Cruciformity

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On the Word That Creates, the Hundred Billion Failures That Led to You, and the Touch That Transfers Holiness

The Word That Created

We have all been called to share the gospel of Jesus Christ. Some of us in particular vocations, some in different ways, but every one of us. *And the word we have been entrusted to share is the same word that created the heavens.*

Think about what that word is capable of. The sound of God's voice that created the hundred billion stars that fill the visible sky. The breath that caused a hundred billion creatures to begin to breathe. That word, spoken by our Lord Jesus Christ, that caused a hundred billion failures to be lifted off our shoulders. That is the word we have been called to carry. A single word brings new creation. It is the same word in every case. The Genesis 1 let there be and the Calvary Father, forgive them and the resurrection-morning Mary and the still-being-spoken word that turns a dead heart into a living one: one word, one voice, one Author across the whole arc.

Mimetic Creatures

And here is something I want you to hold about what we are, because the chapter's pastoral argument depends on it. *We are mimetic creatures.* We see others act, and then we act. We hear others speak, and then we speak. We watch others react, and then we react. *Imitation is the deepest layer of how human beings actually become themselves.*

There has been a centuries-long debate about *nature versus nurture*, which one shapes us more, the genetic inheritance we were born with or the formative environment we grew up in? And the honest answer is *both*, but with a striking caveat. *When nurture is removed entirely, the human being does not become fully human in any recognizable sense*. The historical record of so-called *feral children*, children isolated from normal human contact during the formative years, is sobering. *Speech, if not acquired during certain developmental windows, is sometimes never acquired*. Upright walking, social behavior, the capacity for normal relational attachment, all of these turn out to be *learned by imitation* in ways we did not fully appreciate before we observed what happens when imitation is absent. *We become human by watching humans be human.*

Now extend the principle theologically. From Genesis forward, *the serpent spoke*, and a particular kind of speech began entering the human race. Listen to what Genesis records of the first conversation:

"Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, 'Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden'?'" (Genesis 3:1).

The serpent's speech caused the first parents to begin to *elevate their thinking above the thinking of God*. The serpent's logic became the new mimetic template. *Something to be grasped after* (cf. Philippians 2:6, contrasting Adam's grasping with Christ's not-grasping). The serpent's voice was the first counter-voice to the Creator's voice, and the human race has been taking notes ever since.

And the *serpent spirit* runs all the way through the Bible. From Genesis 3 to Revelation 12, where John sees a war in heaven:

"So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him" (Revelation 12:9).

That serpent of old. Same serpent. Different size. What started as a whispered conversation in the garden has grown, across millennia, into a dragon-sized power, what John calls the deceiver of the whole world. Same speech-pattern. Same mimetic logic. What began in an individual couple becomes a superpowered dragon when it scales up to imperial Rome and every other great power. The pattern travels.

And the question is: what kind of speech are we taking on? My father always told me: if you run with the wolves, you're gonna howl with them. That is Appalachian wisdom, and it is true to form. We may all be speaking English in this room, though some of us speak Southern English more fluently than others, but the deeper question is whether the speech-patterns underneath our language are dragon-speech, wolf-speech, or the speech of the Son of God. That distinction is downstream of nature. It is upstream of nurture. It is the question of what we have been imitating, generation after generation, all the way back to the garden.

Why Violence Feels Right

And here is something the mimetic framing helps to explain. *Why does violence feel right?* Why do we have such a proclivity toward it? Why do whole cultures, and whole individuals, repeatedly fall into patterns of cruelty, sexual misconduct, dominance-seeking, and so on?

Genesis tells us *violence filled the whole earth* before the flood (Genesis 6:11). That was not metaphor. That was a description of how the deformed mimetic chain had compounded across generations until the whole population was running on a violence-loop. *The flood came*

because the loop had become unstoppable from the inside. The hard reset was necessary because no normal generational correction could interrupt the pattern.

And the pattern is *animal*. The serpent has crept into the herd, and the herd is now imitating the serpent. *But it feels right.* That is the unsettling part. When you watch your media, *I will be honest about my own experience here*, you can find yourself applauding the bad behavior of a character the storyteller has built up. The narrative has invested you in this person, and now everyone who opposes them feels like a villain who *deserves* what is about to happen to them. *Have you ever gotten caught up in a character to the point where everything that character does is justified?* I have. Welcome to human nature. Welcome to the mimetic loop the serpent's voice still runs through your living room speakers.

