**The Invitation**

Romans 8:1-4

A man stood outside a busy **London train station passing out flyers**. Most people never even looked at the offer on those small pieces of paper, simply dropping them on the ground or throwing them in the nearest garbage can. What the flyer said was, “Just return this flyer to the man passing them out for a free five-pound note.” No strings attached. For anyone who came back he just gave them the cash on the spot.

After three hours - though hundreds, probably thousands of people were given this incredible offer - ***only eleven people came back for the money***. The vast majority were either too busy to look at the offer or just didn’t believe it was true. Think of all of those flyers being trampled by London residents and eventually ending up in the trash.

This was an experiment set up by a London newspaper. It provided a fascinating window into human behavior and the lack of trust we have for anything claiming to be “Free.” We always assume there are strings attached - some kind of high-pressure sales pitch coming alongside the “free gift.”

Let me assure you that ***we don’t do high pressure here at Oakwood***. But we are bold and unapologetic as we share with as many people as we possibly can **the incredible invitation** God has extended to the whole world in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the greatest ***FREE GIFT*** ever offered - and it is available for only a limited time.

That story of the five-pound offer in London is told in the first episode of ***Christianity Explored*** - an excellent eight week introduction to the good news of Jesus Christ in the gospel of Mark. Pastor Rico Tice who has served in London for years says in that first episode:

“When you hear what you’re about to hear, if you don’t think it’s the best news you’ve ever heard, you can be absolutely certain you have not yet understood it.” Rico Tice, *Christianity Explored* (available on RightNow Media)

Our goal over these next five weeks is **to help you understand how good the good news of Jesus really is**. Don’t be like those people in London who were too busy or too skeptical to look at the words on the flyer. Pick up the gospel of Mark or open the book of Romans or watch a season of the Chosen or go through Christianity Explored with a friend. If you already know how amazing the grace of God is, then use these next few weeks to ***pass it on to a friend or family member*** who needs to hear some good news.

Because you won’t find the gospel of Jesus Christ more clearly or powerfully expressed than right here in Romans chapter eight.

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Romans 8:1

For some of you that word “condemnation” may be an immediate turn off. But stay with me for a few minutes. Let me share how the judgment and punishment God promises for sin is actually central to the good news of forgiveness and eternal life in Jesus Christ.

***I grew up going to church.*** My parents brought me to Sunday School and worship service every Sunday morning and most Sunday nights. As soon as I was old enough, they brought me to the Wednesday night AWANA club where I started memorizing Bible verses to earn candy bars. So, from my earliest days I knew there was a God and that He had spoken to us through the Bible.

We sang songs about the holiness and justice of God. My Sunday School teachers talked about the fact that ***God sees everything and knows everything***. So as a 5, 6, 7-year-old kid I became uneasy, even fearful about the judgment of God. Thankfully my teachers also talked about the gospel - and would frequently invite us to pray a prayer or raise a hand to ask God to forgive us and invite Jesus into our hearts. Like many children who grow up in church I “got saved” on almost every occasion.

Later I learned that “praying the prayer” or ***responding to the invitation over and over is not a sign of great faith*** and responsiveness to the Holy Spirit but actually reveals that you have not yet really understood the grace of God and what it really means to “be saved.”

I was 11 or 12 when this reached **a crisis point** for me because my childhood sins had grown up into real adolescent sins and I knew God could not look the other way. So, with all of my 7th grade courage, I wrote everything down in my journal, handed it to my youth leader and bolted for the door. He called me the next day and took me out for a shake and then spent the next few months helping me understand the gospel.

I can still see the little cartoon image in that Navigators booklet - of a teenage boy beside ***the smoking ruins of his father’s car***. It asked the question, “If you wrecked your Dad’s car would he be upset with you?” (of course!) “But would he still be your Dad?”

By that point in life, I was pretty sure my Dad could fix anything, especially cars - so it was a good analogy for me. And I was also ***very sure that Dad would be there for me*** no matter what. I had lost enough soccer games to prove that point - and he was still there with that Back to the Future video camera cheering me on!

The point of that booklet and that my youth leader was helping me understand was - ***what God wants from us is a RELATIONSHIP***. And once you commit to Jesus you become a child of God, and nothing can ever change that. He is your Father and will be forever. You are safe in His unconditional love.

