

The Books of Titus, Philemon, and Jude

Lesson 11: The Character and Doom of False Teachers -- Jude 12–16

Jude is a poet of warning. When he wants to describe the false teachers who had crept into the church, he does not hand us a dry list of doctrinal errors. He paints pictures, one after another, drawn from sea and sky and field, and each picture exposes a different facet of the same emptiness. By the time he is done, you can almost see these men: impressive on the surface, hollow underneath, promising much and delivering nothing. It is a portrait of religious counterfeits, and it is meant to help us recognize the type wherever it appears.

“These are hidden reefs at your love feasts,” he begins, “as they feast with you without fear, shepherds feeding themselves” (v. 12). Picture a ship gliding toward what looks like open water, when just beneath the surface lies a reef that can tear the hull apart. These men sat at the church’s fellowship meals, looking like fellow believers, while quietly endangering everyone around them. They were shepherds, but shepherds who fed only themselves, the exact opposite of the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.

Then the images tumble out. They are “waterless clouds, swept along by winds,” clouds that promise rain to a thirsty land and deliver nothing (v. 12). They are “fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted,” trees that should be heavy with fruit at harvest but stand bare and lifeless (v. 12). They are “wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame,” and “wandering stars” for whom utter darkness is reserved (v. 13). Empty, restless, rootless, and headed for darkness. Jude even reaches back to an ancient prophecy of Enoch to declare that the Lord is coming to judge all the ungodly (vv. 14–15).

And then, almost quietly, Jude names the inner reality behind all the vivid imagery: “These are grumblers, malcontents, following their own sinful desires; they are loud-mouthed boasters, showing favoritism to gain advantage” (v. 16). Strip away the spiritual veneer and what remains is a heart that grumbles against God, chases its own cravings, brags to impress, and flatters to get ahead. It is a sobering portrait, but it is not only about them. As you read these verses, let Jude sharpen your discernment about empty religion, and let him also search your own heart for any trace of the grumbling, craving, and self-promotion he describes.

Group Discussion: Jude describes the false teachers with a series of vivid images: hidden reefs, waterless clouds, fruitless trees, wild waves, and wandering stars (vv. 12–13). What do all these pictures have in common, and what do they teach us about the difference between an impressive religious appearance and genuine spiritual substance? How can we tell the difference in ourselves and in our teachers?

Personal Reflection: Jude finally names the inner reality behind the false teachers: “grumblers, malcontents, following their own sinful desires ... loud-mouthed boasters, showing favoritism to gain advantage” (v. 16). Set the false teachers aside and look honestly at your own heart. Which

of these, grumbling, discontent, self-indulgence, boasting, or flattery for advantage, do you recognize in yourself? What would it look like to bring that to Christ this week?

Read Jude 12–16

Study Questions

1. Jude calls the false teachers “hidden reefs at your love feasts” and “shepherds feeding themselves” (v. 12). What does this teach about the danger of leaders who use their position to serve themselves rather than the flock, and how does this contrast with the model of the Good Shepherd?
2. Jude condemns “shepherds feeding themselves” (v. 12), a warning against using spiritual things for selfish ends. Where might you be tempted to make your faith, your service, or your role mostly about yourself, your comfort, recognition, or advantage? How is Christ calling you to a more self-giving love?
3. Jude piles up images of emptiness: “waterless clouds” and “fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted” (v. 12). What do these pictures teach about the nature of false teaching, that it promises much but produces nothing, and why is fruitlessness such a reliable mark of what is spiritually counterfeit?
4. Jude pictures clouds that promise rain but deliver none, and trees that should bear fruit but stand bare (v. 12). Where in your life are you promising more than you are delivering, to God or to others? What would it take to close the gap between your appearance and your actual fruit?
5. Jude reaches back to a prophecy that “the Lord comes with ten thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgment on all” the ungodly (vv. 14–15). What does this passage teach about the certainty and the universality of God’s coming judgment, and how should the reality of that day shape the way we live now?
6. Jude says the Lord is coming to call the ungodly to account for their deeds and their harsh words (v. 15). If you knew the Lord would return this week to review your deeds and your words, what would you want to change today? What does your honest answer reveal about where you are not yet ready?
7. Jude exposes the false teachers as those “following their own sinful desires” while putting on a religious front (v. 16). How does Scripture describe the difference between being led by the Spirit and being driven by our own desires, and why is self-will at the root of so much false religion?
8. Jude names “grumblers” and “malcontents” who are never satisfied (v. 16). Grumbling can become a quiet habit of the heart. Where has complaint or chronic discontent taken root in you, and how might gratitude and trust in God begin to replace it?
9. Jude’s whole portrait warns that empty, self-serving religion, however impressive its appearance, stands under God’s certain judgment, while genuine faith bears real fruit and submits to Christ as Lord. Drawing the threads together, how does this passage help us

discern true faith from counterfeit, and why does God care so deeply about the reality beneath our religious appearance?

10. Look back across these verses. Jude has exposed empty religion with vivid honesty, declared the certainty of judgment, and named the heart behind the counterfeit. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through this passage. What is the single truth from Jude 12–16 that you most need to carry into this coming week?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Ezekiel 34:1–10, shepherds who feed themselves instead of the flock; Matthew 7:15–23, knowing false prophets by their fruit, and “I never knew you”; John 10:11–15, the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep; 2 Peter 2:17–19, waterless springs and mists of darkness; Philippians 2:14–15, doing all things without grumbling, shining as lights in the world.