

# Ugly Christmas Sweater: Ugly Thoughts

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[ 0 : 00 ] So my name is Kent Dixon. It is a joy to be the lead pastor here. So this morning as we begin the season of Advent, you see a wreath and candles here up front.

The wreath itself is shaped in a perfect circle, and that is intended to represent, to symbolize the eternity of God. And each candle in this wreath, there are four of them, have significance as well. There are how many Sundays in Advent? Yes. Advent math. So each candle has significance. And so on each Sunday of Advent, we'll be recognizing one of the four virtues, each of these candles represents one, one of the four virtues that Jesus brings to us.

And those virtues are hope and love and joy and peace. Hope, love, joy, and peace.

And this morning, I'm lighting the first candle, which symbolizes hope. So today we celebrate the wonder of the season that we're entering. And like children on Christmas morning, with eyes wide open and with hearts full of hope.

[ 1 : 14 ] Like Jesus says, we say, let the little children come to me, for the kingdom of God belongs to them. We celebrate the wonder of the star placed high above Bethlehem, sent as a sign from God to announce the fulfillment of our deepest hopes and dreams.

Can you recognize that? The birth of Emmanuel, God with us. So today, I encourage each of you to focus on that hope.

Focus on the hope that we have in knowing that Jesus is the answer for our deepest needs. So at this time of year, particularly in the church, we begin to use this word, Advent.

You've already heard me use it. And it's important to recognize that Advent, here's your quick Advent lesson. Advent is not a when, although it is recognized in a period of time.

It is a what. It is a thing. It is a noun, generally. And the noun Advent is used to introduce something important. So in the church, the Advent season includes these four weeks leading up to Christmas as we anticipate something important.

[ 2 : 33 ] That's why it's Advent, the Advent season. And we're remembering and recognizing that we're in the season leading up to the birth of Jesus. So all that means for us personally and for the world and for God's people.

Does that make sense? And people have said to me, and I remember saying this to a pastor that I was in a congregation. We were not a liturgical church, so not a very formal church.

A Protestant church, very kind of mainstream. I don't want to say vanilla, but very mainstream. And he started to include church year things and terminology like Advent and things like that.

And I said to him, help me to understand why are we doing that? So people have asked me that since I've been here. I think we tend to forget that there are seasons that lead up to key times in the church.

There are seasons that lead up to Christmas and make that entire season more rich. There are times, Lent, for example, that leads up to Easter. And there's a whole richness that we miss when we only focus on those handful of things in the church calendar where we could broaden our understanding.

[ 3 : 49 ] So that's trying to bring a balance of liturgy and understanding of the richness that we have in the church. It's also not freaking people out that we're all of a sudden becoming Catholic.

So there is a richness that we miss out as Protestants sometimes. And so I'm bringing some of that in. So hopefully that calms your nerves, helps you to understand a bit.

So today, in case you hadn't guessed, we are beginning our brand new series for the Christmas season called Ugly Christmas Sweater. That's right.

And I take that personally because I think this is a beautiful Christmas sweater. I think it's enriching, enlightening, jolly. It is way too large for me, so I could fit two of me in here.

And I'm extremely hot. So Leah, if I begin to swoon, you can just come over and catch me before I fall. So maybe you know this tradition, right?

[ 4 : 48 ] Maybe you know this ugly Christmas sweater tradition. I have worked in my previous life to being a pastor. I worked in companies where we would have a Christmas party, and this was part of it. We would wear the ugliest Christmas sweater you could.

Someone would get a gift that was an ugly Christmas sweater, that kind of stuff. So it's a tradition sometimes that people have. It might be a festive party where you have friends and people are choosing ugly sweaters, the most obnoxious, gaudy sweater they can find.

And we have them all lined up in our house, and so we're ready. So I encourage you, yay, to everyone who did it. Don't feel guilty if you didn't. But it's an invitation.

Do it. Go crazy, because we want to have fun. So parties like this usually involve the usual stuff, right? Jingle bells, candy canes, eggnog, ribbons, bows, all those things.

And it's fun to do those things, fun to eat cookies and celebrate together and have fun while being as goofy as possible. So this ugly Christmas sweater idea is not new, right?

[ 5 : 53 ] It's become a bit of a cultural phenomenon. And it was funny. Our church administrator, Shaylin, forwarded me a message. A community organization, thank you, Leah, for the water, a community organization in our area had a big ugly Christmas sweater event.

And she said, are you tapped into cultural awareness? And I said, it's not a new thing. But it is interesting that it's on people's radar. It's something that people do. So though there are people who love to wear them at each year at parties, we also need to recognize that the reality is at Christmas time, sometimes people can tend to embrace ugly attitudes as well.