Around a year later I heard a preacher say it this way:

“Nothing you do can make God love you more. Nothing you do can make God love you less.” Preacher at a Challenge Conference, 1989

This is what I want to do for you in this five-week series. Sit down with you like my youth leader did with me and walk you through the incredible invitation God offers us - the free gift of forgiveness and eternal life in Jesus Christ. Once I understood this my life was never the same. Oh, it wasn’t that I was perfect - far from it. But I knew that I was FORGIVEN and secure in my relationship with Jesus. That’s what we will see today in verse one.

And here is the **overview of the five-week series**:

**God’s Astounding offer of Eternal Life in Jesus Christ:**

* Be Forgiven (v. 1)
* Be Free (v. 2)
* Be Filled (v. 3-8)
* Be Fruitful (v. 9-11)
* Be Family (v. 12-17)

The good news of Jesus Christ is better than any of us can fully understand or appreciate. Every day you follow Jesus you learn a little more about the overflowing, unconditional nature of His love. Romans eight summarizes the gospel so powerfully that I encourage ***everyone I disciple to memorize these verses***. Start in verse one and memorize as much as you can. Some of you could do the whole chapter and you would be incredibly blessed for your efforts.

The picture for me is of a beautiful, calm **Florida pond on a warm summer day**. The gators are sunbathing on the shore so it’s perfectly safe. The water is calling you to dive in. C.S. Lewis says it beautifully:

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| **God’s Astounding offer of Eternal Life in Jesus Christ:** |
| * Be Forgiven (v. 1)
* Be Free (v. 2)
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* Be Fruitful (v. 9-11)
* Be Family (v. 12-17)
 | “If you want to get warm you must stand near a fire: if you want to be wet you must get into the water. If you want joy, power, peace, eternal life, you must get close to, or even into, the thing that has them.” C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* |

**Jesus is the One** who has joy, power, peace, love, grace, eternal life. He is the fountain of life at the center of reality. Lewis goes on, “Once you are united with Him how can you not live forever? If you are separated from Him, how can you not wither and die?”

That’s the invitation. Now, let’s dive into that first gift in verse one - BE FORGIVEN.

**God’s Astounding Free Gift:**

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Romans 8:1

We will see there are **five steps to understanding and receiving this gift**. First, we need to recognize the struggle.

**God’s Astounding Free Gift:**

* The **Struggle** - there is good and bad in all of us

“There is therefore now no **condemnation** for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Romans 8:1

The word “condemnation” is a strong one, obviously. It conveys justice, punishment, death and hell. Don’t miss the fact that IN CHRIST JESUS there is NO condemnation. There is a way to avoid that verdict and sentence of condemnation. Jesus is that way.

But let’s turn back to Romans 7 to appreciate the human struggle we all experience every day.

**God’s Astounding Free Gift:**

* The **Struggle** - there is good and bad in all of us

“I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.” Romans 7:18

This is the apostle Paul talking. He was a high-level Pharisee - which was the most advanced group of Bible students in the first century. He knew the Old Testament better than anyone and he followed the Law of Moses to the exact letter. But even this Pharisee of Pharisees said that deep inside he was a mess - he was conflicted in a struggle he could not overcome.

***How relatable is this verse?*** “I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.” That sums up the human condition. We know the right thing we ought to do, but we don’t always do it.

* We should tell the truth, but we sometimes bend it…
* We should wait our turn, but we sometimes cut in front…
* We should share what we have, but we tend to keep the best for ourselves…
* We should use nice words, but we sometimes hurt people with our words.

And those are just the first rules we learn in **KINDERGARTEN**!

In verse 23 Paul describes this as a war - ***a battle inside of him*** - between the good law of God on the one side and the desires of his human flesh on the other. The conflict threatens to tear him apart - as it does every one of us.

**That is the universal human experience**. There is good and bad in all of us. The good comes from the image of God stamped on every human being. The bad comes from the sin of Adam and Eve we were born with. That is the struggle. Therefore step two:

**God’s Astounding Free Gift:**

* The Reality - no one is **perfect**, which is the requirement for heaven

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Romans 3:23

We have to flip back a few chapters for this key Bible truth. Because all people sin, we all fall short of God’s standard - which is PERFECTION. And this is actually wonderfully good news that God’s standards are so high!

**What kind of judge would God be** if He didn’t promise perfect justice? What would you think of a human judge who winked and looked the other way at a child sex predator? “Hey, it’s ok this time - I know you have a good heart.” Or what about the drunk driver who killed your loved one? If the judge heard the case and just let the guy go with a warning - you’d question his wisdom wouldn’t you?

