

Ugly Christmas Sweater: Ugly Words

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[0 : 00] So today we're continuing. Now, we have somebody new with us this morning. Hi, Nathan. So I said to Nathan, I'm not a weirdo pastor wearing this crazy sweater. Well, I am a weirdo pastor, but I said it'll all make sense hopefully shortly. So we started last week a new sermon series called Ugly Christmas Sweater. And Donna said, that's not an ugly sweater at all. It's very cute. And I said, well, cute is what I'm after. So, you know, I'm already short. So let's make it cute.

Take away all my masculinity. It's all good. So we're continuing in this series this morning, and we've been considering the cultural phenomenon of the ugly Christmas sweater. But we've also started to recognize that during the Christmas season, too many of us find ourselves being ugly as well, being almost like ugly sweaters that we might wear at a Christmas party. And last week, we talked about how important it is to steer clear of ugly thoughts. Because if we're not careful, ugly thoughts can lead to a whole host of other things that could hurt us personally and also hurt others. So today we're going to be talking about our ugly words.

It's all too easy to say things to other people that are hurtful without even paying much attention to it, right? Do we take stock in the words that we use? Friends, God takes our words very seriously.

[1 : 37] And he wants us to use those words to build other people up, to bless them, to encourage them. And words are powerful. So I'm going to share an example with you. And there was some interaction on the screen, but that's okay. I'm going to say a word that I was going to show on the screen.

And I want you, when I say the word, it's not necessarily free association, so not saying what the word relates to in your mind, but your reaction to it. So what each word makes you think of, how it makes you feel? You ready? Snow. Cold. Yucky. Moist. Soft. Fluffy. Oh. There's some snow optimists. Beautiful. So don't be afraid to yell these out now. Hot chocolate. Marshmallows. Yep. Nice.

Christmas lights. Vern remembers last week still. Burned out bulbs. Yes. A Christmas activity. That's something we were talking about it last night at home. And Michelle said, what's something that each of us like about Christmas? And I said, looking at Christmas lights. We still haven't done that yet this year when we plan to do it. Now this next one is potentially extremely divisive. Eggnog. Somebody say yuck. Dawn. Okay. Let's all take a moment and pray for Dawn. Yuck. Wow. I have a, I think I told, I said last Sunday, I resisted buying eggnog at the grocery store a little while ago. And Michelle said, don't resist. Give in. So we do have eggnog in the fridge at home. And Dawn, I will pray for you. Maybe we'll share a liter. On the 18th, at the potluck lunch, I'll bring some of you and I'll have a race. Okay. And the last one, highly divisive. You ready? Fruitcake. Thank you. Dear Kathy, zombie apocalypse. Fruitcake.

Wow. And yet, it's still around. So that means former marketing guy, right? So that means there must be a market for it. So we'll pray for them too. To me, fruit. Yum. Cake. Yum. Smash them together. Yuck. Not a chance. So every one of these words that we've considered evoke a response. We recognize that right away. And some words may make us excited or nostalgic. I didn't put mandarin oranges in there. But my mom always called them Christmas oranges. And they were a big part of Christmas at our house. One of my brothers always liked getting a can of smoked oysters in his stocking every year.

[4 : 31] Loved them and still loves them, I'm sure. Yuck. Chocolate, maybe. Smoked oyster. Yuck. But, right, we recognize that there's nostalgia there. Some words may even make us lose our appetite, right? Some of those. So we can recognize from looking at those words together, from considering them together, that words carry meaning for us, right? It matters how and when we use them.

Our words, hear this, our words have power. This concept is one that shows up often in the Bible. And the book of Proverbs consistently talks about words. But more than that, it also talks about the mouths that use those words. And Proverbs, as you may know, is full of practical wisdom about how we can honor other people. So the Bible says in Proverbs 18, verse 21, and you can go there if you want. There's Bibles in the pew in front of you, or if you have it, one with you, or on your phone. Keep them handy, because we're doing some scripture hopping this morning. Proverbs 18, verse 21 says, the tongue has the power of life and death. And those who love it will eat its fruit. So God gives us an incredible responsibility in the way we speak to each other.