And we have the potential to be informed by something different. The breath of God can replace the breath of the dragon. The voice of the Son of God can interrupt the inherited speech of the wolves. *That is the chapter's central claim*: that the mimetic creature can be re-fitted with a new template, *if a different voice is brought near*.

The Hundred Billion Failures That Led to You

And let me make this concrete in a way I think will land. *Every one of us is the end-point of an unimaginably long mimetic chain.* If you could imagine every ancestor whose life ever contributed to yours (every father, every mother, every grandfather and grandmother, generation upon generation back into the deep past) *that is the tree of life that became you*.

Go to one of the genealogy services: Ancestry.com, FamilyTreeDNA, the others. Put in your information. Start clicking the leaves on the tree. It will not take you any time at all before you are looking at ancestors from the 1600s, and that is only about ten or twelve generations back. *Go ten or twelve more generations and you are in the 1400s*. Go another twelve and you

are in the 1200s. And so on, generation upon generation, into the deep mist where the records become unreliable. *Millions of people, somewhere in that tree, contributed to the genetic and behavioral inheritance that became you.* Good people. Bad people. *Good people who did bad things. Bad people who did good things.* A whole mixed bag of human conduct across an unimaginable span of time.

A hundred billion failures led to you. And not only failures: *successes too, and tender acts of kindness, and prayers prayed in secret over cradles in centuries you cannot reach back to*. Every cradle that was rocked by every grandmother in your line. Every father who raised his children, or died in some battle whose name has been forgotten, or abandoned the mother of his child, or somehow held the family together against pressures we cannot imagine. *Every word spoken over every one of your ancestors became something in you, through the long mimetic chain*.

And the words spoken specifically over you, *those landed on a particular target*. My father named me *Robert Shane*. *Robert* after Robert Spinks, a cowboy who used to buck broncos in southern California for ten dollars apiece in 1910. *Shane* after the title character of the 1953 western (the live transcript said 1968, the year I was born, but the actual film is from 1953). My father was speaking *cowboy* over me when he chose the name. *Robert Spinks. Shane. Wyoming. Boots before I could walk.* He was naming a vocation he wanted me to grow into.

And here is the thing. *Every one of us has had something spoken over us.* Some of those words are gifts. Some of those words are wounds. *We begin to take the form of the words spoken over us.* We begin to shape ourselves to please the people above us. We morph ourselves to fit the categories our parents and our culture and our peer group have given us. *The mimetic chain extends right into your particular life through the words spoken over your particular cradle.*

Emmanuel

And then, two thousand years ago, something new arrived. *Emmanuel, God with us*. The Word who created the hundred billion stars *took on flesh* and walked among the mimetic creatures whose ancestral chains had run them so far off course. And the Word began to speak *a different word* over the human race.

Listen to how Philippians 2 frames the difference:

> Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. (Philippians 2:5–8)

Watch the contrast Paul is drawing. *Adam grasped at being like God.* Adam reached for what was not his to take. *Christ, being in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped*. Same divine prerogative; *opposite posture*. Adam reached up. Christ emptied down. Adam tried to climb. Christ deliberately descended. *And the result of the descent was the cross*, where the Word who created the universe humbled himself to the point of executed criminal at the hands of his own creatures.

And the Christ who emptied down was *teaching the human race a different mimetic template*. Not Caesar power. *Jesus power.* A power that goes to the cross. A power that humbles itself. A power that does not seek its own. *This is what it means to be human*, the Emmanuel was saying with every gesture and every word. *Not the dragon-template. Not Caesar's template. This.*

And his gospel was concentrated, early in his ministry, into a kind of manifesto. Matthew 5, 6, and 7, the Sermon on the Mount. Attitudes of *purity*. Attitudes of *meekness*. Attitudes of *righteousness*. *Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.* Beatitudes that completely inverted the dragon's value-set. *Turning the other cheek* instead of striking back. *Enemy-love* instead of enemy-destruction. *Inward purity* in prayer and giving and fasting, rather than the outward exhibitionism the surrounding religious culture rewarded. *Nothing calibrated to exalt the individual. Everything calibrated to exalt the God in whom the individual had placed his confidence.* That is the new mimetic template. *That is the speech the Word came to teach us to imitate.*

New Creation

And when that Word begins to speak over us, something can happen. The mind of the serpent can be replaced. The nature of the dragon can be unlearned. The culture that tries to control us and inform us can lose its grip. The billion ancestors who spoke love or hate over our line do not get the final word. Something new begins.