We give out a book to newcomers called *How Good is Good Enough*. Pastor Andy Stanley expresses this point simply and clearly - that most Americans today believe that ***“good people go to heaven.”*** The problem is the question in the title HOW GOOD is good enough? There is no clear and definite answer you can find to that question in ANY holy book from any religion or any philosophy or ethics book.

Just watch the recent TV show ***The Good Place*** and you’ll quickly see that probably the MOST conflicted character is Chidi, who is a professor of ETHICS. He seems, at first, to have it all together and have all the answers. But the more you get to know him, the more you realize he is just a tightly wound bundle of stress and questions. This boils over when he finally cracks and adds a bunch of candy to a huge pot of chili - because he has concluded that nothing matters, there is no meaning or purpose to anything, so just “put the peeps in the chili to make it taste BAD.” 

I can’t endorse everything in the Good Place but the first two seasons actually come remarkably close to presenting Biblical truth. One thing they wrestle with is this reality that no one is perfect - and really we are all much more of a mess inside than we want to let on. Ok, let’s get back to the actual Bible.

**God’s Astounding Free Gift:**

* The Reality - no one is **perfect**, which is the requirement for heaven

“For the wages of sin is death.” Romans 6:23

**God promises JUSTICE** and that is wonderfully good news. Because God is perfect and holy and righteous and good, His nature requires Him to give people exactly what they deserve. And the just outcome we all deserve is death - both physical and spiritual death. Romans 6:23 calls this “the wage” we have earned because of our sin. Because of the struggle we all experience the reality is that none of us is perfect; none of us can earn our way into God’s good graces. And so, step three:

**God’s Astounding Free Gift:**

* The Offer - You can exchange your sin for Jesus’ **Righteousness**

“God has done what the law… could not do by sending his own Son.” Romans 8:3

Seeing that we could never fix ourselves - we could never be good enough. Even if we all became like Saul the Pharisee and memorized the whole Bible and devoted ourselves to being as good and faithful and obedient as possible - we would still experience the struggle of a divided heart and we would still fall short of God’s glorious perfection.

Since we could not save ourselves, God sent His only Son to save us. ***Jesus DID what you and I could not Do.*** He DID obey God’s Law completely. He DID resist every temptation and sin. He DID measure up to the perfect standards of God. So Jesus was the only human being who ever earned his own place in heaven. He was the only person who could be judged by God to be righteous and perfect on His own merits.

And since He was not just a perfect human being but was also the eternally divine Son of God, **His sacrifice on the cross has INFINITE value** and can be applied to every one of us who will respond to God’s offer in the gospel. Look at verse 4.

**God’s Astounding Free Gift:**

* The Offer - You can exchange your sin for Jesus’ **Righteousness**

“In order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us.” Romans 8:4

Here is ***the PURPOSE or OUTCOME of the work of Jesus*** - our perfection. Jesus came to do what you and I never could - to satisfy the full requirements of the law. But don’t miss that last phrase IN US. The demands of God’s justice can be fully satisfied in you if you just make this exchange.

The picture for me is of ***a filthy little boy who has been playing in the mud all day***. He comes home and obviously Mom isn’t going to just let him into the house. He is dripping in slimy mud. She can’t let him into her clean home and mess everything up!

Just then the boy’s **big brother comes out** and sees the problem. He gets the hose, washes off his brother, takes the dirty clothes and shoes out back to wash them up and gives his little brother some of his own clean clothes so he can go inside and be with the family. The big brother gets very messy in order to clean up the little boy. It’s an EXCHANGE.

***This is what Jesus offers you and me.*** He will take your sin - every single bad thing you ever did or said or thought. Imagine all of your life choices sticking to you - layer upon layer - like dirty, stinky clothes you can’t get off. But Jesus will take them all from you and place them upon Himself right there on the cross. In exchange, He will give you His robe of perfect, radiant righteousness. **He will wash you off and dress you in His own perfection**.

For free. You simply need to say “yes.”

The righteous requirement of God’s law can be fully satisfied in you if you just say “yes” to Jesus. This leads you to a DECISION, which is step four.

**God’s Astounding Free Gift:**

* The Decision - Trust in what you can **Do** or what God has **Done**

“God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do.” Romans 8:3

Paul tried it the way of the law. Like Chidi, he just found himself more and more conflicted. Rules alone cannot change you. Only Jesus can change you.

