



JAMES



B. Dale Ellenburg
&
Christopher W. Morgan





I recommend Chris Morgan's and Dale Ellenburg's *James: Wisdom for the Community* to serious students of the Word of God, especially pastors, for five reasons. First, the commentary is closely tied to the text of Scripture. It majors on what a commentary ought to major on – the exposition of Holy Scripture. Second, the writing is clear and accessible. Readers will not be put off by technical nomenclature. Third, unlike many biblical commentaries, this one is theological. It does not skirt the hard issues. It reverberates with the themes of wisdom for the community and the necessity of consistency in the lives of God's people, themes needed to be heard today, as much as by James' original audience. Fourth, it is full of illustrations from Scripture and life that help readers grasp the truth. Fifth, the biblical exposition is applied to life, in a way that James would have approved. All in all, this is a solid and useful commentary written by two pastor-scholars to help the church be the church as God intended.

Robert A. Peterson,

Professor of Systematic Theology,
Covenant Theological Seminary, St Louis, Missouri

The book of James is a book about practical Christian living. James, the half brother of our Lord Jesus, was the pastor of the church in Jerusalem in the First Century. He was a wonderful theologian, but he also was involved in people's lives in a practical way on a daily basis. His writing comes from the heart of a man who understood that Christianity was supposed to produce good works.

Dr. Dale Ellenburg and Dr. Chris Morgan are a lot like James. They are wonderful theologians and serve as pastors. They do not merely study in a cloistered setting, but also are involved in the lives of church members and the people in the communities where they serve. Both are godly men, excellent scholars, and genuine 'shoe-leather Christians.' They live what they believe. That's what James is calling all of us to do. You will learn that as you study the book of James, verse by verse, in this wonderful commentary written by my dear friends."

Steve Gaines

Bellevue Baptist Church, Memphis, Tennessee





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Wisdom for the Community



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and
Christopher W. Morgan

CHRISTIAN
FOCUS





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*Dedicated with gratitude to our wives,
Constance and Shelley,
for their love and support.*





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We also want to express our appreciation for pastors around the world who are faithful to their call to preach the Word, love the church, and lead God's people. May the Lord continue to use them to honor His name, strengthen His churches, and reach the lost. May the epistle of James encourage and challenge them as it has us.







Introduction

Why Study James?

The interview process and trial sermon went well, the vote was taken, and now Michael¹ has accepted the call to pastor his first church. 'Pastor Michael, that has a nice ring to it,' he muses. As he dreams of what this church could be, he gladly hangs his freshly printed seminary degree on his new office wall and puts his commentaries on the shelves. He looks out his window at his name that now appears on the church sign. He has high hopes that this church will be like the church of the New Testament – vibrant, holy, unified, and centered on God and His truth.

One year later Pastor Michael realizes that the church leaders were not completely forthright with him about their problems. He finds that some in the church are more interested in religion than following Jesus. They enjoy studying the Bible but never seem to get around to doing what it says. Pastor Michael also observes that some church members display an obvious prejudice against a certain group or groups of people who attend – they are believed to have the wrong color of skin, the wrong socio-economic background, live on the wrong side of the tracks, or in some cases are simply not in the 'insider' clique. The young minister discerns that several suppose that they should be seen as spiritual leaders, but their character and spiritual maturity do not match their view of themselves. And recently, Pastor Michael has received attacks of gossip,

1. This story combines those of a few friends and former students. The name is changed.





slander, and criticism – sometimes seemingly innocent but other times unmistakably evil and malicious. Too many people in the church pray for the success of their particular goals and programs but apparently have no interest in the good of the overall church. ‘Is this really prayer, or simple rivalry, ambition, and pride in disguise?’ he wonders. But the majority of members are not that way, Pastor Michael concludes. They reflect a different sin. Instead, they wear their insincere smiles as they enter the sanctuary and when they are asked how they are doing they express some ‘Christianese’ platitude or assert that they are ‘fine,’ even when on the inside they are falling apart. They have exchanged real community for plastic hypocrisy.

Pastor Michael is not sure how to feel or what to do. He knows the New Testament well enough to know that churches are not supposed to be like this. Yet he has heard from his professors, his pastoral mentors, and is finding from his experiences that churches in real life are too often like this – they are not yet fully what God has called them to be. Thankfully, Pastor Michael is convinced of God’s call on his life so he does not allow the discouragement to lead him to squelch his commitments by quitting the ministry. But he wants to see something better, something authentic, something effective. He longs to experience the church as it was intended to be. He wants to experience what he sees as the New Testament church: a healthy, vibrant, unified, God-centered, evangelistic covenant community.