And our words are not meaningless. We're very quick to throw our words away, I think. And it says here in scripture that our words literally hold the power of life and death.

I still remember things that significant people have said to me throughout my life. I've been encouraged and affirmed by friends and family and mentors. Some of the greatest things that were ever said to me are cherished things from my mom and dad, who are now gone.

But mentors and friends over the years have said so many things to me that I still hold, that shaped me, that were important to me. And I can recognize that I've been encouraged to be my best.

[6:49] I've been encouraged in the things that I've done. I've been cheered on and supported.

And I attribute many of the successes, many of the things that I have achieved in my life to God first, but also to those life-giving conversations where someone has lifted me up or encouraged me or given words of life and hope.

But friends, I can also recognize times when people have said things to me that were unkind or untrue. And have you ever had to untangle an untruth that was said about you that was hurtful? And then you had to explain for some reason to someone else why it was not true? It doesn't feel very good. And so maybe you can remember experiences like this as well.

They shape us in bad ways sometimes. You may have had someone say something that hurt your self-esteem, that damaged your emotions.

Or somehow made you feel less than. And when I say those things, I can think of those experiences throughout my life. And you probably can as well.

[8:01] And so sadly, we likely all bear the scars from some of those experiences in our lives. They have changed us. And maybe we've said things ourselves that have hurt someone else.

The reality is, as I said, we can say things that can give life. Or we can say things that bring death. And the really sad truth is that many Christians have a tendency to overlook the simple truth that our words have power.

I had a friend of mine say to me once, you know, I've met a lot of Christians. And the most Christian people I've ever met do not declare the name of Jesus Christ.

It's a little bit scary, isn't it? Michelle, I have to laugh because Michelle said to me the other day, she said, ugly Christmas sweater, what a fun theme. It's so fun.

[8:57] We all get to be silly. But she said, the themes are so hard. And she said, it's not fun at all. And I said, well, sometimes difficult things need to be wrapped in a happy package.

So it's during the Christmas season when we're surrounded by family and friends. Those are the times when we can really do significant damage. When we can be saying things to someone that we really should keep to ourselves.

Or by saying things that can really harm our relationships. And maybe that's happened to you or maybe you can recognize it. And during a difficult season, especially like the one we've been in over the past few years, I believe we need to be even more careful.

Everyone needs to be treated with care and with kindness and with love. Being a Christian means making an intentional effort to avoid ugly words.

To speak in ways that leave people feeling encouraged. So that doesn't mean that we avoid sharing or having difficult conversations.

[10:08] Not at all. And I know we can all agree here that there are positive and negative ways to speak truth to others. Especially people we claim to love.

In the book of James, we're given extensive warnings about the kind of damage that our speech can do. In his writing, James is addressing the early church because they're learning how to interact with others in a way to move the cause of Christ forward.

To treat each other as Christ would have them treat each other. And James makes it clear that everything they were working so hard for in that early church could be easily undone by careless

words.

Let's look at James 3, verses 3 to 6. James 3, 3 to 6. We read there, Likewise, Does that leave you feeling?

Like, Oh, I better not say anything to anyone anymore. Well, that's not the goal. James is teaching us here, seeking to teach us that the key to stop using ugly words lies in learning to control our tongue.

[12:14] It's not the tool itself that is evil. It is the way it is used that might become evil. So, there are multiple examples here of large things being controlled by small items.

So, as we read, James says, horses can be controlled by a small bit in their mouth. A ship can be controlled by a small rudder. And even forests can be set on fire by a single spark.

So, the same is true for us and our tongues. Because although they may be small in relation to the rest of our bodies, if we're not careful, maybe you can recognize this, they can control us.

They can do significant damage. So, if you ever received an email or had a conversation with someone, who hurt you?

