *Greek Imperative Mood*, 196–97.

### 5. *Force and the Imperative*<sup>35</sup>

There are a number of ways to classify usages. As already noted, the traditional approach is insufficient for a number of reason. I suggest that all imperatives (that are not idiomatic fixed expressions<sup>36</sup>) have some measure of volitional-directive meaning associated with them. Thus, they are all commands.<sup>37</sup> This is why one chooses to use the imperative. The communicator wishes to direct another's action.<sup>38</sup> This does not mean that there are not differences in force which the traditional approach attempts to reflect though usages such as "request" and "permission." However, it is preferable to see these weakened nuances as influenced by external linguistic (and other) features. Before proceeding, it is important to clarify what is meant by force. I am referring to the force of the imperative mood itself, not the lexical meaning of the word. Thus, one may suggest that the imperatives in the following sentences have significantly different force:

**Remember** your heritage  
**Kill** your enemies

However, from the perspective of the imperative mood, the imperative (or commanding) force is the same. One is commanded to either "remember" or "kill" with equal force. It just so happens that the nature of what is commanded is much

35. For more detailed discussion of force, see Fantin, *Greek Imperative Mood*, 206–51.

36. Idiomatic expressions are fixed and should no longer be considered imperatives. They have taken on new meaning that may or may not be related to their original meaning. See Fantin, *Greek Imperative Mood*, 131–33.

37. Köstenberger et al. (*Going Deeper*, 208–9) state that the imperative mood is "not the mood of *command* because the imperative is used in contexts other than command." They prefer the label "mood of *intention*," but note that the "basic concept of the imperative mood is that it expresses a command" (208).

38. As is assumed throughout, this does not necessarily mean the author sincerely wants this to happen. Language does not correspond so closely to reality. Rather, he presents it as so. Determining sincerity or correspondence to fact or reality is beyond the scope of grammar.

stronger in the second. It is the meaning of the verb that carries this strong or weak nuance, not the imperative itself. Next, consider the following:

1. **Give** me the book
2. Please, **give** me the book
3. Sir, **give** me the book

In each of these cases, the force of the imperative sentence is different. The first is a pure full-forced command. The second and third use external features to prepare the hearer for a command. In sentence two, the communicator uses a politeness strategy common in English which adds the word “please.” In example three, another politeness strategy is employed. Here the communicator gives deference to the recipient before the command. In both cases, these external features weaken the force of the imperative sentence with the likely goal of getting the recipient to fulfill the desired command. Yet I suggest the imperative is still a command. In fact, it is because of the rather forceful and potentially socially offensive nature of the imperative mood that the weakening features are employed.

Greek has a number of such weakening features as well. These can be employed by higher-ranked individuals towards lower, by lower-ranked individuals towards higher, and by parties of equal rank (rare in the New Testament so not discussed further).<sup>39</sup> However, whatever the means of weakening, we cannot lose sight of the fact that an imperative is being used. The imperative (commanding) force should not be ignored. Some volitional-directive force is being employed.

The recognition of these weakening features as significant stems from the communication observations that communicators use language in a manner that attempts to communicate their intended meaning in the most economical or efficient way available.<sup>40</sup> In other words, people try to keep their

39. An example is Matt 18:29 which employs the first weakening strategy below.

40. The principles observed and applied here are from Relevance Theory, developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (*Relevance*). For a brief



communication simple.<sup>41</sup> For their part, interpreters will expend mental energy to understand a communicative act until they reach a satisfying understanding.<sup>42</sup> Of course, many reasons occur that result in excessive linguistic baggage in one's communicative contribution and interpreters may be satisfied with meaning that is not the intended. Nevertheless, the better the parties in the process know one another, the more likely accurate communication will result. Add in the effort and time provided for writing, and the likelihood of accuracy is further increased in the case of the New Testament. Therefore, the added features described below are important and have an intended purpose.<sup>43</sup>

5.1. *Imperative Preceded by an Introductory Word of Asking*  
In cases of both higher- and lower-rank speakers, we find a strategy of using a term of asking prior to the introduction of the imperative.<sup>44</sup> This can be in the utterance itself or introduced by the narrator:

Παρακαλοῦμεν δὲ ὑμᾶς, ἀδελφοί, νοθετεῖτε τοὺς ἀτάκτους (1 Thess 5:14)

And we *beg* you, brethren, **instruct** the lazy [undisciplined].

introduction to this theory for biblical studies students, see Fantin, *Greek Imperative Mood*, 43–60. For a relevance theoretical treatment of the imperative and other non-indicative forms, see Wilson and Sperber, “Mood,” 210–29. Wilson and Sperber’s article handles mood primarily from an English perspective and does not account for the distinction among linguistic levels as described above. Relevance theory has been used successfully in New Testament Studies. See, for example, Pattemore, *People of God*. Also see Green, “Lexical Pragmatics,” 799–812 and the accessible volume on relevance theory for exegesis, Sim, *Relevant Way to Read*.