So Pastor Michael studies afresh the New Testament to ascertain what this near-perfect New Testament church looks like, but as he does he discovers a frustrating truth – the New Testament does not depict a perfect church and not even a nearly perfect one! He had always assumed that the portrait of the church by Luke in Acts 2 was the norm. But after more careful study, he recalls that even the churches in Acts had tensions related to money, culture, power, tradition, personalities, leadership style, and missionary qualifications and strategies. He then remembers the mess that the church at Corinth had become. Other churches had problems, too, such as Jew-Gentile tensions in Rome,





cultural divisions and heretical teaching at Corinth, disunity in Philippi, misunderstandings about Christ in Colosse, and so forth. How had he failed to notice that the apostle Paul addressed the concerns he did because the church needed to hear them? He knew that context mattered but never perceived how that applied to the doctrine of the church.

Like so many others, Michael discovered that the church is not yet what it should be. And this discovery was disheartening. That the church is not what it is supposed to be is not all that surprising for some of us who have served in it for a number of years. To us it is no longer surprising but it remains disturbing.

One book of the Bible that helped me (Chris) come to a better understanding of this hard reality is the epistle of James. Although I had read James many times and had preached from it a few times, I had not detected how James' letter addressed real-life churches with real-life problems. The church that James addressed had a tendency to substitute the performance of religion for a life devoted to Jesus and obedience to His commands. The church struggled with favoritism toward the rich and looked down on the poor, even though most of them were poor themselves and even though the rich exploited them! This believing community had in their ranks people who supposed they were spiritual leaders but were only deceiving themselves because they failed to display genuine spirituality and wisdom through a peaceable spirit, unity, and love. This church had people whose words were so vicious that James points to hell as their source, so vindictive that James equates their words with murder, and so slanderous that he reminds them of the future judgment that will take into account their actions and their speech. This church was composed of some people whose prayers God refused to answer because of their self-seeking, proud, and contentious hearts.

After my careful reading of James, my assessment about the church in the New Testament and today is more realistic. The church is in the now and the not yet, I am





finding. It exists in the historical gap where the new age has dawned but has not been realized fully. I knew that of myself and my own Christian pilgrimage but somehow forgot to see the church in that light. This perspective helps me keep my realism from turning to pessimism because I remain convinced that Christ is building His church and is making His bride increasingly more holy. It also keeps me from deeming the status quo as acceptable. It helps me push on to lead the church that Christ, the Chief Shepherd, has entrusted to my care. It leads me to long to pastor God's flock with a wise and seasoned resolve. The church is not yet what it is supposed to be, but neither am I. This perspective pervades James.

In addition to helping us understand the realities and purposes of the Christian community, James addresses other struggles we face in life: trusting God in the midst of our suffering, refusing to give in to temptation, controlling our anger, making sure that we employ our words to edify and not to destroy, maintaining consistency in the Christian life, caring for and ministering to the oppressed, loving people who come from a different socio-economic background, choosing peace over self-centeredness, depending on God in all things, and growing in patience. James deals with all of these and more.

How to Use This Commentary

This commentary is designed to supplement (not be a substitute for) your personal reading and study of James. Our primary purpose is to explain the teachings of James in a way that is helpful to pastors, college students, beginning seminarians, lay teachers and church members. In doing so, the commentary has three parts: 'James in Context' (written by Chris), Commentary (structured by Chris, written primarily by Chris through 1:18, and written primarily by Dale from 1:19–5:20), and 'Theology of James' (written by Chris).

'James in Context' is important because it enables the reader to understand the context of James. Reading without knowing the context is like listening to one part of





someone else's conversation – we may only understand a portion of it. So in the introduction, we address questions like: Who wrote this? Who is James? When was it written? To whom was it written? What type of writing is it? What is the style of its writing? How is it structured? What is its primary theme and themes? Seeing the context of James' authorship, date, audience, literary form, structure, and themes will enable the reader to grasp the message of James more carefully and clearly.

Upon this foundation, the reader is encouraged to read the commentary. The commentary contains chapters divided according to the major divisions ('pericopes') of James. For each division, there is a title that is designed to help the reader see the central topic of the particular biblical passage. Each chapter has headings and most have sub-headings. These divisions should help the reader observe the flow of the passage as well as assist teachers and preachers as they wrestle with how to outline or organize their teaching and preaching. Each verse of James will receive comment and explanation in the natural flow of the specific passages. A 'Wisdom to Live By' section is included at the end of each chapter that seeks to point out principles and raise application-oriented questions. If you are reading this individually, hopefully these principles and questions will help you see the central ideas of each chapter and assist you in the living out of the message of each chapter. If you are reading this as a group, then this section will provide discussion topics and study questions.

The third major section seeks to explain the themes and context of James' thought. 'Theology of James' is designed to help the reader see the larger themes and teachings of James. In particular, special attention is given to James' themes of (1) wisdom for the community, (2) consistency in the church and the Christian life, (3) suffering and testing, (4) the poor and rich, (5) words, (6) love and mercy, and (7) prayer. To understand the message of James, these themes need to be grasped. After the primary themes of James are recounted, the teachings of James





will be compared to that of other biblical writings/writers. It is here that assessment will be given of how James' message relates to the Old Testament wisdom literature, the Old Testament prophets, the teachings of Jesus, and the writings of Paul (especially addressing the issue of justification by faith).