So this is a fun side of things. But the reality is that sometimes Christmas brings not necessarily the best out in people always. Christmas is meant to be a time of joy and happiness as we reflect on the birth of Jesus, the birth of our Savior.

But all too often, this fact, I think, not just at Christmas time, but unfortunately all year round, this fact, this reality, this hope of the birth of Jesus, of all that that means in our lives, can get lost.

It can get lost in ugly thoughts, in ugly words, in ugly motives, ugly actions. And so that's something we're going to recognize.

[ 7 : 21 ] Because this Christmas, things can change and you can celebrate the way Jesus is, what he means to you, in the ways that you think, in the ways that you act, in the words that you choose and use.

And so we're going to explore those things together. So the first week of this series, we want to focus on our thoughts. Because our words and our actions begin internally.

Can you recognize that? Before anything is expressed externally, our actions, our words, it begins in here. It begins inside, in your heart and in your mind.

So if we can catch those things before they escape, all of us have had them escape and thought, oh, rats. If we can catch them before they escape, then we have a good chance, along with the Spirit of God, to rewire our thoughts.

To help us live out of a perspective of joy and blessing. Does that make sense? So I'm going to talk a little bit about rewiring.

[ 8 : 34 ] So this rewiring that we're going to consider this morning can be tricky. Can I have the next slide, Len, please? Thank you. There we go. So who has done that?

Who has pulled out the box? Yes, I'm leaving the pulpit. How scary. Who has done that? Pulled out a box of decorations from the garage, maybe even over the last week or so.

You pull out a big, bundled, jumbled string of lights. And I don't think it's as much the case nowadays. But do you ever remember plugging in a string of lights and they're black?

Won't light up. And why is that? Because one bulb is burned out. So as a kid, I remember my parents would bring out the lights.

We'd plug them in. Wouldn't work. They would give us, I think Sears and places like that used to sell little boxes of the big bulbs. So then the job was go through the entire string of lights and begin to figure out which one was burned out.

[ 9 : 34 ] Because you'd find the one that was burned out and replace it and then, hallelujah. It was lit, right? Everything would be lit up again. So the rewiring that we're considering this morning, it's a difficult challenge.

I think we'll all recognize that. But it's necessary, rewiring our minds is necessary to experience change. So that seems to never fail, right?

With the rewiring of lights, the replacing of a bulb, the finding the connection. And rewiring our minds, as I'm saying, is just as challenging, can be just as challenging.

It can even be tedious or daunting. We've all experienced that, I'm sure. And often it takes years to formulate our way of thinking.

Can you recognize that for yourself? It takes years that all the places, the default ways we think, the ways that we are wired for our brain to go in certain situations and certain actions that happen.

[10:42] Have you ever thought of that for yourself? Have you ever been in a situation, something happens and you think, your brain says, oh, here we go again. Right? Right? You've predetermined how you're going to respond based on past actions that may not actually be applicable to the situation at all.

But we default wire and default respond. And that's dangerous, I think. And so the Bible often talks, probably some of you are thinking, oh, I know where he's going.

Bible often talks about how we view our thoughts. It talks about looking at our thoughts as a way of essentially rewiring our lives.

The idea of thoughts and living a godly life are intimately connected in Scripture. Intimately. In fact, Paul writes to the church in Philippi.

Book is Philippians. And in his closing comments in the book of Philippians, Paul talks about it. And often in the closing of a letter, you'll find the author says the things that they want to get across the most importantly.

[11:53] Their key message. So open your Bibles with me. You can grab one from the pew in front of you if you need to. And let's turn to this Pauline letter.

Philippians chapter 4. And we're going to look at 4 to 7. Verses 4 to 7. I'll read it for us and you can follow along. And when we're done, keep that page open because we're coming back.

So Paul says in Philippians 4, 4 to 7, Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again, he says, rejoice. Let your gentleness, and some translations say gentle spirit, be evident to all.

And I love this. This next passage has been one that I have often sought to use to rewire my own thinking. Paul says, do not be anxious about anything.

But in everything, he says, by prayer and petition. Some translations say supplication. And with thanksgiving, Paul says, present your requests to God.

[13:04] And the peace of God, Paul says, which transcends or surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

So Paul gives us there, gives his listeners, gives all of us, even today, a command in that very first verse. And he even repeats it.

We've talked about repetition in the Bible. It's God's way of saying this is really important. He repeats it to drive it home. And so what is the command? Paul commands us to, I can't hear you. Commands us to rejoice. Right? He says, rejoice in the Lord always. And then he says, oh, and by the way, in case you missed it, rejoice.