41. For a discussion of efficiency in communication, see Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*, 45–49.

42. Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*, 46–50, 124–32; Gutt, *Translation*, 31–35.

43. For further detail regarding this principle and an application to interpretation, see Fantin, *Lord*, 219–66.

44. For further detail, see Fantin, *Greek Imperative Mood*, 224–26, 233–36.

εἶπεν δὲ ὁ Παῦλος· ἐγὼ ἄνθρωπος μὲν εἰμι Ἰουδαῖος, Ταρσεὺς τῆς Κιλικίας . . . δέομαι δέ σου, ἐπίτρεψόν μοι λαλῆσαι πρὸς τὸν λαόν (Acts 21:39)

And Paul said to them, “I am a Jewish man of Tarsus of Cilicia . . . I *ask* you, **allow** me to speak to the people.

. . . καὶ προσελθόντες οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ ἠρώτου αὐτὸν λέγοντες· ἀπόλυσον αὐτήν (Matt 15:23)<sup>45</sup>

. . . and when his disciples came they *asked* him saying, “**Send her away** . . .”

What I am proposing here is that the speaker or narrator is preparing the recipient (and reader) of the imperative by leading with a verb that informs the hearer of what is coming. This is a politeness or weakening strategy that lower-ranked individuals can use to inform a higher-ranked person that he or she will be using an imperative and that no offense is intended. The higher-ranked individual may use such a strategy to not appear overbearing to his or her lower-ranked hearer.

I am more confident in the examples where the verb of asking is uttered by the person using the imperative than I am when it occurs in the narrative. However, the pattern seems to hold.<sup>46</sup> It is possible that there is something in the narrative that this strategy is reflecting such as an unspoken gesture or non-graphemic intonation. Nevertheless, such speculation is based only on silence and is nothing more than an attempt to account for the strategy.

### 5.2 Indirect Third Person

Another strategy, used for likely the same reason as the previous, is the use of the third person.<sup>47</sup> However, it is rare for inferiors except in prayer.<sup>48</sup> There may be a number of reasons one may

45. Further examples include: Matt 15:23; Mark 5:12 || Matt 8:31; Luke 14:18; 22:64; John 4:31; 5:12; Acts 2:40; 16:9; 2 Cor 5:20; Phil 4:3; Heb 13:22.

46. Among the examples cited in the previous footnote, see Matt 15:23; 18:29; Mark 5:12 || Matt 8:31; Luke 22:64; John 4:31; 5:12; Acts 2:40; Acts 16:9.

47. For a more comprehensive treatment, see Fantin, *Greek Imperative Mood*, 227–29, 240–44.

48. See, for example, Matt 6:9–10 (see below); Matt 26:39, 42 || Luke

use a third person imperative<sup>49</sup> but here I am only concerned with its potential as an indirect feature. As Porter notes, “The third person Greek imperative is as strongly directive as the second person.”<sup>50</sup> However, the third person can shift the focus away from direct confrontation. The ultimate intention is the same: to direct someone’s belief, action, etc. However, the third person may serve as a means of achieving compliance that the otherwise more direct second person may be unable to achieve. In these cases, by its very nature, the third person imperative shifts the intended addressee of the imperative from the direct second person to a more remote third person (or object). It replaces the direct (in your face) command with a weakened indirect command. It is probably intended to have the same effect as the direct second person command but it uses a politeness feature either to avoid offending a superior or to be gracious to an inferior.

πᾶσα πικρία καὶ θυμὸς καὶ ὀργὴ καὶ κραυγὴ καὶ βλασφημία ἀρθήτω ἀφ’ ὑμῶν σὺν πάσῃ κακίᾳ (Eph 4:31)

**Let** all bitterness and anger and wrath and outcry and blasphemy **be removed** from you and all worry.

Οὕτως οὖν προσεύχεσθε<sup>51</sup> ὑμεῖς Πάτερ ἡμῶν ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς ἁγιασθήτω τὸ ὄνομά σου· ἐλθέτω ἡ βασιλεία σου· γενηθήτω τὸ θέλημά σου, ὡς ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς (Matt 6:9–10)

In this way then pray, “Our Father who is in the heavens, make your name holy, **let** your kingdom **come**, **let** your will **be done** as in heaven and on the earth.”