Listen to how Paul names it:

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

New creation. The same Word that called the hundred billion stars into being is now calling a new humanity into being inside the human person who has come to him. *Old things passed away. All things made new.* Not a renovation of the old self. *A new creation entirely.* Paul puts it again in Colossians:

"Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; and have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him" (Colossians 3:9–10, KJV).

Put off the old man. Put on the new man. Two verbs. The old man is dead, *crucified with Christ* (Romans 6:6). The new man is alive, *and being renewed in knowledge after the image of the One who created him*. And we get to *put it on*, day by day, like a garment whose fit feels strange at first but becomes more natural the longer we wear it.

And let me be honest: *the new man does not always fit right at first*. When you first start reading Matthew 5, 6, and 7 with serious intent to live into it, the words feel *too big*. *Love your enemies?* That is not how the dragon taught me to handle enemies. *Turn the other cheek?* That is not the response the wolves modeled for me. *Give in secret?* My ancestors did most things in public so they could be seen. *The new man, at first, hangs strangely on the old shoulders.* But *keep living into it*. Because it did not fit the disciples either.

Oh, you of little faith, Jesus kept saying to them. *Believe.* And they kept growing into their faith, growing into the new template, growing into the new humanity until one day they walked out of an upper room with fire on their tongues and went to their deaths singing the gospel of the kingdom in cities that should have killed them faster than they did. *The new man fits eventually.* The disciples are proof. *We are growing up into the fullness of Jesus Christ* (Ephesians 4:13). The growing-up is real, and it does happen, and it is the slow ordinary miracle of Christian formation across a lifetime.

The Pants That No Longer Fit

And growing up is what this is. It does not always feel like growing up while it is happening. When I was a child, *I did not see myself growing*. I did not know I was getting taller.

But every September when school started, *the jeans from the previous year did not fit anymore*. The growth had been happening invisibly through the summer, and only the no-longer-fitting jeans gave it away.

That is how Christian formation works. *We are not always aware that the new man is fitting better and the old man is fitting worse.* And then one day we notice that an old pattern that used to consume us no longer holds the same grip. A response that used to be automatic no longer feels automatic. A reaction that used to come faster than thought is now interrupted by a pause that lets the new man think instead of the old man act. *The pants of the old self no longer fit, because the new self has been growing the whole time*. We did not see the growth. We see the change in fit.

And the growth comes only through the new information. *Only through the logos of God, through the gospel of Jesus Christ, can we actually change.* The beauty of being human, as opposed to being merely animal, is that *we are not stuck in our species-typical behavior set*. We are *informable*. The wolf cannot stop being a wolf. *The human, formed by the word of God, can stop being what the wolves taught him to be*. That is the gift of the *logos*: a new word over our cradles, replacing whatever was spoken over our ancestors' cradles in the long forgotten centuries that produced us.

Sheep Without a Shepherd

Now turn with me to Matthew 9 and 10, because the chapter pivots there into the commissioning. At the end of Matthew 9, Jesus has been preaching the kingdom and healing the sick all by himself. And the text gives us his interior moment:

"But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd" (Matthew 9:36).

Hold those two adjectives. *Weary and scattered*. Or, in some translations, *distressed and downcast*. *That is humanity 101.* You go to the boardrooms of the highest corporations, and you find weary and scattered. You go to the highest levels of government, and you find weary and scattered. You go to the most powerless and impoverished neighborhoods, and you find weary and scattered. *The condition is universal.* The Greek word translated *scattered* (*errimmenoi*) has the sense of *thrown down, cast aside, abandoned,* like a body dumped at the side of the road. *That is the condition of unshepherded humanity*. Beaten down, exhausted, abandoned, unable to coordinate, vulnerable to every predator in the environment.