What's your immediate response going to be? It's not generally, oh, I probably deserved it. It is for me, because I'm self-deprecating, and I'm a people pleaser.

[13:18] So, if someone is mad at me, or treats me badly, my initial response is, what did I do to deserve it? And not in a, what did I do to deserve it? But, I must have done something, which is, as my wife tells me, false, and something I need to work on.

And I'm working on it. But that's the reality, right? We need to take time to consider our words. Take time to choose them wisely. Don't react irresponsibly.

Irresponsibly. Don't react suddenly. Take time to choose your words. Because in doing that, you'll be better able to control them, to keep them from causing harm to someone else.

Because if we don't learn to control our words, it could easily lead us into conflict. Have you ever thought that you process something and said something to someone, and they respond suddenly, and maybe not the way, oh, I didn't think that's how that was going to go.

But did you think about how it may be received by the other person? Was it something that even needed to be said at all? And we'll get there. James 3, verse 7.

[14:33] So, James 3, verse 7 lists off all the animals that have been tamed by human beings, but it's quick to say that controlling our tongue is more difficult than controlling an animal.

So, Daryl and Dorothy do dog breeding and things like that. I'm sure if Dorothy was here, she would say, it's not easy to train a dog. Right, Daryl?

It takes time. It takes effort. So, James is saying that we can control animals more easily than our own tongue. So, James says, all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man.

See, he's saying mission accomplished. But no man can tame the tongue, he says. It is a restless evil full of deadly poison.

I think James had a message he was trying to drive home here to that early church. Did you catch that? He warns us that when our words aren't controlled, they can be evil and full of deadly poison.

[15:43] It's not easy to control our words. And it's not something that we can do on our own. We're not expected to try and do it on our own as is the case with so many things in the Christian life.

We need the Spirit of God to give us the power to do it. I have a short temper and I often have to say to God, I almost said ignite, extinguish the fuse, extinguish the fuse, and I can recognize the temperature climbing and I need to let it back down.

I need to take time and I need to ask God to give me the patience. Give me the right words, the right perspective. So for note takers, these would have been on the screen, but sadly, no.

So let's look at some practical ways we can control our tongues. So I'm going to give you three suggestions. So these are things that you can use as a filter whenever you're interacting with someone else.

And it's not just a church filter. You can use it anywhere, anytime. Because if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, if that's what you declare in your life, these should apply to any conversation you have at any time.

[16:59] Ready? Number one. Will what I'm about to say honor God? So the true test of our words is the way they reflect on our Creator.

As I said before, if I declare myself to be a follower of Jesus Christ and I'm a complainer, I'm mean to other people, where's my witness in that? What does that say about Jesus? What does that say about other Christians? What does it say about the church? And there's even less of an excuse to do it within the church. To criticize each other, to pull each other down. Really? Is that what we're gonna do? So we have a choice in this. We're made by God to be agents of love in the world. That's it.

Agents of love. Agents of hope. This is a bleak world that we live in. In so many ways. We are the people who should reflect other than that.

[18:00] We have a choice in participating in that purpose. We can sit back and do nothing or we can engage in what God is calling us to do there. And so if something we plan to say to someone is not honoring to God, should it be said at all?

Take time to think about it. Number two, will what I'm about to say honor the person I said on the slide, honor the person I'm saying it to, but my English brain says honor the person to whom I am saying it.

because I have to correct it. So if what you're going to say, is it honoring to the person that you're about to say it to? Will it build them up? Is it, constructive criticism is such a bad expression because to me the dominant word there is criticism.

So giving, thinking that you're giving someone constructive criticism, well, they need to know this is wrong. Well, do they? Or can you say, hey, maybe next time we could try it differently. I'm, my brain is wired for being able to take something negative and make it positive and I got it from my dad so if you ever need to filter something through me and say, what's a better way to say this?

Especially if you're going to say it to me. You know, a really good way to not hurt my feelings is, so honoring someone else means that we begin in a place of respect and admiration in the way we speak to them.