διὸ οὐδὲ ἐμαυτὸν ἠξίωσα πρὸς σὲ ἐλθεῖν· ἀλλ’ εἶπέ λόγῳ, καὶ ἰαθήτω ὁ παῖς μου (Luke 7:7)<sup>52</sup>

Therefore, I did not consider myself worthy to come to you, but say [the] word and **let** my servant **be healed** [or, my servant will be healed].

22:42.

49. See Boyer, “Classification,” 47–48.

50. Porter, *Idioms*, 55

51. Note the strong second-person imperative (προσεύχεσθε). Jesus tells/commands his disciples how to pray. The prayer itself is directed towards God and the command is weakened.

52. Other examples include Matt 9:30; Luke 9:23; 1 Tim 4:12.

This final passage is the only potential example outside of prayer where an inferior uses this strategy. The imperative functions almost like a future indicative here.<sup>53</sup> It is also interesting to note that the centurion comes to Jesus as an inferior. At least this is the manner in which he is portrayed (Luke 7:2–8).<sup>54</sup> This is likely what Luke intends. It is possible to argue that the superior-feeling centurion is using a number of significant politeness strategies to get Jesus to fulfill his desire. However, there is nothing in the text to suggest this.

### 5.3 Terms of Honor

One final strategy can be described. It is common for inferiors to preface an imperative (although it may follow<sup>55</sup>) with an honorific term in order to acknowledge the superiority of the hearer before the imperative is used.<sup>56</sup>

[Mary Magdalene to Jesus whom she thought was the gardener]:  
 κύριε, εἰ σὺ ἐβάστασας αὐτόν, εἰπέ μοι ποῦ ἔθηκας αὐτόν (John 20:15)  
 “Sir, if you took him, **tell** me where you have laid him.”

[Jesus prays and says]: πάτερ, ἐλήλυθεν ἡ ὥρα, δόξασόν σου τὸν υἱόν  
 (John 17:1)<sup>57</sup>  
 “Father, the hour has come, **glorify** your son.”

53. NA28 has a future indicative textual variant here supported most importantly by κ, A, C, D, and 33. However, the external support for the imperative is stronger (most importantly P75 and B). Also, the imperative is the more difficult reading. It is understandable why one might change it from the imperative to the future indicative. However, the change to the imperative is not so easily explained.

54. Bock (*Luke 1:1–9:50*, 640–42) highlights the centurion’s humility and his recognition of Jesus’s authority.

55. See, for example, Luke 5:8.

56. See Fantin, *Greek Imperative Mood*, 236–40 for further discussion.

57. John 17 includes four imperatives (17:1, 5, 11, 17). The first three include an honor address label (πάτερ in 17:1, 5 and the stronger πάτερ ἄγιε in 17:11). By the time one gets to verse 17, the honor recognition and the relationship have been established.

In these two examples, a term of honor and respect is used, acknowledging the status of the one to whom the imperative is directed.<sup>58</sup>

#### 5.4 *Absence of a Weakening Strategy in Lower- to Higher-Ranked Directed Commands*

Before leaving our discussion of weakening strategies, it is worth noting that it is uncommon for lower-ranked individuals to use imperatives without a weakening strategy with higher-ranked people. When this happens, it is worth pausing and considering the significance.

[Paul calls over ([προσκαλεσάμενος] not “asks/begs”) a centurion and says]:

τοῦτον ἀπάγαγε πρὸς τὸν χιλιάρχον, ἔχει γὰρ ἀπαγγεῖλαι τι αὐτῷ (Acts 23:17)

*Lead* this young man to the [your] commander, for he has something to tell to him.