And the *unshepherded sheep* image carries enormous Old Testament weight. Listen to Ezekiel 34, which Jesus is unmistakably echoing:

> Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? . . . The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost; but with force and cruelty you have ruled them. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the beasts of the field when they were scattered. (Ezekiel 34:2, 4–5)

The shepherds had been muddying the water with their feet. They had been pushing with their shoulders. They had been feeding themselves while the flock was being scattered. *That is the diagnosis Ezekiel makes of Israel's leaders.* And God's promise in Ezekiel 34 is that he will *raise up one Shepherd, my servant David,* who will gather what has been scattered, bind up what has been broken, heal what has been sick, and feed the flock in good pasture (Ezekiel 34:23–24). *Jesus, looking at the weary and scattered crowds in Matthew 9, is the fulfillment of Ezekiel 34*. He is the Good Shepherd Ezekiel promised.

The Workers Are Few

And then comes Jesus' instruction to the disciples:

"Then He said to His disciples, 'The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest'" (Matthew 9:37–38).

And what does Jesus do *immediately after* asking the disciples to pray for more laborers? *He sends them as the laborers*. The very next verse (Matthew 10:1) opens with Jesus calling the twelve and giving them authority to do what he has been doing: heal the sick, cast out demons, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead. *The disciples prayed for the workers and discovered that they were the answer to their own prayer.* That happens more often than we expect.

And look at *who* the twelve are. *Peter, Andrew, James, John*: okay, so far we know who these are. *Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew,* we know a little about each of these. *James the son of Alphaeus.* What did he do? We are not sure. *Thaddaeus.* What did Thaddaeus do? *There is not a big record of Thaddaeus's contribution. Simon the Zealot*: also called *Simon the Cananaean,* which scholars have linked to the *sicarii,* the *dagger-men* who specialized in stabbing political opponents between the fifth rib in crowded marketplaces. *That* is one of Jesus' disciples. And then *Judas Iscariot,* whose end we know.

This is a mixed bag. God does not pick a starting lineup of obvious heroes. *Some are going to be Peter, who will preach the day-of-Pentecost sermon to three thousand converts.* Some are going to be Thaddaeus, who will quietly serve the kingdom in ways no historical record retains. *Both are members of the same twelve.* And the twelve, collectively, are *restored Israel in seed form*: the new patriarchs of the new nation, gathered around the Emmanuel the

way the original twelve tribes gathered around the tabernacle in the wilderness. *Twelve unlikely men standing in for the twelve tribes around the new tabernacle made of flesh.*

That is the picture. And we are part of it. Every reader of this chapter is, in some real sense, the continuation of those twelve. We have been gathered around the Emmanuel. We have been commissioned to extend his work into the surrounding cities. We have been given a span of authority (over our families, over our workplaces, over our neighborhoods) that we are meant to exercise in the same humble, healing, restoring manner Jesus exercised his.

Kings, Priests, and Prophets

And here is the vocation: kings, priests, and prophets. Three offices, one calling. That is what God called humanity to be in the garden, and that is what he is restoring us to be through Christ.

Kings. Genesis 1 puts it directly: *let them have dominion* (Genesis 1:26). The image-bearing humans were given *dominion* over the creation, *kingship* over the garden in the King's name. Not tyranny. Not exploitation. *Stewardship-kingship*, the kind that exercises authority for the flourishing of what is under the authority's care.

Priests. Genesis 2:15 names the work: *the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it*. The Hebrew verbs (*avad* and *shamar*) are the same verbs used elsewhere for *priestly service in the tabernacle*. The garden was the first sanctuary. The human was the first priest. *Tend and keep* was the priestly vocation.

Prophets. The third dimension: *to tell every subsequent generation, as they were fruitful and multiplied, of the commands God had given*. Speaking the word forward across time. *That* is the prophetic office at its root. Naming reality in God's terms, generation by generation, so that the truth does not get lost in the mimetic drift the dragon's voice keeps trying to introduce.

King, priest, and prophet. That was always the calling of the human person. And it is recovered in Christ, who *is himself king, priest, and prophet* perfectly, and who shares his offices with the people who become his by faith. *We are a royal priesthood, a holy nation* (1 Peter 2:9). The text says it directly.

From Separation to Touch

And here is a sharp contrast between the old priesthood and the new. *The old priesthood was about separation.* If someone walked into the temple with a withered hand, the priest's job was to declare them *unclean* and bar them from full worship. If someone had an itchy rash on their arm, *unclean*. If someone had a bulbous growth somewhere on their body, *unclean*. The priest's vocation was to *separate the clean from the unclean*. That is what *tending and keeping* the holiness of the sanctuary required, under the old covenant.

