The Letter of James (Pillar New Testament Commentary) by Douglas J. Moo

At The Top Of The List

A superb commentary on James—a letter of practical guidance for the Christian life. This highly original commentary seeks to make the Letter of James clear and applicable to Christian living today. Interacting with the latest views on James but keeping academic references to a minimum, Douglas Moo first introduces the Letter of James in its historical context and then provides verse-by-verse comments that explain the message of James both to its first readers and to today's church.

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Before reading Prof. Douglas Moo's Commentary on the Letter of James, I propose to the readers two pre-requisites for a maximum enjoyment of this epistle. First, it is useful to read the epistle several times until you know what each chapter and section (or even verse) talks about because Moo often refers to chapters and verses with the assumption that the readers know what they are about. For example, at the beginning of commentary on the last chapter, he reminds the readers of the continuity of v.1-6 to 4:13-17 (p.209), or later on, the command to pray in v.13 has to do with the appropriate response to "trials of many kinds" 1:2-4 (p.234). Second, a rudimentary knowledge of New Testament Greek is helpful. Even more helpful is if the readers own a Greek New Testament because Moo does plenty of word study, not only from the New Testament, but also from the Septuagint, and other inter-testament documents translated to Greeks: primarily Aprocrpha and Pseudepigrapha. It would also be an added advantage if the readers have read the entire Bible considering the enormous amount of references made to NT and OT texts; the latter is indispensable since the cultural flavor of the epistle is highly Semitic.

The epistle of James is such a controversial letter that there was a debate whether or not to include it in the Scripture. Luther even went so far to claim that James mangles the Scriptures and thereby opposes Paul and all Scripture (p.5). Calvin also conceded that James seems more sparing in proclaiming the grace of Christ than it behooved an Apostle to be (p.5). But I am glad it is included in the New Testament. The reason I love this epistle is aptly given by Moo at the opening of the commentary, that James is intensely practical, concise, and excellent in the use of illustrations as object lessons to get the points across (p1-2). Unless carefully scrutinized, James seems to be a collection of several disconnected sermon notes. In studying James, Moo divides the commentary into two sections. The first section examines the author, the occasion and date, the theology and the unifying theme of the entire epistle. The second part is the verse by verse exegesis and commentary.

The theology of James centers around the role of faith and works in justification; a subject of an intense theological debate, the sovereignty of God, eschatology, wisdom, poverty and wealth. The unifying theme of the epistle is a call to spiritual wholeness with three subdivisions; when dealing with the trials of life, the use of speech, wealth and poverty. James expands this theme negatively and positively. Negatively, he does so by way of rebuke in pointing out inconsistencies between profession of faith and the practice of faith using the key-word "dipsukos;" a compound word consisting of duo and psuch-h; dual-souled or dual-life. Moo claims James invented this word, because it only shows up twice in the NT, never in the OT; both appear in the same epistle. Here James' concern is to portray a basic inconsistency in attitude and spirit rather than an occasional doubt or lapse. Moo calls it "spiritual schizophrenia". I think Moo is being nice for not going so far as calling it "hypocrisy." Throughout the letter, James brought
this dual-souled-ness several times that displays "a basic division in the soul that leads to thinking, speaking, and acting that contradicts one"s claim to belong to God" (p.63). These inconsistencies are manifested in wavering faith in the midst of trials (1:8), discriminatory treatment according to one"s social status, in other words; favoritism (2:1-4, 15-16), dual-use of tongue to bless and to curse (3:9-12, 4:1-2), and tendency to forget believers" heavenly homeland, and the fact that here below, we are in the state of pilgrimage in the diaspora (4:3-4). Positively, James calls for a spiritual wholeness every believer has been given by grace the power to pursue, specifically in endurance (1:2-4), persevering prayer (1:5, 5:13-18), patience (5:7-8), charity, holiness, wisdom and humility (1:16-18, 21, 26-27, 2:8, 3:17-18, 4:6-8). These are some solid exegesis that I thoroughly enjoy. Herein lies the difference between my exegesis and scholastic exegesis. My exegesis only looks at the semantics and limited view on the context which could easily lead to errors. Scholastic exegesis, on the other hand, in addition to semantics, looks at the context with the support of boatload of other references; indispensable if one were to dig deep into the culture and philosophy in James" days to understand the context and hence, what he had in mind when he wrote the letter. Here Moo refers extensively to Jewish inter-testament literatures, Dead Sea scrolls, Rabbinic literature, Philo, Josephus, Early Christian Literature, and Greco-Roman literature (see p.269-271), in addition to references to other NT and OT passages, as well as commentaries from other authors.

Now in regard to faith and work, Moo seems to single out this issue for a lengthy study and rightly so (p.118-144, p.37-43 being the overview of it). When falsely interpreted, antinomians love Paul by singling out Rom 3:28. On the other hand, the legalists love James by singling out Jam 2:17, 24, 27. But if the Scripture is infallible, there must not be a discrepancy between Paul and James, so Luther"s comment here that James opposes Paul and all Scripture treads on a dangerous ground and is unhelpful. The issue of faith and works, of James" particular interest is the "work-less" faith, is inseparable from the big-picture issue of dual-souledness, or the lack of wholeness. James" argument can be divided into the question of the reality of faith and the role of works in justification. Moo argues, faith, in support to James without denying Paul, has to be given a content, and this content is works. It is in interesting to observe the correspondence between faith and works with hearing the Word and doing the Word in 1:22-25. Faith corresponds to hearing the Word while works correspond to doing the Word. Thus, the hearing without doing antithesis is parallel to, or we can even say, that it is a manifestation of faith without works (2:17, 24); a dangerous sign of a dead faith that is unable to save. But James does not argue that works must be added to faith, but a true faith inevitably produces deeds. They are a "test" or evidence by which we determine the genuineness of faith; deeds of obedience to the will of God (p.120). I forgot who made this comment; I think it was John Piper who said, "It is faith alone that justifies, but justifying faith is never alone." But in saying this, there is a lurking Arminian danger, though it might agree with James, but attempts to divorce the sovereignty of God and human responsibility by
saying it is eventually our call in everything, whether to exercise faith or to produce good works. This discussion is beyond the scope of the commentary, so it is sufficient to answer this argument for now with Phil 2:12-13 and Rom 11:36. So yes, God is sovereign and yes, we are responsible for our actions.

In regard to the role of works in justification, it is critical we distinguish the sense of justification that Paul and James have in mind and they are not the same. This difference is what leads to Rom 3:28 and Jam 2:24; that is, initial justification and final justification. Moo puts it this way,

"Paul refers to the initial declaration of a sinner's innocence before God; James to the ultimate verdict of innocence pronounced over a person at the last judgment. If a sinner can get into a relationship with God only by faith (Paul), the ultimate validation of that relationship takes into account the works that true faith must inevitably produces (James). [Quoting Calvin] ... as Paul contends that we are justified apart from the help of works (initial justification view), so James does not allow those who lack good works.

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