So Paul was familiar with all the reasons that his listeners, even up to this day, would have to grumble, to complain, to be frustrated, to be dismayed, to doubt God, to question God, all of those things.

[14:10] And the truth is that I believe we can have the same perspectives, the same feelings. And I know I struggle with that sometimes. Do you find it sometimes hard to rejoice?

It's the reality, right, for some of us in our circumstances. And I want us to recognize something important right now, that our negative feelings affect our thinking.

Our negative feelings affect our thinking. And that's absolutely true. It's reality. Because negative thoughts tend to make us anxious.

They make us jaded. They make us question God. They make us question other people and their motives. And they make us want to, often, negative thoughts, make us want to give up.

Right? As I said a moment ago, we get into those patterns of, well, this happened last time, so this is going to happen again. We get into those ruts of wiring in our lives, in our minds, in our ways of thinking, that cause us to go down a path that's likely not always helpful.

[15:26] And remember that all of this begins, all of these patterns of emotion and negativity and negative response and anxiety, these things all begin in our minds.

Can you recognize that for yourself? But thankfully, I've often thought of Paul as an amazing spiritual electrician. Because Paul talks about rewiring in a lot of his writing.

He talks about changing the way we think. Seeking to reorient our perspective back to God. To rewire how we've been training ourselves to be negative.

And what is Paul's advice? Rejoice. So even in the midst of, you can advance. Thanks. Awesome. Thank you. Even in the midst of all the reasons that we have for negativity, Paul encourages us to choose. It's a choice, a conscious choice, to rejoice.

[ 16 : 33 ] And there's a reason. Because of the Lord. Right? Paul's not just saying, well, you can choose to be a happy person. That's part of it. But he's giving us the reason for joy.

The reason we have to rejoice. And that is what God has done. So rather than being anxious, we're called, Paul says, to bring our worries, bring the things that concern us, bring our anxieties to the Lord in prayer.

Because he's near with us. Because he's near with us. He's close to us, always. So rather than stewing on those things, rather than holding on to those things and obsessing over them and letting negativity pervade our lives, we can bring those things to God, bring our petitions, Paul says, to God, and ask for his help.

Lay our worries at his feet. Because guess what? The more you worry about something, doesn't mean anything's going to change. And this is a serial worrier speaking to you this morning.

Right? The more I worry about something, are my circumstances going to change? No. The more I think, oh, this could be the outcome. Is that going to be the outcome?

[ 17 : 45 ] Not necessarily. Can I control that? Probably not. Can you control what other people think of you? Can you control the outcome of your actions?

Ultimately, no. So there are lots of things that we tend to hang on to, tend to obsess over, that ultimately are beyond our control. And I think that's important to remember.

So how differently might our lives be if we began with all the reasons we have to rejoice and to thank God, rather than focusing on all the things that are frustrating in our circumstances?

What if we focused on all the reasons we have to be joyful and thankful and grateful to God, and started from that point? What if rather than being serial grumblers or serial complainers, which I think some of the best of us can do, what if our default was to first rejoice regardless of our circumstances?

So this one little tip from Paul, to rejoice, can be like the single light bulb in your life, in your string of thought, that makes a change.

[ 19 : 04 ] Paul elaborates in Philippians 4, verse 8. And sorry, Len, I think I had you jump too soon. So go to Philippians 4, 8, if you kept your finger in there.

Philippians 4, verse 8. And let's look at that together. Paul says there, So in this passage, Paul, this great spiritual electrician, gives us clear direction as to where our mindset, where our thinking should go.

Paul says right there, whatever is true, noble, right, lovely, admirable, excellent, praiseworthy, that our mind should focus on those things.

So here's my question for you. Here's my challenge for you this morning. Of all the things this Christmas season, and maybe you're still feeling like it's too early, but you'll get there.

What is the most true, the most noble, the most right, most pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, or praiseworthy thing for you in your life?

[ 20 : 31 ] Because if we can discover that one thing, maybe our thoughts can be transformed from ugly to beautiful before they begin to result in negative actions and negative words.

And those are the things we're going to explore in the weeks ahead. So, but I believe, honestly, I believe this is definitely possible for us. It sounds like hard work a bit though, right?

But to achieve it, we have to think differently than we have before. We have to have a one-track mind. And speaking of rewiring, don't jump to your automatic definition that you may have of what it means to have a one-track mind, because that's not where I'm going.

So the one thing that we need to focus on, what would that be? Well, it's actually found, thankfully, from the Christmas story in Luke 2.

So, we'll get there in a second. On the heels of Jesus' birth, right there, there are shepherds in a field nearby watching their sheep.