And then Jesus comes. And what does Jesus do with the unclean? *He touches them.* The leper in Matthew 8:3. The woman with the issue of blood in Matthew 9:20. The dead daughter of Jairus in Matthew 9:25. *Every category of uncleanness, Jesus touches.* And the contagion runs *the opposite direction*. The leper does not contaminate Jesus. The bleeding woman does not contaminate Jesus. The corpse does not contaminate Jesus. *Holiness flows out of Jesus into the unclean and makes them clean.*

This is the revolution in the priestly vocation. Under the old priesthood, holiness was fragile and uncleanness was contagious. Under the new priesthood inaugurated by Jesus, holiness is contagious and uncleanness is the one that yields. Recall what Haggai had asked the priests in his day:

> "If one carries holy meat in the fold of his garment, and with the edge he touches bread or stew, wine or oil, or any food, will it become holy?" Then the priests answered and said,

> "No." And Haggai said, "If one who is unclean because of a dead body touches any of these, will it be unclean?" So the priests answered and said, "It shall be unclean." (Haggai 2:12–13)

Holiness does not transmit by contact, under the old covenant. Uncleanness does, under the old covenant. In Christ, the entire logic has been reversed. The Word made flesh touches the unclean, and the unclean become clean. The leper is healed. The dead are raised. The defiled are restored. And we, the priesthood Jesus has called us into, operate the same way. Our priesthood is not about pushing the unclean out. It is about carrying the holiness of Christ into the places where uncleanness has been ruling, and watching the ruling reverse.

Heal, Raise, Cleanse, Cast Out, Give

Now look at the specific instructions Jesus gives the twelve when he sends them out:

> "As you go, preach, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:7–8).

Five verbs. Heal. Cleanse. Raise. Cast out. Give. All five are upbuilding actions. None of them is about gathering for yourself. Every one of them is about restoring others to wholeness.

And then Jesus' instructions about provisioning are striking:

> "Provide neither gold nor silver nor copper in your money belts, nor bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor staffs; for a worker is worthy of his food" (Matthew 10:9–10).

Do not acquire. Do not stockpile. Do not bring extra. The disciples are to go light, with no provision for self-preservation beyond the minimum, because the kingdom they are extending operates on a different economic logic than the surrounding world. The world's logic is acquire,

hoard, build bigger barns, secure your position. The kingdom's logic is travel light, give freely, trust the Father for daily provision.

I have been dealing recently with a vendor in business whose mindset is *scarcity*. If they lose on one point in a negotiation, they feel they have lost on every point. *There is never enough. The barns never get big enough. There is always one more thing to hoard.* And the song from *The Greatest Showman* has it right: *never, never, never enough*. *When is it enough?* When do we stop building the next barn?

The kingdom's answer is: *we stop building barns altogether*. The disciples were sent out without extra tunics, without staff replacements, without provisions for what-if. *Because the One who feeds the sparrows is the One they are working for, and the sparrows have never gone hungry under the Father's care* (cf. Matthew 6:26). *Heal. Raise. Cleanse. Cast out. Give. Freely you have received, freely give.* That is the kingdom's economic doctrine, and it is the polar opposite of the surrounding world's accumulation logic.

More Tolerable for Sodom

And then Jesus gives the disciples instructions about how to handle reception and rejection:

> Whatever city or town you enter, inquire who in it is worthy, and stay there till you go out. And when you go into a household, greet it. If the household is worthy, let your peace come upon it. But if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. And whoever will not receive you nor hear your words, when you depart from that house or city, shake off the dust from your feet. Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city! (Matthew 10:11–15)

Hold that final clause carefully. *More tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city.* That is exactly the same phrase we walked through in the previous chapter when looking at Matthew 11:22–24's *more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon*. *Graduated divine assessment*. The judgment of God is calibrated to the actual opportunity each person and each city received. *Sodom and Gomorrah*, the paradigmatic bad-place of the Old Testament, will receive a more lenient assessment in the day of judgment than a city that hosted Jesus' disciples and dismissed them. *The hardness of the heart is what determines the severity of the judgment, not the catalog of past sins.* That is one of the most pastorally important and theologically distinctive doctrines in the entire collection.