This was the lightning bolt of revelation that struck **Martin Luther** and sparked the Protestant Reformation. Remember, Luther was a German Monk. He was as devoted to the Christian faith as Paul had been to the Mosaic Law. Luther prayed for hours every day. He went to his confessor multiple times EVERY DAY to confess even the smallest of sins and negative attitudes. It got so bad that his priest finally told him to stay away until he had done something actually bad.

Everything came to a head when Luther made a pilgrimage to Rome and completed this special religious ritual where you prayed a prayer and confessed your sins, on your knees, on every step of the holy Basilica. He reached the top after hours of prayer and confession and once there said, ***“Who knows if it is enough?”***

***Luther felt the demands of “the righteousness of God”*** pressing down on him in condemnation. He was blinded by the light of God’s glory and knew all about God’s perfect standards of holiness and righteousness.

When Luther read Romans 1 and saw that in the gospel “the righteousness of God is revealed,” he said that he HATED that phrase, “the righteousness of God.” To him it meant the JUSTICE of God to condemn weak and failing sinners like him.

But then, in a moment of clarity and revelation that came from studying this great book of Romans, the light of truth broke through his struggles and fears. The righteousness of God was not His condemning holiness waiting to crush us into the ground - it was a free gift of saving justification to lift us up into glory!

“Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy, as, the work of God, that is, ***what God does in us***, the power of God, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God.” Martin Luther

[https://theory.stanford.edu/~oldham/church/calling/Martin.html#:~:text=Though%20I%20lived%20as%20a,punishes%20sinners%2C%20and%20…](https://theory.stanford.edu/~oldham/church/calling/Martin.html#:~:text=Though%20I%20lived%20as%20a,punishes%20sinners%2C%20and%20%E2%80%A6)

Luther experienced the difference between DO and DONE. For years he tried to find peace in what he could DO as the most devoted monk. But he knew it could never be enough. You can never find peace that way. But once you see it is **WHAT GOD DOES IN US** - it is the gift of being declared righteous in Jesus whereby the righteousness of God is given to you as a credit not based on your efforts but based entirely on your faith in the efforts of Jesus!

**God’s Astounding Free Gift:**

* The Decision - Trust in what you can **Do** or what God has **Done**

“What the law was powerless to do… God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering.” Romans 8:3, NIV

***Instead of condemning you for the sin in YOUR FLESH - God chose to condemn SIN in the human FLESH of His only Son.*** That’s what the cross was all about. Jesus became the once for all sacrifice for your sin and mine.

Remember how it worked in ancient Israel, every year on the Passover. You chose a one-year-old lamb - a sweet, unblemished, healthy **adorable little lamb**. You took it into your home for a week so your heart would bond to the little guy. Then, on the night of Passover, to remember God’s great deliverance of his people from slavery in Egypt, you slaughtered that little lamb and ate some delicious gyros.

Ok, it wasn’t about the lamb chops - it was God teaching his people the cost of sin and how to atone for or cover that sin. Blood was required. The lamb had done nothing wrong. But that lamb had to die to cover your sins and the sins of your family. It was personal. It was real. It was concrete. It was sad.

***Jesus was the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the whole world.*** Animal sacrifices could never provide a lasting and perfect atonement. Only a perfect human could take the place of sinful humans. And only the divine Son of God could make a sacrifice of infinite value.

So, Jesus offers you this **incredible decision**. You can trust in yourself and hope for the best on judgment day. Or you can trust in Jesus and the sacrifice He made for you on the cross. You can trust in what you can DO or trust in what God has DONE for you in Christ. It’s your decision and everything depends on it.

Romans 10 tells us how to take this critical step.

**God’s Astounding Free Gift:**

* The Decision - Trust in what you can **Do** or what God has **Done**

“If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Romans 10:9

**Two things are necessary** to be saved and to have your sins forgiven. First, you have to SAY out loud that Jesus is LORD - that He is the King of Kings, and you want Him to be your personal Lord and Master. Second, you have to believe that he died for your sins and rose again.