[ 21 : 43 ] And they're totally unaware of this miracle that has just taken place. They're unaware of it. They're busy working in the fields. And so the angels appear to them.

So let's look at that together. It's Luke 2, verse 8 to 11. So give us a sec to hop over there. Luke 2, 8 to 11. And it says there, And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, Do not be afraid.

I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you.

He is the Messiah, the Lord. So the most true, the most noble, the most right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, all of those adjectives that Paul uses, the most praiseworthy news is brought to shepherds in a field at night.

[ 23 : 01 ] It was not a tweet sent by someone important. It was not posted online. It was not a TikTok video.

Shepherds in a field at night. God defying expectations again. And so we read that what it was called, what they were receiving, was good news.

Or glad tidings, sometimes we read in translations. But have you ever stopped to think of what this actually was? My friends, this news was the gospel as we know it.

Have you ever considered that, that this good news that the shepherds heard that night was the truth of Jesus Christ? It was the gospel itself.

The good news to focus our minds and thoughts is that a Savior has come to rescue the world. He's come to rescue all of us from the destructive power of sin and death.

[ 24 : 12 ] And this good news was worth rejoicing about. We read them rejoicing, keeping in the forefront of their minds. Not only their minds, but our minds.

The Jewish people had been waiting for hundreds of years for a Messiah. For someone who would come and free them from the bondage of the Roman government.

They were waiting and waiting. Someone who would come and free them from the bondage of sin and death as they knew it. And this good news had finally come.

One unknown author said it this way, Say this with me.

Say this with me. So God sent us a Savior. Our greatest need has always been to receive forgiveness for our sinful state.

[ 25 : 34 ] That is what it's all about. A chance at new life. The birth of Jesus was good news then, and we can still receive that good news in our lives today in this very place at this very moment.

This is the reason that Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year. Because of the birth of a baby who was God who came near to us in the flesh.

Emmanuel. God with us. The book of Psalms offers us a clear way to keep this mindset in our hearts as well.

So we read about it in Psalm 103, verse 2. And you can just listen, because that's a big jump.

Psalm 103, verse 2, and this may be familiar to you. It says, Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.

The writer of the Psalms is reminding himself to be grateful. He's seeking to rewire his mind towards the things of God.

[ 26 : 48 ] He's keeping himself from being an ugly Christmas sweater by remembering. And I love what the writer says at the end there. Forget not all his benefits.

So I want you to remember this. If you take nothing else away from this morning other than the pastor wore an ugly Christmas sweater. Joy doesn't come before gratitude.

Gratitude comes before joy. Joy doesn't come before gratitude. Gratitude comes before joy. You will find true joy when you seek to be grateful.

Sometimes we think, well, once we get all we want, then we can finally be joyful. You know, if I could just check a few more boxes, then, oh, the joy.

I will have so much joy. Sometimes we think once things go our way, then we can be joyful. Right? If these circumstances in my life just change a little bit, then I can be joyful.

[ 27 : 59 ] Friends, this is backwards. Do you hear me say that? It's backwards. Can you recognize there are people all over the world, you maybe even know some, who have everything they could ever want.

And they still don't have true joy. Some are even miserable with everything they could possibly want. We need to continually seek to become good at reminding ourselves of all God's blessings in our lives.

We must continually seek to keep those things top of mind. We need to, frankly, find practical ways to influence our thoughts in positive ways.

Because, remember, our thoughts become our words and our actions. That's the beginning. And it's only through adopting this kind of idea of a gratitude-first approach in your life.

A gratitude-first perspective that will bend our negativity. That will bend our frustration or our anger or our bitterness towards love.

[ 29 : 15 ] Towards hope. My friends, we cannot forget the blessings that God has given in our lives. And you know what they are. You can think of them.

So, for the beginning of this series, I want you to take some time. We're not going to do it right now. But this is homework. Take some time to reflect on.

Consider the reasons that you have to be joyful. That's your takeaway. So, as you leave this morning, begin to think about that. What are the things in your life, the people in your life, the blessings God has brought into your life that you are grateful for?

And seek to put those things top of mind. To keep them at the front of your thinking. Because only a heart that begins in gratitude, begins in thanksgiving, for all God has done, all he has given you, can help you rewire your mind.

Can help you fully embrace the Christmas season for all that it is and all that it could be. So, take time to reflect on, even today.

[ 30 : 25 ] Reflect on the blessings of God in your life and all his benefits. What are those things in your life? You know what they are, as I said.

Think on those things. And seek to be thankful. Because maybe this one intentional act, to seek to be thankful first.

To be grateful first. This one little change in your perspective. Could light up your Christmas this year like never before.

Amen.