Paul’s use of a raw imperative without any politeness strategy here may mean many things. (1) It is possible that Paul was confident in his standing with the centurion’s commander. (2) He may have had confidence in something not mentioned in the text. (3) It is also possible that his confidence was in the value of his information. (4) Less likely, Paul may have been unaware of or simply ignored social convention. (5) Finally, it is possible that Luke was communicating something about Paul’s status (from God’s or Christians’ perspective) that was not the natural order. Prisoners do not command their captors. Whatever the case, this is an unusual situation that demands further consideration.<sup>59</sup>

58. See also Mark 14:36; John 4:15, 31. Matthew 6:9–10 uses both the honor term and the third person.

59. See Fantin, *Greek Imperative Mood*, 238–39. There is much involved in the interaction between the people in this passage. See the helpful discussion in Keener, *Acts*, 3314–16. Concerning weaker-to-stronger imperatives without the use of politeness strategies, see also Matt 13:36 which may simply be common student-teacher interaction or it may mean something more.

### 5.5 *Summary and Conclusions regarding Imperative Mood Usage*

Introductory words of asking, third person imperatives, and honor terms are all strategies for weakening a command expressed by the imperative. One can employ one or more of these when sensitivity is necessary. I am suggesting that these weaken the imperative at the more abstract clausal level, but not at the morphological level. They are needed because the imperative is rather intrusive. However, what is important for communication is the abstract weakened command that is heard by the recipient. This is what is communicated.

I do not claim that these strategies are the only means by which an imperative can be weakened. There may even be strengthening strategies. I have already noted that some may see certain words as weak in themselves.<sup>60</sup> However, as noted, the grammatical “imperative” or “command” nuance is as strong in a command to “remember” as it is in to “kill.” It is not the imperative that is weak. It is the lexical meaning of the verb (or maybe the words themselves are not strong and weak but simply different). Having said this, it is possible that one may choose a weaker lexical verb as a politeness strategy when available as an option to a more forceful verb.

There are two significant conclusions from this study. First, we must recognize imperatives for what they are, commands. These can be used to help direct people for the benefit of themselves and others. They can also be nasty little words that can offend and disrupt relationships. Well-meaning communicators know how to use these effectively. Whether alone or weakened, an imperative remains an imperative. Thus, imperatives are by nature full-forced (i.e., full-forced commands). Imperatives with a weakening feature are weak-forced commands.

Second, as introduced above in the critique of the traditional approach to the imperative mood, much more work must be incorporated from the ancient context to understand the finer nuances of the imperative mood. Only in this manner, can we

60. See Miller, “Limitation,” 432–33.

really understand and appreciate the nuances of the imperative in context. Social relations and personal interactive strategies were understood by the readers. Such assumed knowledge is not explicit in the text. The more effort we devote to studying the ancient world, the better we will understand this complex social environment. Years ago, when I first began studying the imperative mood, I was satisfied with our first conclusion above. However, this is insufficient for understanding the imperative in any significant way. Certainly, the acknowledgment of a consistent command nuance advances our knowledge of the mood. However, because imperatives do not occur in isolation, this knowledge alone does little to illuminate the meaning of the text. The ancient first-century society was very structured. This structure with the cultural value placed on honor and the strict patronage system suggests that navigating through commanding, asking, etc., was rather complicated and likely involved countless potential missteps all along the way. Failures in communication may have had drastic consequences (e.g., one's family being unable to eat!). Identifying weakening strategies provides a significant means towards a more accurate understanding of the mood and text. It is too easy to assume our modern cultural understanding of commanding and politeness and to impose this on the biblical text. Understanding the imperative is not an isolated grammatical issue. It involves a much more thorough understanding of society than grammarians have often considered.

### 6. *Conclusion*

Why should we care about this? Does it really matter whether I classify an imperative as “request” or “weakened force”? Probably not in any significant manner for the experienced exegete or for those who understand the nuances of the history of the discussion of the imperative mood. However, today, labels like “request” may mask the command nature of this mood. The conclusions here may contribute to our understanding of the Samaritan woman's imperative to Jesus to give (δός) her water (John 4:15). Also, it may help one understand the nature of

prayer (and by implication, our relationship to God) as we reflect on Jesus's instructions on the subject. Matthew 6:9–13 includes both third person and second person imperatives directed towards God. He is to “give (δός) us our bread” and “forgive (ἄφεσις) us our trespasses” (Matt 6:11–12). These use appropriate weakening features (including the dependent nature of prayer itself) but nevertheless suggest boldness and confidence on the part of the one who prays.

My goal here has not been to give a complete paradigm for the classification of the imperative mood. Other factors, such as which of the communication event participants benefit from the fulfillment of the imperative and where the imperative falls within the event sequence (i.e., does the imperative command a new or an ongoing action) are also important factors to consider when approaching the mood.<sup>61</sup>

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61. See Fantin, *Greek Imperative Mood*, 251–65.



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