* The Decision - Trust in what you can **Do** or what God has **Done**

“If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Romans 10:9

* Publicly **Declare** Jesus as your King
* Personally **Believe** He died for you and rose again

It’s not enough just to say the words, you have to truly believe them. And it’s not enough to believe in Jesus privately, you have to say the words out loud. **It’s like wedding vows**. You can’t just meet up with your fiancée in private, stare into each other’s eyes and then pronounce yourselves married. No one would recognize that as anything.

You need to say actual words - solemn vows and promises to each other. And you need at least one or two witnesses to attest to what happened.

The same is true with Jesus. A lot of people know about Jesus and sort of flirt with him for years. But they have not made their vow. Have you?

King Jesus offers you forgiveness and eternal life right now - ***through a personal relationship with Him.*** It’s all or nothing. “Whoever has the Son of God has life, whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.” If you want love, joy, peace, power you must get close to, even into the one who has them. That’s the final step today - the bonus of this first gospel gift.

**God’s Astounding Free Gift:**

* The Bonus - You can be **Forgiven**, declared perfect, by becoming **One** with Jesus

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are ***in Christ Jesus.***” Romans 8:1

We don’t just pray “in Jesus’ name.” We LIVE in Jesus’ name. This is the real invitation of the gospel - to become one with God through the Lord Jesus Christ. This is what happens in the great exchange when you ask Jesus to take all of your sins from you and to give you His righteousness. The only way Jesus can do that is by ***making you ONE with Him***.

Look at Romans 6.

* The Bonus - You can be **Forgiven**, declared perfect, by becoming **One** with Jesus

“We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” Romans 6:4

***Baptism is a picture of being united with Jesus.*** You go under water as a symbol of dying with Jesus and being buried with him. Then you come up from the water as a sign of rising from the dead with Jesus.

* The Bonus - You can be **Forgiven**, declared perfect, by becoming **One** with Jesus

“For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” Romans 6:5

Do you see those key words - **UNITED WITH HIM**? I would say everyone would like that second part - being united with him in His resurrection - meaning you live forever with Jesus in His eternal kingdom. But there is an important IF in the first part. The only way to be united with Jesus in His resurrection is if you are first united with Him in His death.

***The old, sinful you has to die.*** That’s what happens in the great exchange when you trade your sin for the righteousness of Jesus. You let your old self DIE - the you that couldn’t do the right things anyway, as much as you wanted to. You ask Jesus to take that old person and nail it to the cross with Him. And He does. Your old self - your FLESH, Paul calls it - is nailed to the cross and dies there, hallelujah. And it that same moment, a new person is born. God makes you new, uniting you with the Risen Jesus and filling you with His life, power, peace - indeed filling you with HIMSELF.

But that’s getting ahead of the story.

Because that’s the full invitation. ***When you get Jesus you get everything.***

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| **God’s Astounding offer of Eternal Life in Jesus Christ:** |
| * Be Forgiven (v. 1)
* Be Free (v. 2)
* Be Filled (v. 3-8)
* Be Fruitful (v. 9-11)
* Be Family (v. 12-17)
 | “If you want to get warm you must stand near a fire: if you want to be wet you must get into the water. If you want joy, power, peace, eternal life, you must get close to, or even into, the thing that has them.” C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* |

You get the forgiveness of all of your sins. You get freedom from the power of sin over you - that’s next week. You get filled up with the Holy Spirit - God Himself comes to live in your heart. Through the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit, as you abide in Jesus, you become able to bear fruit in your character and ministry calling. And at the same time that you are united with Jesus in faith you are adopted into the family of God - meaning you have a whole host of brothers and sisters beside you on the journey.

***So hear this invitation from the Lord Jesus.*** This is how the Bible ends:

“The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.” Revelation 22:17

***The water of life is the very life of Jesus*** - the Creator of all things, the Savior of the world - and He personally invites you to come and drink of this water so you will never be thirsty again. Nothing in this world will satisfy you for long. Only Jesus can give you the love, joy, peace, purpose, and power you need both now and forever.

I told you - no high-pressure sales here. Just you and Jesus having a little chat. Take the next couple of minutes to pray and consider this invitation from Jesus. Really all you have to do is say, “Yes.” C.S. Lewis called himself the most reluctant convert in England. And his yes came while riding on a bus after years of conversations with Tolkien and another Christian friend. But finally, the young atheist realized the truth - all the clues in the world were pointing him to an inescapable conclusion - there is a God and He wants a relationship with you.

Take a couple of minutes to ***hear the voice of Jesus calling you***. Then we will close with a song.

Let’s pray.