[19:29] Can you see that? But consider someone else with love. Consider someone else with the benefit of the doubt first. Before you say something to someone else, as I alluded to a moment ago, consider how you personally might receive those words.

That's a great filter. If these words I'm about to say were spoken to me, any red flags there? Any things that would get my back up, make me defensive?

We're thinking about then. So how we treat another person who has also been created by God, can you recognize that? Definitely says something about how we feel about our creator.

Does that make sense? So if you're going to run another person, believer or not, who has been created by God, if you're going to run them down and your first instinct is to discourage and criticize, what does that say about your opinion of the person who created them, the one who created them? And you, by the way. It's not a great reflection. Can you recognize that? Does that make sense? So number three, this is a big one.

[20:46] will what I'm about to say be something I regret? I'll let that sit there for a second.

Will it be something I'm about to say, a filter is, will it be something I regret? Because I believe if you can go to bed at night and not wish that you could take something back that you said during the day, then you're probably on the right track in terms of choosing your words.

But if you go to bed at night, any night, and think, ooh, maybe I should have said that differently.

That reaction was not what I expected. Those are things to consider. Because remember that ugly words sometimes cause damage that can't be reversed.

So the other person that you've hurt may forgive you, may well forgive you, which is what we're also called to do, but forgive and forget is not always accurate.

Right? So the damage that can be done can last potentially for a very long time. So just quickly again, will what I'm about to say honor God? Will what I'm about to say honor the person to whom I am saying it?

[22:03] Or three, will what I'm about to say be something I will regret? Good filters. So I believe we're wise to ask ourselves these questions in controlling our tongues because again, our words have power.

Christians are meant to be representatives of the joy of the birth of Jesus. Can you recognize that? How that event changed the world. We are called to be different.

The world complains. The world seeks for answers in anything. We're called to be different. We're called to not default to complaining and criticism.

And so when we consider the event that changed the world, the event that changed our lives, or we claim that it changed our lives, and then we act like the world, we sabotage that message that we claim to proclaim.

And we do that simply by speaking carelessly. As I said before, again, it's worth repeating a few times, when someone says to me that Christians are often the most critical people they know, the most negative people they know, the most judgmental people they know, maybe these three filters need to be applied a little better, or maybe we need to seek God's guidance in our lives and how we speak a little better as followers of Jesus.

[23 : 30] James goes on to address this in chapter 3 of James as well, so I'll just read that for us. Bible says in James 3, 9-12, with the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness, James says.

Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be, he says. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?

My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

Each year, Christians all over the world attend Christmas services and sing hymns about the greatness of God, about Jesus coming as a baby in Bethlehem.

We light candles, we sing silent night in churches to celebrate the birth of Jesus around the world.

So why then do so many of the same people turn right around and say ugly things to or even about other people?

[24 : 47] James believes this is a problem that he needed to address with the early church, that they needed to address. And I believe it's a challenge we need to receive today as well.

Because we can't have it both ways. You can't say you love God while cursing or criticizing people he's created. See that?

It does not work. James suggests that just as a spring cannot have both salt and fresh water and as a fig tree, if you like figs, which I don't, fig tree, yummy fruit produces olives, not yummy fruit.

Our mouth should not speak both compliments and gossip, both compliments and criticism.

Christians cannot be so hypocritical that they speak out of both sides of their mouth.

So the challenge is to speak from our hearts. The words that we use are a window into our heart.

Can you see that? They reveal our need for God to transform us from the inside out.

[26 : 00] The Bible says in Luke 6 verse 45, you can hop over there or you can just listen. Luke 6 45, the good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart.

Hear this, for the overflow, out of the overflow of his heart, his mouth speaks. Maybe the place we need to begin in changing our ugly words is to ask God to show us what it may need, what there is that may need to be healed inside ourselves.

Sometimes we speak out of a broken heart and when we do that, it causes us to lash out. Maybe you heard the saying before, hurt people hurt people.