And notice the specific kind of reception Jesus is looking for. If the household is worthy, let your peace come upon it. The disciples are not asking the household to perform some elaborate religious test. They are asking the household whether it will receive them with hospitality. That is the test. Will you let us in? Will you give us a meal? Will you offer us a place to stay for the night? If yes, the peace of the disciples falls on the household. If no, the peace returns to the disciples, and the disciples shake the dust off their feet and move on. Hospitality is the receiving-mechanism. The household that receives the messenger receives the message. And the household that refuses hospitality is the household that has chosen the position Sodom and Gomorrah originally chose, because Sodom's sin, as Ezekiel later named it, was precisely inhospitality to the strangers at the gate:

> Look, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: She and her daughter had pride, fullness of food, and abundance of idleness; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. And they were haughty and committed abomination before Me; therefore I took them away as I saw fit. (Ezekiel 16:49–50)

The sin of Sodom was pride, satiation, idleness, and refusal of hospitality to the poor and needy. That is Ezekiel's diagnosis. And here in Matthew 10, the cities of Israel that refuse hospitality to the disciples of Jesus are positioning themselves precisely where Sodom positioned itself. And the comparison goes to where the comparison goes: the day of judgment, where the divine assessment will be graduated to the specific response each city made.

Walking in Forgiveness

And here is the pastoral landing that lifts the whole chapter into hope. Since Jesus' death and resurrection, we are walking around in an atmosphere of forgiveness. We are walking around in a sea of forgiveness. Whether we know it or not. Whether we want it or not. The forgiveness has been poured out across the whole creation. And all we have to do is open our doors to it. Open the household. Receive the strangers at the gate. Receive the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is what repentance finally is, opening the doors of your life to a forgiveness that has already been poured out and is waiting to come in.

And once those doors open, the forgiveness that was already all around us begins to flow in. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16). Whoever. Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, sinner, saint, the rank-and-file of every category the human mind has ever invented. Whoever. The wideness of the door is exactly what the gospel of Jesus Christ has always claimed.

And the discovery I have made along my own journey is that I have often been floating in forgiveness without receiving it for myself. I have preached forgiveness from this pulpit and then walked back to my own house and become a shut-up castaway of pent-up self-loathing and unforgiveness. The door was closed even while I was preaching about the open door. That has

been one of the hardest interior lessons of my pastoral life. The forgiveness is real. The forgiveness is mine. The forgiveness was poured out on Calvary and is presently surrounding me. And I have, more often than I want to admit, refused to receive it. Opening the door of my own life to the forgiveness I have been preaching to others has been a slower work than my preaching has sometimes suggested. It is still happening.

Change the Tree

And God has commissioned us to *change the tree*. *Change that tree that led to you*: the tree of brokenness and shattered lives, of good things and bad things, of the hundred billion failures that found their way to you across the unimaginable centuries of the human story. *That tree, in your line, can be changed*. Not by your power. By the power of the Spirit who indwells you. The new mimetic template can become the new pattern. *The children you raise can be the first generation in your line to grow up under a different speech-pattern than the dragon's*. The grandchildren they raise can be the second. The great-grandchildren can be the third. *Generation by generation, the tree can be turned*.

And the people who insist they cannot change, the people who say it is the Irish in me, or it is my anxiety, or it is my genetic proclivity, or it is just how my family has always been, those people are right that the inheritance is real. The genetic and environmental inheritance is real. But the inheritance is no longer the final word. Somebody more powerful than your parents is now speaking over you. Somebody whose voice can drown out the inherited speech. The Irish in you wants to be consumed by the Jesus in you. And that consumption is not the negation of who you are. It is the renewal of who you are into who you were meant to be all along.

And it is the *love of God*, more than anything else, that produces the change. Listen to Titus 2:

"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age" (Titus 2:11–12).

Grace teaches us to deny ungodliness. It is not first behaviorism. It is not first the cataloging of sins to be avoided. *It is first the encounter with grace, which then produces the denial of ungodliness as a side-effect of the encounter*. The mimetic template shifts because the Word being spoken over the listener has shifted. *Behavior change is downstream of relational change.* Always. The other order does not work, because it does not get down to where the formation is actually happening.

Cruciformity

And there is a word modern theologians have been using for what God has done with us through Christ: *cruciformity*. *Cross-shape.* The making-cruciform of the human person who has been made new in Christ.

And cruciformity works because of mimesis. Because we are imitative creatures. We hear a story. We put ourselves in the story. We begin to live out the story. The memory of someone else's existence gets impressed in our spirit, and we start to live in their pattern. That is what has happened through Jesus Christ. The Story we have heard, of the One who loved his enemies, who washed the feet of his betrayer, who from the cross prayed Father, forgive them, they know not what they do, that Story has begun to be impressed in us. And as it is impressed in us, we begin to live and die on the cross Christ has called us to carry.

Sacrificially love one another. Sacrificially love our enemies. Father, forgive them, they know not what they do: said by us, in the small ways our own crosses keep presenting to us, exactly the way the Master said it from his own. That kind of cruciformity. As we begin to live

into that story, we begin to shape our life into his life. And new humanity is being birthed out, one cruciform believer at a time, into a world that has been running on dragon-imitation for too long.

Holiness That Transfers

And the reason we heal the sick, raise the dead, and cleanse the leper is exactly because the priesthood God has called us to is the new priesthood of holiness-transmission, not the old priesthood of separation. We touch the unclean and the unclean become clean. That is the kingdom's signature. The transmission flows outward from the holiness placed in our hearts to the lives of the people around us who have not yet been made holy. Their idolatry is healed. Their diseases are healed. Their mental conditions are healed. Because they have come into contact with people whose testimony is exactly the testimony Wade Robson used to sing: if you could see, friend, where I once was, then you would see a miracle of God's grace.

My own father (*Harvey Massey, the escapee from Appalachia*, as he came to be called in our family) has told the story countless times of his own conversion on San Gabriel Boulevard in southern California. He was driving along that boulevard, and *something began to change in his life at that moment*, and he walked into a meeting and saw the older Robert Spinks (the cowboy I was later named after, who by then was an old man) *receiving something from God*.

And here is what I want you to hear about that story. Old men do not graduate from needing Jesus. The aged Robert Spinks, who lived to be 101, was still receiving from the Lord at every stage of his life. He was anchored to the day he died. We never escape our need for Jesus to keep us out of the jaws of the serpent. The beast wants to rend us. The dragon wants to manifest itself through us. But there is a God in heaven who says new humanity, new creation, new beginnings for every one of us at every stage of every life.

And the testimony we carry (if you could go with me back to where I started from, you would see a miracle of God's grace) becomes the story other people can step into. If the escapee from Appalachia could become what he has become, then maybe God has something for me. That is how the kingdom extends. One testimony at a time. One cruciform believer at a time. One opened door at a time. One mimetic template being passed from disciple to disciple across the long descent of the centuries. That is the mechanism. That is what God is doing through us.

The Stuff of Heaven

And he has given us the same stuff he himself is made of. You are created in the image of God. The breath of God is in your lungs. The Spirit of God dwells in your heart. Now be the king and queen, the priest and priestess, the prophet and prophetess God has called you to be.

Speak the new word into the lives of your children. Spread the new template throughout the earth, to the north and the south and the east and the west. As you go, create new sons and daughters through the voice of God you have been given and the Spirit who has empowered you. That is the commission. That is what God has called us to.

And it is not a *labor* in the burdened sense. It is not tedium. *It is the very thing that will liberate us.* We were liberated *through* the labors God gave us in the garden. *Tend and keep*, he said. Not *sit and do nothing*. *Tend and keep.* And that is what we are doing. We are tending and keeping the new creation that is being born in the world through every life that has been turned cruciform. *We are sharing the word. We are giving ourselves to others. We are loving the enemy. We are touching the unclean.* And in every act, *something happens to us as well as to them*. The serpent loses a little more of his grip. The dragon loses a little more of his speech. *The new humanity rises up another small notch toward the fullness of Christ.*

A hundred billion stars cannot do what God has done in us. A hundred billion creatures praising God with their breath cannot outdo the breath of Jesus that has been put into us. He found us dead in trespasses and sins. He breathed on us. He brought us into the family. He gave us a place of belonging. He put us at a table with kings and queens. And he said: the stuff of heaven is now in you. Now go and be heaven on earth, until the day when heaven and earth are finally one. That is the commission. That is the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is what we have been called to.

Praise God for the great job he has given us. And now let’s go and do it.