People who are hurt hurt other people or people who have been hurt. Their default is to hurt others and bring them down. Sometimes when we speak out of a hurt heart, it causes us to be cruel to other people.

You know, I'm hurting, I want to make you hurt the same or more. That's human nature sometimes and it's not shouldn't be Christian default nature.

[27 : 23] So it means that we need to take an honest look inside ourselves because we need to use our words to speak life into other people. Sure you can speak truth to someone, but you can do it kindly when I can probably share this story without getting into too much trouble, although pray for me on the ride home.

When Michelle and I first met, I come from a very diplomatic family. She comes from the opposite extreme, not undiplomatic, but very direct, very blunt, very unvarnished.

So I came from a family that we would not fight if you put boxing gloves on us and put us in the ring. Super diplomatic to a fault so things would get crammed down inside and not dealt with.

So still very diplomatic in our family. Michelle's family, oh, this is what I think. Oh, you don't think that? Well, let's have it out. Or, I think this, she's laughing, I think this, you don't think this, you are wrong and let me teach you how you're wrong and how you can become more like me.

both wrong, right? Both on extreme opposite ends. And so we've brought each other into the middle. She used to think I was a liar, partly.

[28 : 51] This is early on. We got through it. Because she knew the full picture of what I thought in a situation. So then when I related the situation or I processed the situation with others, she was left going, that's not what you think.

I mean, maybe it's part of what you think, but why didn't you let them have it? Why didn't you? So I taught her, sometimes a brick can be wrapped in velvet. Or, the brick can be applied with 10% of force rather than 110%.

She taught, I taught her, oh that's what I taught her I guess. So she taught me, if you're hurt, tell someone you're hurt and how they hurt you.

If you're mad, tell someone you're mad. Don't let it fester because it will kill you, not them. Do you see that? So we've come to a very cool middle ground where, well nobody gets away with anything anymore but do you see how that's more healthy?

To be honest with each other, to speak truth to each other but to do it in a kind sort of way. Because I personally, I want to speak from a heart of love. I want to speak from a heart that reflects a love for God and a love for people, a desire to be in relationship with and care for other people.

[30 : 12] And that's not just because I'm a pastor. That's how I feel about people. That's how I feel about God. And I want to allow a passion for Jesus, a passion for God to overflow into my language, into how I treat other people.

Sure, I get annoyed by how someone treats me and I may even say, I'm annoyed with you. But it doesn't mean we can't still love one another. And so the first place, I'm just about to close, don't panic, the first place we see this is in our closest relationships.

Because when our hearts begin to intentionally seek to lean towards Jesus, we will begin to see, you'll begin to recognize that the words that you use towards your spouse, perhaps, towards your friends, towards even your enemies.

I don't have any enemies, so I don't know what that's like. Or the words of our children. The words that we use towards our children better reflect love, right?

If we lean into Jesus, if we seek to ask God to guide our words, use filters before we speak to people, we can be better at breathing and speaking life into someone else.

[31 : 27] Does that make sense? I want to be, I want each of you to be, I want every Christian to be known for the life they speak into other people, the hope that they bring to other people with their words.

I want us to be Jesus to the world that so desperately needs him. Friends, words carry meaning and it truly matters how and when we use them.

This Christmas, I want to invite you to use your words to encourage others, to lift them up. May the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ touch your heart in a way that's evident in how you speak to people. Not just this coming week, but I hope this plants a flag that can change your perspective for the rest of your life. Take a moment now and let the Lord bring one person to mind that you think could benefit from some kind words this week.

Make the decision this week to encourage them. It's been a tough stretch of years, has it not? We're not, it doesn't feel over yet, right?

[32 : 43] Everyone is spread thin. Everyone needs hope. Everyone needs to be lifted up. today we can choose to make the best of what we have, to express the love of Christ to others through the words that we choose.

So let's be people who challenge and encourage each other even in doing that as brothers and sisters in this place. Amen.